

One big adventure

REES JONES

From working for his father, one of the great names of golf design, to going his own way and building a reputation as perhaps the greatest preparer of tournament courses the game has seen, Rees Jones' life has been one big adventure. He spoke to Adam Lawrence about past, present and future.

Dynasties are remarkable things.

In our modern world, with billions of people receiving decent educations and able to make their own decisions about how they will live their lives, people still often follow the same path as their parents. Whether presidents, prime ministers, musicians, actors or businesspeople, there are many 'modern dynasties'.

The history of golf architecture has its share. In some ways, it isn't surprising:

most golf design practices are small, and sit often comfortably within the sphere of 'family businesses'. So the existence of names like Hawtree, Harradine – and Jones, reputedly the best known of all – is not as big a shock as it might seem.

Robert Trent Jones, Sr. is one of the profession's most important names. In the aftermath of World War Two, with golf in the US looking to move on and embrace the mood of progress, Jones became the dominant architect, building

hundreds of courses across America and the world. He was instrumental in the creation of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA), the profession's largest trade body.

Jones, Sr., who died in 2000 at the age of 93, continued to design courses until very late in life. Much earlier, his two sons had joined him in the family business, and both later went their own way, creating large course portfolios of their own. Younger son Rees has, in a sense,

been in the golf business since the age of 13, when he was tasked by his father in 1954 to measure the length of drives during that year's US Open at Baltusrol, to provide accurate information on distances for future championship redesign projects. Like his father, Rees has gone on to work on a large number of courses that have held major events.

Rees went to college at Yale. "My mother wanted me to go to Yale to get a liberal arts education to decide what I wanted to do with my life," he says. "After my sophomore year, I decided to go into the golf course design business, even though it wasn't very lucrative at the time. In my junior and senior years, I took courses that enabled me to get into Harvard School of Design, where I

met classmate Cabell Robinson and later helped him get into golf course design."

After completing his education, Rees went to work for his father. "I had a great life working with him," he says of the early years. "In the post-World War Two era, people were coming out of the Depression and were limited on what they could do or afford. There wasn't much money in golf course design then; it was a real labour of love. Bill Baldwin, who was the head of my dad's construction crew, took me under his wing, and taught me that I couldn't implement a design if I didn't know how to get it built."

Elder brother Bobby went solo in 1972, and Rees followed suit two years later. "It was the right time to go on my own," he says. "I'd worked for my dad for ten

years. I quickly got the Arcadian Shores design assignment in Myrtle Beach, which made the *Golf Digest* top 100 list and helped establish my reputation. Golf architecture goes in cycles, as the economy does. When I went on my own, we were in a downturn, but it was a good time to establish my name. I was hired to design three courses for Hilton Head Plantation, a major real estate development at the time, which led to additional work elsewhere.

"There weren't as many burgeoning golf course designers in those days, because we were coming out of such a slow economic period. Most of the new designers had worked for Ross, Maxwell or others. I was accepted into the ASGCA the same year as Bill Amick and Ed Seay.

Photos: Rees Jones Inc



Jones and design associate Bryce Swanson (second right) at their first project in Japan, the 2011 redesign of the West course at Ibaraki Country Club



Jones restored and reworked Bethpage Black in preparation for the 2002 US Open, and made further tweaks in advance of the 2009 US Open, 2019 PGA Championship and 2025 Ryder Cup

It was a significantly smaller group of individuals in those days.”

Rees’s career really took off in the 1980s, when he was hired to do design work at The Country Club in Brookline in preparation for the 1988 US Open. That event had two major consequences: he became the go-to architect if your course was hosting a major championship (eventually becoming known, as his father had before him, as the ‘Open Doctor’). Also, his proposal for Brookline was very radical for the time, restorative in essence: the project played a substantial role in spawning the movement to restore classic golf courses, now so popular.

“I was hired by The Country Club because I knew the history of the club, the US Open and Francis Ouimet. The USGA in part wanted to go there to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Ouimet’s victory. I interviewed for the job with other architects; some of whom wanted to dramatically change the course. I wanted to restore it. I could see how the greens had become rounded and shrunk during the Depression. I had an eye for what it should look like, having grown up playing and working on classic courses. We studied the old photos, and when we restored a bunker, we dug a hole and found sand and we knew we were in the right location.”

Not far from Brookline, Rees was involved in another famous US Open, the 2002 championship at Bethpage Black, the first ever to be played on a true publicly owned course. The USGA executive director, David Fay, conceived the idea of reconstructing the Black for a future US Open and organised a group of 12 people to visit and play the course on 1 May 1995, to assess its potential.

Rees was among them. The group decided the idea was a sound one, and Rees was hired to restore and rework the golf course. “I was embedded in the project from the beginning,” he says. “That year, the Open was to be held at Shinnecock Hills, and someone saw me

and David Fay in the Bethpage parking lot and the next day the newspapers reported that Shinnecock must have some real problems, so they’re going to hold the US Open at Bethpage. As a publicly owned course, it had been neglected and overgrown, but its original features were still there. We had to add length for the Open, and added or relocated many bunkers in the same style, but it was easy to see what had to be done.” Bethpage Black will host the 2025 Ryder Cup.

Another publicly owned course Rees has completely redesigned for championship play is the South course at Torrey Pines in San Diego. As well as



two US Opens, Torrey Pines hosts the PGA Tour regularly. Unlike Bethpage Black, one of the five courses at the facility, which embraces its reputation as a man-eater (as the famous sign by the course’s first tee shows), Torrey Pines needed to remain playable for average golfers, as well as a challenging test for the best. Jones says this is one of the hardest challenges for any architect. “I think Torrey Pines accommodates the recreational golfer, because of the varied contoured diagonal greens, which help

to create a course that is visually interesting and exciting for the viewer at home, while ensuring it can later be set up in a way that makes it enjoyable and playable for golfers of all levels.”

Golf architecture is not known as a collaborative business – the marketing for golf courses, when it relates to architecture at all, generally focuses exclusively on the big name deemed to be responsible for everything. Rees has seen a lot of that, but he is quick to give a lot of the credit for his projects to the designers who have worked

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create shot options. Torrey Pines South plays over 80,000 rounds annually, even though it can accommodate a PGA Tour event. The real challenge with designing courses that host professional tournaments isn’t just accommodating crowds and stands and such, but

with him for decades, Greg Muirhead for 41 years, Steve Weisser for 34 and Bryce Swanson for 25. “We have worked together for so long, we are like a well-oiled machine. They are incredibly talented designers in their own right. The success of the company is because I was fortunate



The course at RedStick Golf Club is one of 11 original Rees Jones designs in the state of Florida and more than 100 worldwide

to have such high-quality people on my team. We're really co-designers on most of our projects."

And that's not the only collaboration on his resumé: Rees is co-credited along with some of the most famous professional golfers. "When I designed Golf Santander in Madrid, Spain, for the bank of the same name, I did it for Seve Ballesteros's father-in-law, Emilio Botín, who ran the bank," he explains. "Because of Mr Botín's relationship with Seve I was fortunate that he was able to contribute to the design. Recently I have had the pleasure of collaborating with Hideki Matsuyama on the Taiheiyo Club's Gotemba course in Japan. He was very helpful because he had played the golf course often while it hosted the Taiheiyo Masters."

Rees has worked all over the world, including, more recently, on several high-profile projects in Japan, starting with the West course at the Ibaraki club in Osaka, whose East course was touched up by Hugh Alison during his trip to Japan in 1930. At Ibaraki, Rees removed the two greens per hole system used on so many

very proud of our work, because I think we are helping to transform the style of Japanese golf," he says.

In his long career, Rees has seen a lot of different trends in golf architecture. He says that the key to remaining successful is a resolute focus on the most important aspect of the job: playability.

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Japanese courses to cope with the radically different summer and winter weather. The redesign was so well received that the course was chosen to host the 2024 Japan Open. He has since worked on a number of other high-end Japanese courses. "I'm

"The more you do, the more you learn, and you have to keep learning," he explains. "I've been fortunate to work on some of the best sites in golf. I think the reason I was selected to work on so many premier projects is that I try



Jones and design associate Greg Muirhead (second left) with workers at Yunling GC in China and, inset, with design associate Steve Weisser (second left) and the team at El Caballero CC in California. Muirhead, Weisser and Swanson have a combined total of 100 years working with Jones

to accommodate every golfer's ability. The reason I admire MacKenzie and Tillinghast is that their courses were beautiful, and beauty is very appealing to golfers. They built sculptured bunkers, then after World War Two, things were more utilitarian. Later Pete Dye built pot bunkers, so everyone started doing that. Then Nicklaus started building highly ranked golf courses with an abundance of mounds which were copied by others. Today sand-flanked fairways are in vogue. Fashions always change.

"What makes golf course design so rewarding isn't just the great clients and people we meet – it's the variety and constant challenge that keeps it

exciting. Whether we're creating new courses, adding forward tees, renovating bunkers, designing short-game areas, or even building a backyard putting green, every project is unique. Some clients are preparing for professional tournaments, others want to make their course more welcoming. We're fortunate to have loyal clients who continue to turn to our company for it all."

Rees's adventure is far from over. "My career has been a labour of love. My ambition has always been to build popular facilities and to grow the game of golf. I've been fortunate in recent years to have a lot of projects in Florida, where I am designing and redesigning

courses that accommodate every ability and age group. At Wellman Golf Club in Johnsonville, South Carolina, I was able to build a golf course inexpensively so that all golfers could afford to play there. I have two exciting public projects in Hollywood, Florida, and Greensboro, North Carolina, where we will build public golf courses that are affordable. I want the entry-level golfer to have a place to play and have a sports activity that they enjoy for a lifetime. I believe I've accomplished this at Torrey Pines, Bethpage Black, Bryan Park, Corica Park, Bayou Oaks and many other public golf courses. That's an important part of my legacy." **GCA**