

Where it all started

What inspires a person to become a golf course architect? Richard Humphreys speaks with ASGCA members about the people, courses and experiences that planted the seed for a career in golf design.

Photo: Steve Forrest



Steve Forrest, ASGCA past president, grew up playing golf at his home course (Holston Hills) in Marion, Virginia.

Photo: Logan Thompson



Logan Thompson, ASGCA, was seven years old when he received his first set of golf clubs.

When children are asked what they want to be when they're older, you might expect them to say a nurse, teacher, astronaut or, maybe now, an influencer. But you'd rarely hear "a golf course architect."

'The Great Junior Golf Design Challenge', organized by the ASGCA during the pandemic, may have done its bit to change that, with young people across the world getting a taste of design by sketching out their ideas for golf holes.

But what sparked the interest of today's golf course architects? And

when did they begin to see golf course design as a career path?

By Design spoke with several ASGCA members to find out.

Family ties

ASGCA Past President Jan Bel Jan grew up in a golfing family. Her father George and his five brothers all caddied at Highland Country Club, near Pittsburgh. Three of them went on to be PGA professionals, with their careers spanning stints at clubs in Florida, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

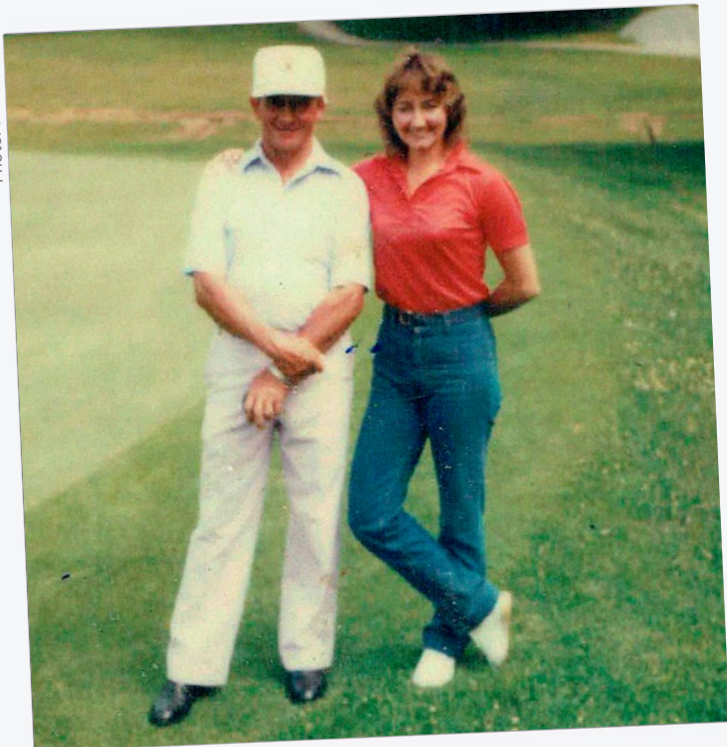
"I recall listening to these men animatedly discussing the courses they'd played, the shots they made, and their competitors," says Bel Jan. "Adult talk was generally boring, but their enthusiasm and intensity piqued my interest, even though I was too young to grasp the depth of their discussions."

"My father designed, supervised construction and was the pro-superintendent of the course where I grew up, Mannitto Country Club. He sat at the kitchen table after my siblings and I had finished our homework and, using colored pencils with lots of erasing and redrawing, routed the course, determined cuts and fills, and prepared green designs on graph paper. As a second grader, it made me laugh to see my dad 'doing homework' and using colored pencils!"

Jan's uncle Willie took her to Longue Vue Club in Pennsylvania. "The entry landscaping was unforgettably beautiful!" she remembers. "I still recall the vibrant masses of color. The clubhouse was the grandest structure – other than a church – that I'd seen! Willie took me on the course, and I saw how scenic and beautiful it was – especially the fifteenth hole. As a youngster, I didn't know anything about design or strategy, but I remember how the golf holes seemed to fit where they were."

"Willie explained this is what his brother, my father, was trying to do at Mannitto. By the time I was a teenager and working on

Photo: Jan Bel Jan



Golf was in the genes for ASGCA Past President Jan Bel Jan, pictured with her father George

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Photo: Jan Bel Jan



The Bel Jan brothers all caddied in Pittsburgh and three went on to become PGA professionals

Photo: Steve Forrest



The island green third on the Dogwood course at Country Club of North Carolina left a strong impression on Steve Forrest

the course and in the golf shop, I began to appreciate how much the Golden Age courses that my father and uncles played in western Pennsylvania had influenced my interest in different golf courses and design. They understood the qualities of a fair test as well as the aesthetics that provided the ambiance. I learned the basics by listening to them. They made it possible for me to ask better questions.”

The Mannitto club would pass through several owners before the Bel Jan family, who lived on property, left. Jan says that had the family moved earlier, she might not have ended up working in golf course design.

The Nicklaus effect

Two golf tournaments that took place in the early 1970s left a

lasting impression on a young Steve Forrest, now an ASGCA Past President. The Liggett & Myers Open Match Play Championship in 1972 was played at The Country Club of North Carolina in Pinehurst, that saw Jack Nicklaus beat Frank Beard 2&1 in the final, and was “the most exciting golf event,” according to Forrest.

“I specifically remember the island green on the third hole of the Dogwood course,” he says. “I also clearly recall Nicklaus hitting a one-iron over our heads to reach the par-five twelfth in two shots. I never would have guessed that he and I would one day stand beside each other in our Donald Ross tartan jackets at an ASGCA Annual Meeting!”

The second was the World Open Golf Championship (also known as

the Colgate Hall of Fame Classic) in 1973, which was played on Pinehurst’s No. 2 course. “That tournament, coupled with an article I had read in *Golf Digest* about Donald Ross’s design, left me intrigued and fascinated,” he says.

“Until I started thinking about ‘where it started,’ I didn’t realize how many ties to the Pinehurst area were connected to my formative design years!”

Forrest would return to The Country Club of North Carolina in 2002 alongside his design partner, ASGCA Past President Arthur Hills, who prepared a masterplan for the club’s two courses.

“My home course was Holston Hills in Marion, Virginia, not to be confused with Donald Ross’s gem in Knoxville, Tennessee,” says



Photo: Trey Kemp



Trey Kemp, ASGCA, fell in love with the game at the nine-hole Haskell CC course in West Texas

Forrest. “It was the course where I hit my first ever hole-in-one!

“Holston Hills was designed by Fred Garbin as a nine-holer with another nine added later. Consequently, holes ten and eighteen were some distance from the clubhouse. After being an architect for about 25 years, I had the opportunity to show the club a routing plan that would get the first, ninth, tenth and eighteenth holes in closer proximity to the clubhouse – as well as adding a full-size practice range – but being a small-town club, they never really had the money to implement the ideas.”

All roads lead to Texas

“I didn’t grow up dreaming of becoming a golf course architect,” says Trey Kemp, ASGCA. “In fact,

I didn’t even know it was a real profession until a new course was built in my hometown of Amarillo, Texas, while I was in high school.”

Kemp was introduced to the game by his grandfather. “Every summer, we’d play at Haskell Country Club, a small nine-hole course in West



“From the moment I stepped onto the course, I felt like I was somewhere special”

Trey Kemp, ASGCA

Texas,” he says. “That’s where I fell in love with the game.”

Most of Kemp’s early golf was played in West Texas. “The courses were flat, the wind was constant, and the ball seemed to

roll forever,” he recalls. “But there were three courses I played during family vacations that left a lasting impression: Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, the Plantation course at Kapalua, Hawaii, and Pinchurst No. 2. Experiencing those layouts in high school opened my eyes to how

varied and thoughtful golf course design could be. I’m not sure if they were the reason I chose this path, but they certainly didn’t hurt!”

Colonial was the first that Kemp played. “From the moment I

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stepped onto the course, I felt like I was somewhere special,” he says. “It was the first time I found myself not focused on my own game – I was just soaking it all in. I had never seen anything like it.

“Plantation gave me a whole new appreciation for how stunning a golf course could be, while still presenting a strategic challenge. It made me think more deeply about how a course can make a golfer think their way around.

“And then there was Pinehurst No. 2. That course showed me just how critical green design is to a golf course. One thing I’ve come to believe over time is that all great golf courses have one thing in common: a great set of greens.”

While at university, Kemp worked at Onion Creek Club in Austin. Bill Coore, ASGCA, and Ben Crenshaw had designed a nine-hole layout not long before Kemp began working there. “Bill and Ben were also on site renovating the original course,” says Kemp. “I remember watching

Golf Complex. “It was a special full-circle moment for me,” says Kemp. “I wanted to give the community something unique; a course that stood apart from anything else in the area. My early memories of learning the game in West Texas, along with the lasting impressions of Colonial, Kapalua and Pinehurst, helped shape the way I approached the project, both creatively and personally.”

Nature takes its course

Don Knott, ASGCA, also never imagined a future in golf course architecture. He didn’t play golf growing up, and there was no course in his hometown.

Knott played other sports in his youth, studied landscape architecture at university and had summer jobs where he got a taste of creating park and site plans. After a two-year stint in the army, Knott returned to graduate school at UC Berkeley in 1971 to study architecture, discovered golf and



By 1972, Knott was looking for a summer job and wondered if he could find one in golf course design. “The Bay Area was home to both



“I would strap my clubs over my shoulder and ride my motorcycle to Tilden Park”

Don Knott, ASGCA

them work and thinking, ‘that’s it, that’s what I want to do, too.’”

In 2012, Kemp, while working with John Colligan, ASGCA, returned to his hometown of Amarillo, Texas, to renovate the Mustang course at Ross Rogers

quickly fell in love with the game. “I would strap my clubs over my shoulder and ride my motorcycle to Tilden Park in the Berkeley Hills,” he says. “It was a wonderful course cascading through the wooded rolling hills.”

Bob Graves and Robert Trent Jones Jr,” says Knott. “The Palo Alto office of Jones offered me a spot for the summer. I finished my master’s degree in 1973 and returned to the organization full time that summer. The rest is history, as they say.”



Photo: Pebble Beach Company

The famous short par-four fourth hole at Spyglass Hill left a lasting impression on Don Knott, ASGCA, who first saw it when attending the Bing Crosby National Pro-Am in the early 1970s

Knott credits his love of nature and the outdoors for his path into golf course design. “My father was an avid outdoor sportsman, and we spent time fishing, hunting, hiking and camping,” he says. “Being in the outdoors was always special – and golf is kind of a journey through nature. The game is an obstacle course – navigating from point A to point B while attempting to avoid hazards has always been intriguing to me. The visual aesthetics of blending the game into nature is also a fascinating design challenge.”

In the early days of his golf course design career, Knott attended the Bing Crosby National Pro-Amateur

(now known as AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am), a visit that left him inspired. “I marveled at the many spectacular golf holes on the Monterey coast, but there was one that was particularly special,” he says. “The fourth at Spyglass Hill had abundant beauty, significant intimidation, a bit of mystery and blended magically into the dunescape. The hole remains one of my favorites in golf.”

Learning from a King

Logan Thompson, ASGCA, is one of the Society’s newest members. His career in the golf industry began in 2014 with McDonald & Sons.

“I was introduced to the game of

golf by my grandfather when I was about eight,” says Thompson. “We would go to many different golf courses in central Virginia and as I got older, I started to pay attention to the differences in each course. I also loved, and still love, building things and was never afraid to get dirty. I started to put both of those worlds together in high school and began researching everything I could about golf course architecture.”

Thompson continued playing golf and studying courses at college. “What I quickly learned is that good golf courses utilize the natural lay of the land as much as possible,” he says. “They also provide a strategic



“The game
is saying hello
to a new crop
of designers.
I’m a voice of
the ASGCA.”

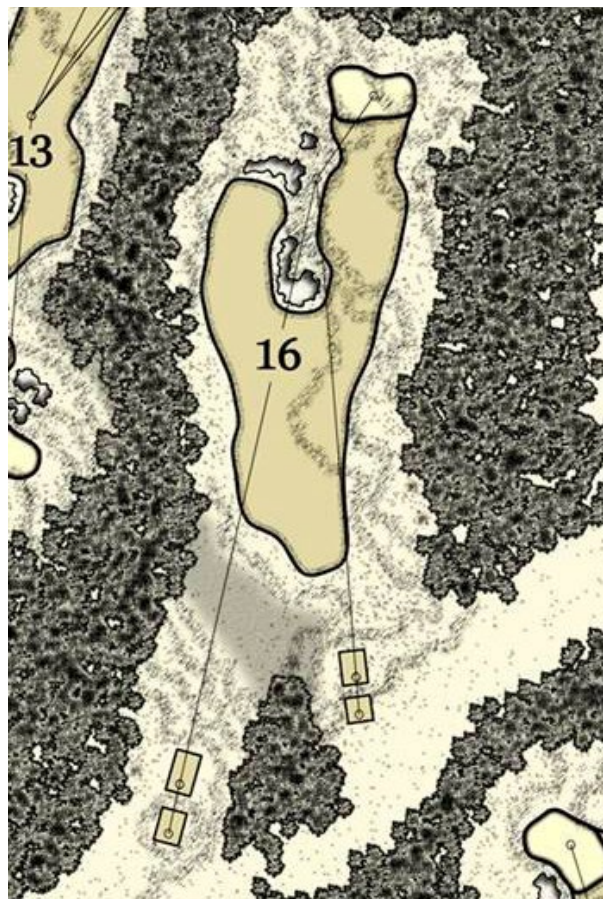
— BRANDON JOHNSON



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The sixteenth hole at the now-closed King Carter course in Kilmarnock, Virginia, is an example of risk-reward golf that Logan Thomson, ASGCA, played in college, contributing to his appreciation of strategic design



challenge to the best players, while also providing a fun and forgiving course for high handicap golfers. A great example of this was King Carter in Kilmarnock, Virginia.”

Thompson would play King Carter (it closed in 2018) with his uncle. “The design did a great job at providing a ‘bogey route’ for weaker players to get around trouble, while testing the better players with many risk-reward shots,” says Thompson. “I vividly remember the 305-yard par-four sixteenth. The hole had a split fairway with a large bunker complex in the middle. The way you played it was dictated by which tee was used that day, as well as the pin position. For the longer

hitters, the green was reachable off the tee, but if you wanted to lay up, the pin position dictated which section of the fairway you aimed for. The fairway was still wide enough for the weaker player to hit around trouble, reach the green and two-putt for bogey. It’s those risk-reward holes that make golf exciting for all skill levels. For my design work, I ensure every skill level is considered.”

Shortly after joining McDonald & Sons, Thompson found out that King Carter was one of the firm’s clients and he found the original plan by Joel Weiman, ASGCA, and Andrew Green. He learned more about the course from the pair and is striving to implement the design/build

techniques as the new lead designer of McDonald Design Group.

These skills were put into practice on one of his first projects, at Loudoun Golf & Country Club in Purcellville, Virginia. “The second is a great example of a risk-reward hole,” says Thompson. “Our placement of a new fairway bunker complex forces the better players to decide how much they are willing to carry, with a well-placed tee shot catching a slope that allows the ball to roll within 100 yards of the green. At the same time, the widened fairway and approach allows for the weaker players to hit around trouble, as well as utilize the left-to-right kicker slope left of the green.” ●