

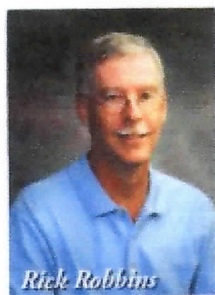
The China Maple Golf Club is one of three courses Rick Robbins hopes to open in that country this year.



Rick Robbins

All the Tees in China

By Brad King



Rick Robbins

The background music in the restaurant hums so gently its melody is hardly perceptible as Rick Robbins eyes the cheeseburger in front of him. He shifts his lithe frame to find comfort in a hard, straight-backed chair and begins metaphorically whistling a familiar yet barely recognizable tune of his own.

It has been nearly two decades since the golf course architect and western North Carolina native departed the comfort of the Jack Nicklaus design umbrella to form his own company, Cary-based Robbins and Associates International Inc. Now 60, Robbins finds himself a first-time grandfather designing courses during a time when the economic downturn and its trickle-down effect on golf have forced some

better-known peers to shutter their operations. Yet here he sits, explaining to his lunch companion how much work his company has in the pipeline.

If the weather cooperates on the other side of the world, he plans to oversee ribbon-cuttings this year at three golf courses in China. They are about as varied in topography, climate and location as possible. One is near the Korean border in northern China. Another is on Hainan Island in the far south. The third is between them, near Nanjing, a former capital that is second only to Shanghai as eastern China's commercial center.

Robbins also has signed contracts to design a 27-hole master-planned resort west of Xiamen, a coastal city in southeastern China, and a 45-hole resort near Duijiangyan, in the center of the country. But what he finds most thrilling is having completed a preliminary design for The Shanghai Golf Training Center, which will include a Tournament Players Club-

style course, a full practice range including a section for short-game work and a nine-hole, par-3 course.

"Helping create facilities that will assist growth of the game in China is incredibly satisfying," Robbins says. "The facility will be reserved at certain times for use by schools for training kids to play, much like our First Tee program in the U.S., and may be very instrumental in helping create China's Olympic team in 2016."

Domestically, Robbins has kept busy at his home course, Prestonwood Country Club, where since 1993 he and his family have inhabited a two-story home he helped design on the 14th fairway. That's also where he, for the past two years, has overseen renovation of the club's greens. "It is really strange," he says, "to have your work either be a two-minute cart ride or an 18-hour plane trip."

Reaching down toward his plate for a potato chip, his right hand trembles slightly. It was the same type of involuntary tremor

that his wife, Ginger, began noticing a few years earlier when they sat together late at night watching television. A visit to a neurologist revealed that he had Parkinson's disease, a progressive degenerative disorder of the central nervous system. Among those who suffer from the disease are evangelist Billy Graham, boxer Muhammad Ali, actor Michael J. Fox and former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno.

Given that Robbins' grandmother and uncle — scientists believe genetics may play a role in the disease — had been diagnosed with Parkinson's, the news wasn't the devastating surprise for him that it is for many. While there is no cure for Parkinson's, medications and multidisciplinary management can provide relief, and Robbins says he exhibits none of its symptoms when holding the two chief tools of his trade — a pencil and a golf club.

The golf industry, meanwhile, has been suffering, mainly because of the economy. And its symptoms have been manifesting themselves. Consumer spending on golf equipment, for example, fell 14% in 2009 and an additional 3% in 2010. The number of rounds played was down 3.5% through the third quarter of 2010, and that was in comparison, again, to a weak 2009. The National Golf Foundation predicts that 500 to 1,000 public courses will close during the next five years.

Given those factors, it raises the question of how Robbins is where he is today — in one of the most successful periods of his professional career. The answer begins along the Blue Ridge Parkway in the town of Blowing Rock, where Robbins' grandfather, Grover C. Robbins Sr., a nurseryman and developer, served four stints as mayor — a total of 18 years — from 1919 through 1949. The elder Robbins also opened The Blowing Rock as a popular tourist attraction. The family, spearheaded by Grover Sr.'s three sons, would develop Tweetsie Railroad as well as three major golf projects — Beech Mountain Golf and Ski Resort, Hound Ears Club and The Elk River Club.

But Robbins' own infatuation with the sport began at another mecca of the sport. The winter of 1960 brought 6 feet or more of snow to sections of the North Carolina mountains. "My father just said, 'Enough's enough.' He packed up the family and moved us ... to Pinchurst." Spencer Robbins took a night auditor job at Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club in Southern Pines. He later would become manager of operations and work closely with Tar Heel golf legends Peggy Kirk Bell and her husband, Warren "Buller" Bell. It was on their Donald Ross-designed course that young Robbins fell in love with golf. "I would play 36 holes a day with my older brother, Rob. The Bells told us we could play as much golf whenever we wanted — as long as we kept out of the way of the members and guests."

Robbins was skilled enough to play on his high school's golf team. But by the time he entered N.C. State University's School of Design in 1969, he was focused on the business side of the sport. His golf education didn't end after he graduated in 1973. That's when he was discovered by international course architect Bob von Hagge, considered one of golf's true characters. Von Hagge had trained under course designer Dick Wilson in the 1950s before teaming up with Australian golfer Bruce Devlin to form Von Hagge & Devlin, a prolific design firm. He hired Robbins in 1973 as an apprentice in the firm's Florida office.

Robbins spent more than a decade there, and von Hagge, who died in October, became a mentor and friend. "Bob's design philosophy of producing courses that were visually exciting with a strong emphasis on shaping that made light and shadow an integral part of the design became something I have tried to incorporate into my work," Robbins says.

Like many American golf course architects and land planners, much of Robbins' time today is spent on projects in China. Unlike many of his peers, he didn't go to that country after the downturn in the U.S.

but has been active there and in other parts of Asia for almost 20 years.

Following his work with Von Hagge & Devlin, Robbins moved to Nicklaus/Sierra Development, where he worked on many Jack Nicklaus Communities — high-end subdivisions and golf courses. He later moved to Nicklaus' Golden Bear Design. "I walked through the gates of the 1990 U.S. Open at Medinah [Country Club, near

Chicago], and Jack was practicing on the putting green," Robbins says. "He called me over and offered me [a] job in Hong Kong. I called Ginger from the golf course and said, 'Have I got a surprise for you.'"

The surprise was the opportunity to open an office in Hong Kong. He became Nicklaus' senior designer in the Far East, overseeing more than 30 projects and designing courses in such countries as

Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan and Sri Lanka.

By the time Robbins left Nicklaus in 1991 to start his own design company, he had contacts throughout Asia and invaluable knowledge about the culture. Through the mid-1990s, he remained active there, with occasional exploratory trips to China. In 2001, soon after the Sept. 11 disaster, Robbins attended a golf show in Beijing where he was struck with the realization that China had discovered golf — meaning there was tremendous potential for growth.

It was also at that golf exhibition that another important piece of the puzzle fell into place. Robbins met July Nie (Nie Xiao Min), who spoke both major dialects of Chinese — Mandarin and Cantonese — and had excellent skills speaking and writing English. Making matters even better, she had taken courses in the agronomics of golf turf grass and played the game well.

She worked at the time as a translator and writer for *Golf Magazine* (China) and *Golfweek*. But Robbins immediately saw great potential in working with her, and they have been business partners since then. "Having a local Chinese partner who can handle not only the translation duties but has tremendous contacts in the golf industry, who can keep me from doing things that might offend a client and who can get me around the country with little effort is a true asset," Robbins says. "It makes doing business in a place with a completely different cultural background much easier both for me and for our clients. They always feel that there is someone available that they can speak to about any issues in their own language and on their time zone."

Robbins also credits his overseas success to the example set by his father of how to treat people. "His ability to treat every person he meets with respect and friendliness has helped me deal with the varied cultural issues faced by international business. Nowhere is the ability to work with people more important than in China,

where doing business deals depends more heavily on relationships than almost any other factor. Being able to get along well with clients and have them feel comfortable with you will often outweigh price as a consideration."

Robbins says the other drivers in his success involve paying attention to the basics that work well everywhere. "Being responsive to [clients'] needs by keeping to schedules and knowing what they need for governmental approvals is one. The fact that I spend considerable time in China, and work with all aspects of the design personally so the clients see the principal of the firm and can form a personal relationship with me, is also beneficial."

Robbins' work is evident on golf courses and master plans in 24 states and 11 foreign countries. He even credits the Parkinson's diagnosis for his prolific work. "It is why I am going as hard as I am now. Mine is on a very low scale of development. Unless something happens to progress it, I should be in good shape for 10 to 15 more years."

His peers are recognizing his years of work. He was appointed last year to the executive committee of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, of which he is secretary. In May, Robbins takes the mantle as treasurer, and he'll move up to vice president the following year. In 2013, he will become the third N.C. State graduate to serve as the organization's president, following Clyde Johnston and current ASGCA President Erik Larsen.

Looking back, Robbins says his chosen field has generated a scrapbook of memories. He worked closely with Nicklaus and other legends of the game. In a chilling coincidence, he was supposed to be on the October 1999 flight in which Payne Stewart and five others died but changed his travel plans at the last moment. He has walked along the Great Wall of China and meets regularly with provincial governors. "I tell people I've never had a job in my life. It has been a profession, and I wouldn't trade it for anything." □

Brad King is a Winston-Salem writer.