

# A Conversation with REES JONES

By Will Brogan

## "The Open Doctor"



The Falls At Grand Falls Resort & Casino

As you'll see in the pages of this month's issue, we are featuring a couple "casino courses" that were original designs by the legendary Rees Jones. Our Will Brogan recently interviewed Jones, the highlights of which are detailed here in this article.

**Tee Times:** You've worked on a few courses in our readership area, including two original designs in Dacotah Ridge Golf Club (Morton, Minnesota) and The Falls at Grand Falls Casino & Golf Resort (Larchwood, Iowa). What can you share about those two projects? (*Rees Jones also built Blue Top Ridge at Riverside (Riverside, Iowa)*)

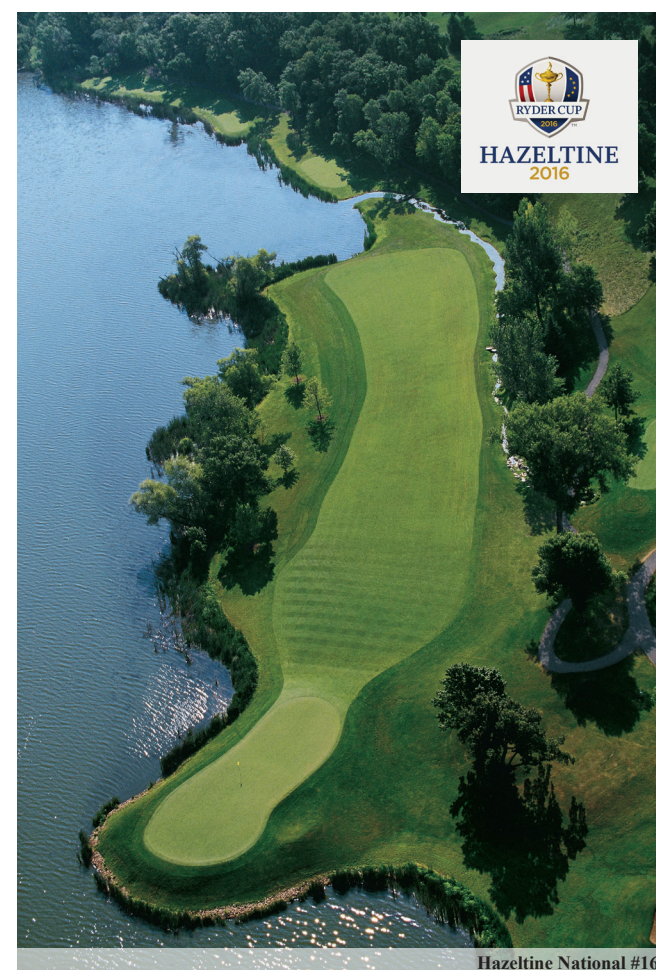
**Rees Jones:** For Dacotah Ridge, you drive across this flat farmland, and all of a sudden you come upon this land with topography, some trees, a stream going through it, and elevation changes. So, Dacotah Ridge is almost like an oasis in the desert, it's very surprising when you come upon the site and find such a *great* piece of ground for golf. Grand Falls is a prairie golf course that's in the middle of farmland. When we built it, we had the corn around us that left us waiting for the baseball players to come out! It's got more topography and more roll to it. It's an *ideal* piece of property for "today's golf". Both courses have been very well received and people have traveled great distances to play them.

**TT:** In preparation for the 2016 Ryder Cup, what are some changes you are doing to Hazeltine National Golf Club that you can tell our readers about?

**RJ:** Most of the work ahead is really up to Davis Love III. Most of the changes will be in the setup of the golf course. The golf course is pretty well fixed, but we re-did the greens about five years ago and modestly changed some of the contours and put the new bent grasses on. I've been working there since the late eighties re-bunkering, lengthening, adding tees, just making the golf course much more natural. But I don't think there are really going to be any "changes", maybe just the mowing patterns, I believe the rough will be low and the fairways will be ample, and they're looking for a very exciting event. They are re-routing the holes, so they will not be the same as when the PGA Championships were held

there. Hazeltine has been one of my favorite projects because it has such a great membership, and the course meant a lot to my dad. We've basically continued to finish what my dad started, and I think he's looking down from upstairs saying, "It's really going to be wonderful for the Ryder Cup."

**TT:** You're known throughout the golf world as "The Open Doctor". That nickname was effectively passed to you from your father, but what does that term mean to you?



Hazeltine National #16





Dacotah Ridge #11

**RJ:** It was a term that my father was given because he did a lot of the Open courses in his prime. I've done seven U.S. Open courses, eight PGA Championship courses, and five Ryder Cups, and I've worked on twelve U.S. Open venues from the past. I guess the press designated me as "The Open Doctor" of the last twenty years, mainly for the preparation I was doing for the events to make it a fair test, a championship test, to crown a worthy champion, and working with the USGA to have a great event.

**TT:** What is the most important element of building - or renovating - a golf course to you?

**RJ:** I think sustainability is probably the most important part, for both the environment and for the game itself. I was on the USGA environmental research committee for about 15 years, and we helped fund a lot of research money to find out how *really good* golf courses are for the environment. Just think, if they didn't have golf courses in Los Angeles, there'd be NO green space there, and no place for the wildlife! Golf courses provide a great ecosystem, and are very good for the wildlife. To some degree, especially in today's world, golf is probably more environmentally friendly than any other use of turf grass.

**TT:** Do you have a particular "theme" that you try to achieve with each of your courses, like a Rees Jones trademark? If not, then do you establish a "theme" or style *within* a particular course?

**RJ:** I try not to. I try to design in conjunction with the environment that I'm working with. On a place like Pinehurst No. 7, we used all the natural elevation to build it like an old-style golf course, because Pinehurst really is like "America's St. Andrews", so we tried to give it an old, pre-depression look with a lot of naturally elevated green sites and built them like a lot of the famous golf courses of yesteryear. We want to make sure that the green contours are challenging, yet fair, I think the bunker style really has to fit the terrain and the locale and the history. I think we're the most flexible in terms of multiple styles. A lot of architects get into one style of bunker because they want the player to know that "*they*" did the course. I'd almost prefer that the player asks "who" did the course when I build them.

**TT:** What is the single best part of designing golf courses from your personal perspective?

**RJ:** I really believe that golf is a sport of a lifetime. I play with my grandkids now, and I played with my father when I was growing up. It is a sport that transcends generations. I try to give people places where they can have a lot of fun and a lot of pleasure. Just being with your friends for five hours is phenomenal. Being in an environment that gives you the positive feeling is a goal. I try to design for the experience of it being an "escape", and it's even more of an escape when you don't bring your cell phone! They say that golf takes too long, but I think that the fact that it does take "too long" is wonderful because it allows for the interaction with your friends and family for that amount of time.

**TT:** You've been doing this as the leader of your own design firm for over forty years now. What was your favorite project or most vivid memory over that timespan?

**RJ:** I don't really have a favorite *golf course*, but I have three favorite *projects*. Bethpage Black, because we brought the public golfer in, and it was in the greater New York area, with the first U. S. Open occurring right after 9/11, and it really was a very positive event for the fire fighters and the police and the people that were suffering from the effects of 9/11. Bethpage led to Torrey Pines, when it was a "build it and we will come" event, and it was one of the greatest Opens ever with Tiger winning on a broken leg in a nineteen hole playoff. Both



Rees Jones With The Staff At The Falls At Grand Falls Resort &amp; Casino Grand Opening

those projects helped the transition of golf from a "private" mindset to a "public" mindset, and now both those courses are going to carry forward that effort. Then there's East Lake Golf Club. Twenty years ago, Tom Cousins and I went in there, and it really was a disaster. We resurrected the course with a Donald Ross theme, and he built a middle school, high school, and a YMCA, and took a place that had the second-highest crime rate in the country and turned it into an ideal place where kids, instead of getting into trouble and going to prison, are going to Ivy League colleges and more than a dozen are playing on college golf teams. Seeing the results of this twenty year effort to positively re-claim the East side of Atlanta has been wonderful, and having it take place where Bobby Jones originally played golf and it is playing host to such an important event in the TOUR Championship, it's just a great example.

Rees Jones' impact on the game of golf has indeed reached legendary status. While the professionals prepare for another exciting trip to Hazeltine National Golf Club, those of us who are fans and recreational golfers are now incredibly fortunate to enjoy a pair of outstanding public Jones designs within an easy drive from home. Thank you Rees!



Bluetop Ridge at Riverside Casino #5