

A formula for success

A good partnership between club and architect can deliver great results on the course. But what does it take to achieve a strong bond? Richard Humphreys considers three examples.

Bill Gates once said: "Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning."

In the software business, you may well get the opportunity to win back unhappy customers. But golf course architects rarely get that second chance. They may prefer to take comfort from the adage: "People who are the most difficult to please are often the least worth pleasing."

In the golf business, where there are countless variables and tastes are subjective, it can be difficult to pin down a precise formula for success. But one thing is for sure, the quality of the relationship between a club and its golf course architect will be a key contributor.

To understand more about how great partnerships are forged, and what makes them work, we took a deeper dive into three examples, from Michigan, New Jersey and, firstly, South Korea.

CJ Group and Golfplan

The relationship between South Korean developer CJ Group and the design business Golfplan was forged with a trip to Scotland.

"When Chairman Jay Lee asked me what I thought of his property in a mountainous area of Jeju Island and its potential to attract a global audience, I spoke of the Highlands golf experience," says David Dale, ASGCA, who was first appointed by CJ Group in 1996.

Following Dale's advice, Lee organized a trip for his key staff to experience some of Scotland's finest



Photos: Golfplan

The eighth hole at The Club at Nine Bridges, the first collaboration between CJ Group and Golfplan

courses, and better understand Golfplan's vision for what would become The Club at Nine Bridges.

Upon their return, the team could formulate ideas together in the knowledge they had common reference points. "We would have the plan draped over Jay's coffee table and discuss the nuances of shot options within each hole," says Dale.

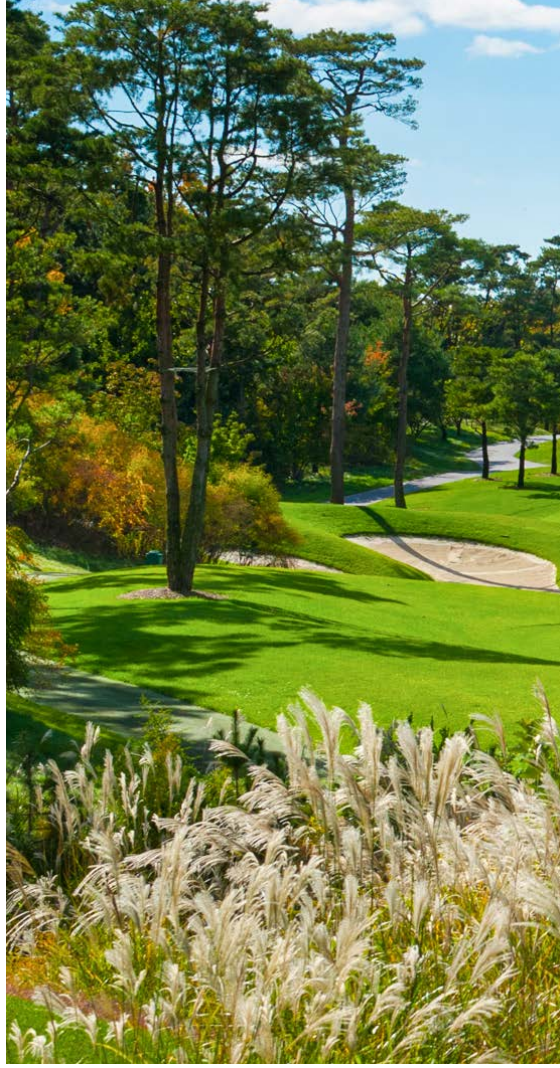
The Club at Nine Bridges would open in 2001, with two nines inspired by the trip, named 'Creek' and 'Highland.' The Creek nine features dry streams, shrubs and stone walls, while the Highland nine has a wider grassland feel. The course is widely considered to be among the very best modern courses in Asia and has been appreciated by a global audience as the host venue of several tournaments, including the PGA Tour's CJ Cup.

With a shared appreciation of historic courses as inspiration for modern design, the developer would return to Dale, along with his current Golfplan partner Kevin Ramsey, ASGCA, in the late 2000s for the design of a new venture, the Haesley Nine Bridges course in Gyenggi-do province, southeast of Seoul.

"David has a high understanding of the course concept we are pursuing and has actually completed it," says Chris Ahn, CEO and vice president of CJ Logistics. "During the last two decades, we have renovated parts of both courses and he has achieved what we wanted every



Photos: Golfplan



Chairman Jay Lee of CJ Group and David Dale, ASGCA, have now worked together for over 25 years, including on the Haesley Nine Bridges course (hole 10, pictured right)

single time. He listens closely to the chairman's wishes and takes care of all the details.

"David has the correct medicine to ensure the holes present the same challenge as they did on opening day. On holes with site challenges, David devised clever solutions to direct tee shots to areas that would still test players.

"The PGA Tour players… wow! We never believed they could hit the ball so far in such a location, but the holes have a good defense for the big hitters. The almost-daily winds on Jeju make the eighteenth hole very exciting for the CJ Cup. David is clever with strategy: he is always talking about angles, approaches, the landing positions for drives, and the importance of variety for members and PGA players alike. This is the reason why we have been working with him for so long."

"There is a balance that must be struck, and I am looked upon to find it"

Those ever-present winds play a key role in the strategy of the course, especially during the typhoon season, which is also peak golfing season in South Korea. "More often than not Jay and I discuss climate, site and soil conditions and then the cost to sustain the design concept," says Dale. "We reference concept drawings and 3D sketches along with other visual aids, but in each instance, we spend numerous hours on the course talking, arm waving, painting lines and flagging to convey our thoughts and ideas."

Dale and Ahn both highlight the importance of effective communication between architect and client, not just at the initial design stage, but throughout the course's lifetime.

"Our chairman has plenty of ideas about course improvements and he listens to experts, but he is always asking for David's opinion," says Ahn. "David speaks with a smile and emotion about both golf courses.



The chairman likes that David is so passionate about the layouts, the members, and the special events where the world gets to see that Korea has great golf courses.

"David has a very keen eye, and he will say things like, 'that sightline would be better if moved a little lower.' He is always watching and protecting the chairman's vision of the golf course. The pair of them have worked together to make the golf course what it is, always sharing that same passion."

From Dale's perspective, balance is crucial: "Jay is always considering alternatives ways to toughen the golf courses for the professional player and at the same time I am always looking at how we balance this goal of high-level competition with member play. There is a balance that must be struck, and I am looked upon to find it.

"The team that manages the golf courses are always innovative and evaluating how to heighten the experience for the customer and improve the financial sustainability of both courses. Strategic planning for introducing improvements is a constant conversation we have with their team. We develop numerous concepts to provide the player with strategic options, risk and reward opportunities and discuss at length the most practical manner to implement the vision."

Crystal Mountain and AJH Golf

A silent auction was the unlikely event that brought a Michigan club together with a golf course architect. Crystal Mountain Resort's golf course superintendent Jason Farah and assistants Trevor Mills and Daniel Heiss had successfully bid for bunker liner installation at a Michigan Golf Course Superintendents Association event, and A. John Harvey, ASGCA, was supplier Porous Pave's specialist assigned to oversee the work.

Harvey and Farah got to know each other during that pilot project and, impressed with Harvey's meticulous approach, Farah invited him to review a tree management project that was under way on several holes of the resort's Betsie Valley course.

Chris and Jim MacInnes, the owners of Crystal Mountain Resort, had initiated the project to harvest timber, in the knowledge

that it also represented a healthy ecological development of the environment, nurturing more favorable and indigenous species to regenerate and thrive within the managed areas.

But Harvey was able to add a new perspective, that could extend the value of the work out onto the course. "This tree program allowed the ownership to realize that it could create opportunities to improve playability, turfgrass management, drainage, sunlight penetration, aesthetics and strategic values. Once the trees started to come down, ideas to benefit the course's design began to brew."

Harvey was appointed to oversee a six-hole renovation on the course, which included reclaiming corridors of play, creating and renovating bunkers, sculpting sand waste areas, rebuilding and recontouring several tees, and shifting fairway landing zones.

"The goals have been to piggyback course improvements on top of the significant corridor work that were reclaimed and widened by the tree management program," says Harvey. "This has opened up some incredible vistas throughout the property, as well as towards the distant northern Michigan countryside."



The partnership between A. John Harvey (foreground) and crew and contractors on the Betsie Valley course (pictured right) at Crystal Mountain Resort has, according to owner Chris MacInnes, "transformed a humble track into a masterpiece"



"As owners, we are grateful for our partnership with John," says Chris MacInnes. "He not only listens carefully to our goals, including playability, revenue generation and budget, but also sees potential for the Betsie Valley layout that we never imagined. Working closely with our golf course team, led by superintendent Jason Farah and the course contractors, Chris Furness of Great Lakes Golf Construction and Doug Thielen of Thielen Turf Irrigation, John has transformed a humble track into a masterpiece.

"John has guided us to better honor the Betsie Valley layout and improve playability. This allows us to increase rates and the number of rounds we can comfortably accommodate. We believe this is a great example of the value of a partnership with a very talented golf course architect – preserving and enhancing our land and generating more revenue from our golf course operations."

Strong communication was also pivotal for work at Crystal Mountain. "We were able to discover new ideas together to strengthen the overall experience for golfers so that the course would be more enjoyable to play, all while having the passion for making golf great and rekindling the spirit of golf at Crystal Mountain," says MacInnes. "We were able to bounce ideas off each other in a constructive fashion and have a lot

"We were able to discover new ideas together to strengthen the overall experience"



Photos: A. John Harvey, ASGCA

of fun while building the design concepts laid out on paper during construction with the golf course contractor and their team.

"Because our land is so important, we are committed to its thoughtful and wise stewardship, as well as its highest and best use. Working with a golf course designer who shares these values, communicates well and is respectful, will help us to accomplish our objectives."

Metedeconk National and Raymond Hearn

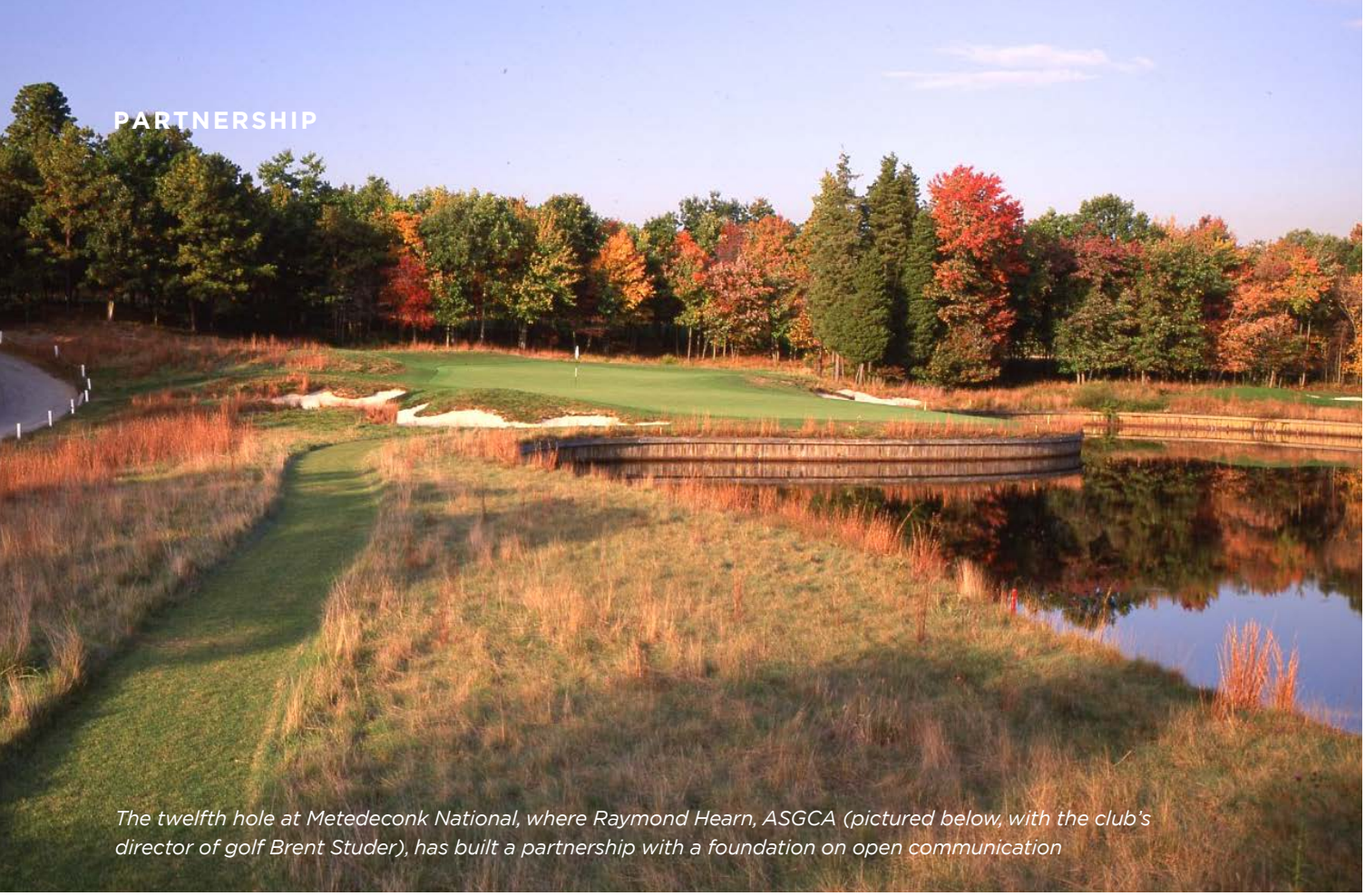
ASGCA Founding Father Robert Trent Jones, Sr. and his senior designer, ASGCA Past President Roger Rulewich, laid out the first 18 of 27 holes at Metedeconk National, on the edge of New Jersey's Pine Barrens, in 1987. The course was instantly considered one of the most beautiful in the state, with holes sprawling in splendid isolation, framed by fescue and trees, across the vast property. But like any course over 30 years of age, time will take a toll, and by 2018 work was needed to return the Jones design to its best.

"Paramount to the club was ensuring all revisions honored its proud past while preparing it for the future, which is the same ethic I have applied at many other classic courses," says Raymond Hearn, ASGCA, who was contacted by the club. "I knew what an honor and privilege it would be to partner with them in respectfully bringing their course into the 21st century."

Hearn gained the trust of the club with an emphasis on listening. "Ray carefully listened to our goals and objectives and brought everyone 'into the tent,'" says club president Fred Price. "He involved our director of golf, Brent Studer, with playability discussions; golf course superintendent Andrew Mallick with maintenance considerations; general manager Derek Kopp; myself as club president; and Rob Bakos, our greens committee chair. We were present in all his communication throughout the design phase, site visits and after."

"While my partnership with the club's leaders was crucial to the outcome, I knew I had one other important partner in this project to consider – Robert Trent Jones, Sr.," says Hearn. "I was in total agreement with the club that the legacy left by Jones should be preserved at all costs.

"I have always respected the work of Jones and the best way to honor an architect is to preserve their routing. Jones, along with Roger Rulewich, did an incredible job routing the 27-holes, and I wanted



Photos: Raymond Hearn Golf Course Design Inc

The twelfth hole at Metedeconk National, where Raymond Hearn, ASGCA (pictured below, with the club's director of golf Brent Studer), has built a partnership with a foundation on open communication



to restore the original ragged-edge capes and bays of the bunkers, which was an integral part of the Jones design, lost to ever-changing sand lines and bunker edging."

While respecting the original design was key, Hearn also oversaw changes that would improve the playing experience for today's golfers.

"A respectful renovation provides an opportunity to improve two elements I consider paramount to design: angles and options," says Hearn. "While we were restoring the course to its original glory, we also found ways to refine and increase strategy and shot value with more angles and options. Overall, the original design intent of Jones was safeguarded, but, as Price would say, 'creatively tweaked.'"

Kopp says: "Ray made sure his renovation work still screamed RTJ, which was important to us. He also improved shot value and strategy with his creative bunker, fairway and green runoff area adjustments."

There were, of course, differences of opinion along the way. But by giving each stakeholder's views careful consideration, and talking through his own rationale for design decisions, Hearn found his path clearing.

"Listening to different thoughts, recommendations, concerns and compliments allowed me to understand the club's expectations and ultimately gain their trust to implement my plan," says Hearn.

"From the club's leadership to the construction crew, communication was key in the partnership approach – a crucial part in any relationship. Thanks to a true partnership and open communication, Metedeconk will maintain its living legacy to golf's past, present and future."