

Advancing collaboration

The extent to which golf course architects work together, and with others in the industry, has evolved and had a positive effect on facilities, the industry and the game. We asked some of ASGCA's longer-serving members for their reflections on how cooperation in golf has developed.

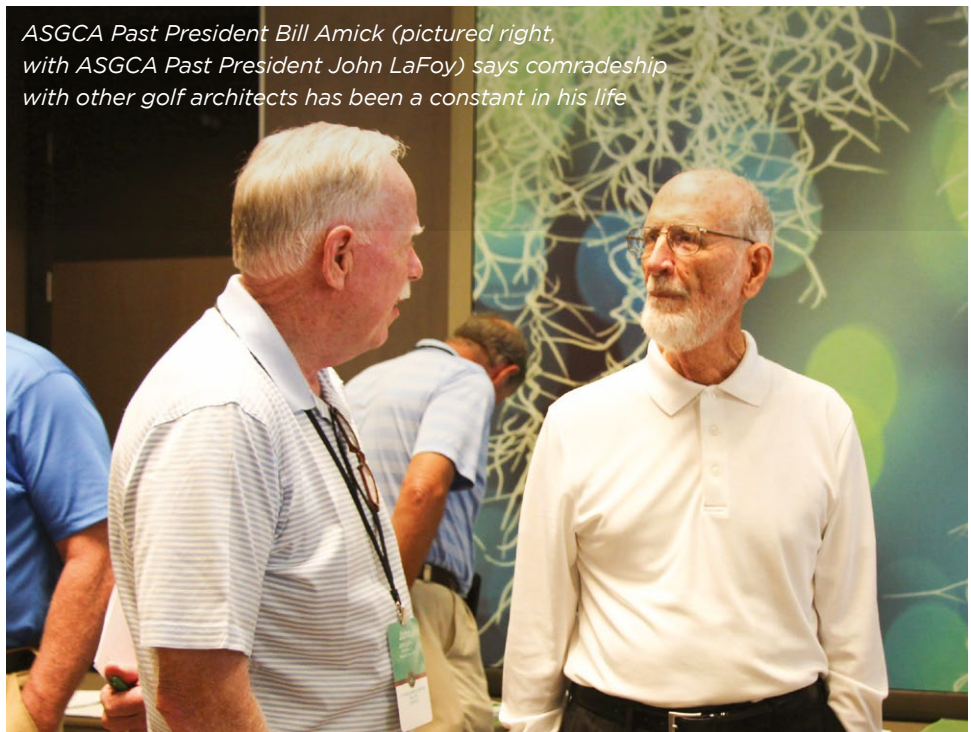
Collaborations are now increasingly commonplace. From Balmain x Beyoncé to Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw, good partnerships can yield success in all spheres of life.

While golf course architecture has a long history of famous 'collabs' – Robertson and Morris, Jones and MacKenzie, Thompson and Trent Jones, to name just a few – attitudes towards working together have evolved quite significantly over recent decades.

"Formal collaboration between architects wasn't common in the 1970s and 1980s," says ASGCA Past President Lee Schmidt on his early years as a golf course architect.

That's not to say there wasn't a fraternal spirit. Schmidt recalls one of his first ASGCA Annual Meetings, in Bermuda in 1980, which he attended with his mentor, and ASGCA Fellow, Pete Dye. "As we arrived at the hotel, Art Hills was there, looking concerned. Pete discovered that his luggage had been lost by the airline. He turned to me and said, 'can you give Art some of your clothes?'"

A somewhat shocked Schmidt complied, and picked out a few items. "I remember how bizarre it



ASGCA Past President Bill Amick (pictured right, with ASGCA Past President John LaFoy) says comradeship with other golf architects has been a constant in his life

Photo: ASGCA


Photo: Carter Sherline


Photo: Jekyll Island Golf Club


Photo: ASGCA


Photo: The Preserve at Oak Meadows

Clockwise from top left, Paul Albanese, ASGCA, and ASGCA Fellow Jerry Matthews (centre) on site at Saskatoon GC in Michigan; Bill Boswell, ASGCA, and Troy Vincent, ASGCA; ASGCA Past Presidents Greg Martin and Forrest Richardson; and an education session from a ASGCA Annual Meeting

was to see Art wearing my clothes for the duration of the meeting!" he says. On returning home, a package arrived in the mail, with every item laundered and pressed.

Aside from sharing clothes from each other's backs, Schmidt says that collaboration was generally limited to sharing ideas and expertise. "We would play each other's courses and talk about design topics. We would also call someone up and ask them questions, like 'do you know a shaper in this area?' or 'where did you get sand from for this project?'."

"Members would talk to each other about the design of bunkers and greens and how they dealt with a particular problem – they'd be happy to tell you how," adds ASGCA Past President Don Knott. "That kind of collaboration has been going on for years."

But as Schmidt says: "Collaboration was more informal."

ASGCA Past President Dick Phelps agrees: "There weren't many joint partnerships in those days," he says, explaining: "The ability to collaborate was a lot more difficult than it is now," alluding to the advances in technology and transportation that help bring people together more easily.

"There wasn't as much emphasis on education and exchanging important information about golf course architecture," says ASGCA Past President Bill Amick. He stops short of using 'fraternal' – "I was in a college fraternity, and it wasn't like that!", but describes the relationships with other architects as a "comradeship, that stuck with us throughout."

ASGCA Past President Jan Bel Jan says that togetherness extended to



Todd Eckenrode, ASGCA, collaborated with landscape architect Ken Alperstein to preserve native areas at Twin Dolphin in Mexico

recognizing when a colleague may be a better fit for a client. She says: "When I've been asked to be part of a certain project that would suit someone else, I have said, this is a person who's better for it because of their location and experience, you'll get a much better product and more time invested than from me."

Over time, the spirit of comradeship has evolved, and architects are increasingly recognizing the value of working in groups. Two topics in particular galvanized the industry, acting as a catalyst to collaboration.

Environmental awareness

"What triggered more coordination between golf groups was the big environmental issues," says Knott. Golf had garnered a reputation of being harmful to the environment, so architects increasingly recognized the importance of speaking with governing bodies, as well as superintendents, legislators and the wider public.

"There were so many golf projects, often part of a housing development, that were going in front of the public, and that's when we really had to defend ourselves," says Knott.

"Most of the issues centered around water and pollution – the environmental community was big on pesticides and herbicides. Water usage was an issue in the west, but water quality was one of the primary concerns, and the golf community had to do some serious research."

One of the first opportunities to share that research with the environmental community came at the 'Golf in the Environment' meeting in Pebble Beach in March 1995. Knott, along with ASGCA Past Presidents Mike Hurdzan and Bill Love, attended.

"The environment groups came away realizing that golf guys actually thought about these issues," says Knott. "There were several more of these meetings, and eventually the environmental community recognized that golf wasn't as bad as they thought."

Golf architects had already been considering how best to communicate that the courses they design were environmentally sustainable, and how to encourage a sustainable approach to golf course design. "We took charge in terms of these issues," says Knott. "We would release white


Photo: Evan Schiller


Photo: Les Bordes

Short courses like Wild Piglet at Les Bordes, a design by Gil Hanse, ASGCA, can have a positive impact from an environmental standpoint as they require less land and resources

papers around environmental uses and other topics and publish periodicals and statements that the general public could read." A few years before the Pebble Beach meeting, *An Environmental Approach to Golf Course Development*, edited by Love, was published, and such communications continue to be an important mechanism for collaboration, evidenced for example by the ASGCA Foundation's recent series of *Golf & Water* books. These cover best practices for golf course maintenance, how designers can protect the environment, and include case studies to demonstrate how golf architects have met various sustainable goals.

Schmidt says: "These publications help architects, but also help educate the public, whether it's a city council or an environmental group. We can say, here's a paper that we've already done regarding this topic in a very readable format with case studies and good examples. It helps everyone in the golf industry to be better informed."

"Shorter layouts have the benefit of requiring less land, water and many other essentials"

One of the outcomes of the growing acceptance of sustainable approaches to golf course design has been an increase in the popularity of scaled down courses. "Shorter layouts have the benefit of requiring less land, water and many other essentials," says Amick. "They also require smaller amounts of petroleum-based products to construct and maintain, and there is no need for a big irrigation system – this combination leads to a lower annual maintenance budget. And all of this has a positive impact from an environment standpoint in comparison to building a full-length 18-hole course."

Architects collectively recognize that environmental issues will continue to dominate. "The drought, particularly in the

west, is really going to affect golf," warns Phelps. "We have small communities in the west that are telling the public to cut back on their water usage. Some communities are even losing their wells completely."

By working closely together to consider such environmental issues, architects have learned from shared experience and expertise that there are solutions to mitigate them. "Facilities will become more conscious of how much water is being used on its course, and that will undoubtedly lead to projects to reduce the amount of turf to save water," says Phelps.

Advancing accessibility

Another major topic around which the industry has come together is accessibility.

The Americans with Disabilities Act, which was signed into law in 1990, prohibits discrimination based on disability.

Schmidt says: "Golf architects joined these discussions back in the early nineties because the people coming up with the rules did not understand that much about golf. The ASGCA got involved as we didn't want certain laws passed that would affect the integrity of the game. We were there to protect golf."

Phelps and ASGCA Past President Denis Griffiths were among the experts who became involved early to guide lawmakers to make decisions that would achieve their objectives while also being good for the game.



Photo: National Archives

President George H.W. Bush, the 2018 ASGCA Donald Ross Award winner, signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law in 1990. The ASGCA helped guide lawmakers regarding the ADA and its relation to golf, including 'golf car passage' from tee to green, and green to tee

Following a Washington D.C. meeting, where Phelps delivered a presentation as part of an ASGCA advisory group, guidelines for golf were released to ensure disabled golfers could access – on every hole – at least one tee, the fairway and the green.

Bel Jan, who has been a board member for the National Alliance for Accessible Golf since 2010, is now among those spearheading ASGCA's work on accessibility. She highlights the importance of those collaborative discussions, and subsequent revisions, in arriving at recommendations that are practical to implement. "The emphasis is on golf car passage," she says. "Golfers with mobility impairments need to be able to drive their golf carts onto the tees and hit from the cart, then drive down the fairways and onto greens – that's the passage. This is easy for architects to design, because mowing equipment has to get to all these places."

Relationships between golf course architects and industry partners, of the type that resulted in practical and effective approaches to environmental and accessibility issues, have grown "exponentially" over the years, says Schmidt.

"Back in the olden days, ASGCA members were given a big thick binder of products, but we started talking about how to engage better with suppliers and other industry partners. This wasn't just about learning their products but letting them get to know us. By doing

"Sharing ideas makes it easier for club governors to accept a proposal"



Photo: ASGCA Past President Jan Bel Jan

this, it opened more avenues for collaboration."

And, as it turned out, these relationships had a tendency to work both ways.

"Architects would start to say they'd heard from one of our partners about a potential golf course project – it opened up a lot more avenues for getting work, and we reciprocated," says Schmidt. "Our members got more educated on a lot of different fronts, including products – that was a very big positive at that point in time for our organization."

Formal collaborations for golf course projects are now widespread, even among architects who might usually be viewed as competitors. There is a recognition of the unique attributes that each party brings that can add value for the client and increase the likelihood of success.

In Mississippi, for example, Nathan Crace, ASGCA, reached out to ASGCA Past President Robert Trent Jones, Jr., for his insight into his 10-hole Otter Creek layout. Jones was glad to become involved, particularly given the project's emphasis on introducing golf to young people.

Troy Vincent, ASGCA, and Bill Boswell, ASGCA, are working together at Jekyll Island in Georgia. "Bill and I have known each other for a number of years and the idea of collaborating on a project together appealed to both of us, but it had to be the right project," says Vincent. "Given the fact there are multiple golf courses and so many possibilities at Jekyll Island, it was apparent that this would be the perfect fit. We have varying design concepts and styles but that has proven to be advantageous when dealing with such a large project and has allowed us to explore a number of opportunities that will ultimately benefit Jekyll Island."

Phelps gives the example of his son, Rick, lead architect at Phelps-Atkinson Golf Course Design and also an ASGCA Past President, who regularly collaborates with others. "Rick and several guys, who have projects in Colorado, go and have lunch together," says Phelps. "They play golf. They compare notes. I think it's terrific, and very good for the profession."

A collaborative approach is an important aspect of being a modern-day architect, says Bel Jan. "People are very willing to share – I do, because in many ways it's validating. It validates an idea, and it makes it a lot easier for club governors to accept a proposal. When you say this was successful at this club and made that club money, the option is definitely more persuasive. It also lets club governors know that you are open to more than just your own ideas, and it helps them validate it back to their own members."