



The Major Designer, Rees Jones

Scion of the famous Robert Trent Jones Sr. and also known as “The Major Designer”, Rees Jones has had his name stamped on many heartbreaking and celebratory major championship grounds. **BY BENNY TEO**



OPENING PICTURE: Cascata, situated at the entrance of Boulder City just 30 minutes away from the Las Vegas strip. **INSET:** Rees Jones.

A life spent in golf. Now wouldn't that be a dream. For Rees Jones however, it has been one that has spanned seven decades and counting. Born in New Jersey to a family that has been involved in golf for the greater part of the 20th century through the elder, and then his older brother, it seemed natural that the younger Jones would do likewise, and, hundreds, if not thousands of hours of Major championship golf later on prime-time TV, the world is glad he did.

As a boy, Rees Jones would accompany his father as he goes about surveying golf courses. “As a young man, I took vacations with my family to my father’s jobs,” he recalls. “I became interested in golf course design because I visited many of the sites under construction and became fascinated with the work.”

After graduating from Yale and Harvard's Graduate School of Design, he unsurprisingly joined the family business at Robert Trent Jones Incorporated where he assisted on numerous courses until coming out on his own in 1974. “I decided to become a golf designer while still a junior at Yale, so I enrolled in art, math and design courses in order to apply to the Harvard School of Design.”

“I had a great childhood, enjoyed school and all kinds of outside activities. I played golf from age six or so, often with my father

and was hooked from the beginning. Later on, I worked in the summer on some of my father’s projects where I learnt first hand how a golf course is built.”

Being in a golfing family, it seems, had everything to do with his decision. “I have been immersed in golf my whole life because of my father. It was an easy decision to make. In the United States, it is not uncommon to follow in one’s father’s footsteps,” he says, continuing, “Because of that, I think it was easier to get started in the industry, but at the same time, my clients held me to a higher standard because of my father’s reputation but my background and my family name certainly helped me find clients.”

And it is here that we begin our look into his extraordinary career that has spanned over 100 golf courses, served as the president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, and recipient of the 2004 Old Tom Morris Award from the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, which is its highest honour. “I enjoy the confirmation that these awards bring and especially looking forward to receiving the Donald Ross Award in April from the American Society of Golf Course Architects, as this was voted on by a group of my colleagues.”

“When I started out, the country was in a recession. In a way this was good, as it gave me time to get myself organized and let people know I was on my own. I had four courses on Hilton Head Island

IMAGES ON THIS PAGE: Yunling Golf Club & Rees Jones at the project site.



“After graduating from Yale and Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, he unsurprisingly joined the family business at Robert Trent Jones Incorporated where he assisted on numerous courses until coming out on his own in 1974.”

(South Carolina) that gave me a good start. Jobs were steady, but it was not until I completely redesigned The Country Club in Brookline, Massachusetts, in preparation for the 1988 United States Open that my business took off. That was a definite milestone and the positive feedback from the golfing world helped my business and my reputation.”

As confident as he had been back then, the young designer never thought to consult his more experienced family or sought assistance in his fledgling career but he did take his father to Haig Point and Pinehurst No. 7 for a look like any proud son would. “When he attended the 1997 U.S. Open at Congressional, he praised the work I did there,” Jones beams in recollection.

It was, however, his work at Brookline that made the biggest impact. “I made changes on several courses prior to 1988, but Brookline is my most significant complete redesign, done in 1985 in preparation for the 1988 U.S. Open. In order to restore Brookline, I used old photographs to bring the course back to its original design intent.”

As his reputation for bringing new life to old championship tracts spreads, Jones began to get more and more interesting jobs that demands meticulous research into each project’s unique characteristics and how best to bring it a new lease of life.

“When I restore a course, I typically try to understand and maintain the original designer’s philosophy and style, while

updating the course to match today’s playability and maintenance standards. This is easy with my Dad’s courses, since I am so familiar with his design philosophy and style,” he says, further explaining, “Sometimes, the client wants to retain the original design style of their course, in which case, we will restore or reconstruct the course. While restoring a course, we are also up-dating it by repositioning bunkers and tees to bring it into the 21st century and keep up with modern equipment.”

However there are instances where the owner wants even more extensive changes to the course, including re-routing some or all of the holes in order to achieve his needs. That is a redesign. The decision, while it usually lies with the owner, is also something that the

experienced designer consults in. Most of that depends on the quality and condition of the existing course, as well as the owner’s goals and objectives. Nowadays, because of bigger budgets and better technology, more can be achieved sometimes without sacrificing the soul of the original plan.

“I just like to work for good clients with good vision on a good site. With a new design, there are often many possibilities. We study the land to ‘find’ the best course, so to speak. Sometimes with remodeling, depending on the existing conditions and the client’s goals, we either restore and update the existing course - I like to call this process a “restoration-modernization” - or we undertake a more comprehensive remodeling approach where the course

assumes our own design style and philosophy.”

With a keen eye for detail and creative landscaping, his projects soon developed reputation as strong championship grounds. While some of the courses had already been awarded a Major before he was selected to work on them like Brookline, as mentioned above, Hazeltine and Bethpage Black, others required remodeling before they could be selected. For example, at Congressional Country Club’s Blue Course, The South Course at Torrey Pines, the Highlands Course at Atlanta Athletic Club, and Bellerive Country Club in St. Louis (this most recent, for the 2018 PGA Championship), a complete remodeling needed to be done in order

for them to be selected.

Interestingly, they are all, noticeably, American classics. “I love to work on the great old courses, especially (A.W.) Tillinghast, (Alister) McKenzie, (Seth) Raynor and (Donald) Ross. I learn from them as I do the work.”

Reflecting on his lifework, he observes, “I have been fortunate to have worked on many classic golf courses. I take what I learned and apply those ideas to my modern designs. All good architects today use good ideas from the past. I like courses that have a more traditional feel to them. I think more traditional designs, with no gimmicks, have stood the test of time and have proven to be better.”

Having said that, the ‘Major Designer’



TOP LEFT PAGE: Bethpage State Park (Black Course);
BOTTOM: Congressional Country Club (Blue Course).

does have certain philosophies of his own that golfers of every ilk will appreciate as being fair. Emphasizing strategy, variety and playability, he abstains from blind hazards or holes in order to show the golfer the shot at hand.

"Because skill levels vary greatly between golfers, I think it is important to design and locate features and fairways in a manner that provides a genuine challenge for the best players, but also allows average players to enjoy their round and want to play the course again," he explains and adds, "I design so that a course has an ebb and flow, variety, aesthetics and especially shot options. I want each hole to be memorable and different from the others."

But the biggest satisfaction he derives is nevertheless in testing the best golfers in the world. "The 2002 U.S. Open at Bethpage Black, after our renovation, was perhaps the most exciting because the championship was held on a public golf course for the first time in its history. It introduced a new breed of enthusiastic fan."

While the classics may have given him satisfaction, it is his newer designs that tested him the most. Cascata, a private golfing enclave opened in 2000 and owned by hotel and casino operator Caesars Entertainment is situated at the entrance of Boulder City just 30 minutes away from the Las Vegas strip. Together with the North Course at Lake of Isles (opened in 2005) in Connecticut, they make up for his most testing challenge.

Aptly named 'waterfall' in Italian, Cascata is built upon a hilly backdrop with a 418-foot waterfall that flows from steep mountainside, over mammoth boulders, cascading into a river and roaring through its clubhouse while the North Course at Lake of Isles is built around the 90-acre body of water that it is named after, rolling terrain and island greens and tee boxes.

"These were two of the toughest to work on because of the severity of the topography and the rock outcroppings on the site. Only a very experienced golf course architect could have managed these sites because changes had to be made constantly as the site conditions dictated. However, the difficult nature of the sites of both courses made for

two truly spectacular golf courses from a playability and visual perspective," says Jones of both courses which are among the finest in their respective states.

Unlike his well-travelled brother Robert Trent Jones Jnr, Rees has, for many years, worked mainly in North America and has only a smattering of projects overseas. This is a departure from many others who have moved to the 'promised land' of Asia and the Middle East to seek out new fortunes and some mind-bogglingly huge projects.

He explains simply that, "in order to accomplish what I wanted to accomplish, I took only a limited amount of jobs, and there were plenty of those closer to home." Despite that fact, the draw of adventure and new frontiers have proved too enticing even for the picky architect who is currently

To that end, he maintains certain criteria when selecting jobs. "I think the most important thing is to have a client that has the same objectives that I do. We evaluate many projects throughout the world, but we are primarily interested in working with great clients who have a great site and are committed to building a quality product."

"Our design team has worked together for years. I continue to work closely with each designer. When a client works with one of them, he is getting my input also. I feel Rees Jones, Inc. has the best staff in the industry today. Our firm has built more than 170 courses and our design team has over 110 years of combined experience, so I think my clients feel they are in good hands."

Many designers today play the

"The 2002 U.S. Open at Bethpage Black, after our renovation, was perhaps the most exciting because the championship was held on a public golf course for the first time in its history."

enjoying opportunities in places like Kunming, Beijing and Osaka.

In reference to his current Yunling Golf Club project in the golfing mecca that surrounds the southern Chinese city of Kunming, he says, "I find that there are great design opportunities in Asia now. I enjoy working in Asia and especially in China. I am especially intrigued by many aspects of Chinese culture."

His visit has made such an impact as for him to declare, "We plan to be active in the Asia and China markets... continue to evaluate and pursue those opportunities that we feel are consistent with our firm's values and philosophy... providing excellent service for our clients and designing the world's best regarded golf courses!"

environment card when talking about their work and Jones is especially known to be very vocal on this issue. "I think we work hard for each of our clients to create a golf course which is environmentally sound as well. The golf course industry has been environmentally conscious for years. In fact, working to make the golf course sustainable has made the designs better for today and for the future. We have long embraced the notion that golf courses can, and should, co-exist in harmony with the landscape while benefitting the environment. We believe a properly designed and maintained golf course can protect wildlife habitat, preserve native vegetation, conserve water resources and buffer open green spaces from development." 