

A Quiet Success

Denis Griffiths isn't the Most Famous Course Designer, But He Certainly Gets the Job Done – All Over the World BY PATRICK JONES

Denis Griffiths holds the enviable distinction of being the only American golf architect ever to design a course in St. Andrews, Scotland. It is considered the birthplace of golf as well as the sport's destination Mecca. "I still look back and say, 'Man, we got to do that,'" says Griffiths of his two St. Andrews Bay layouts built in 2001 and 2002. "What an opportunity."

It was not the first time that golf – a sport Griffiths' barely considered in his youth – searched him out for the chance of a lifetime.

Griffiths, 61, estimates that he has been directly involved in 100 course designs in a career that has spanned almost 40 years. Golf has taken him around the world. But if not for a knee injury suffered in college, he knows his personal story could be much different – if not also abbreviated.

Griffiths, a native of Indianola, Iowa, was wrapping up a degree in landscape architecture at Iowa State University in 1970 and potentially facing a dangerous future dodging enemy fire in foreign rice paddies – not exactly the landscape he had studied for.

"I was literally bound to Vietnam," he says of a time when a lottery determined military draft order. "I was just waiting to go."

Griffiths failed his induction physical due to his bum knee that was injured in a pick-up flag football game.

"The day after (failing his physical), I went back to the Landscape Architecture Department to look at available positions on the job board," says Griffiths. "There were two job listings. One was in Houston. The other was in Atlanta."

Two weeks later, Griffiths was a Georgian and an employee of Davis, Kirby & Player Inc., a designer

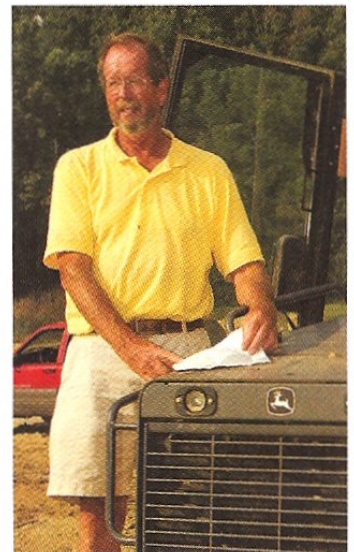
of golf courses across the globe. The latter name in the company was nine-time major tournament champion Gary Player.

"No doubt about it, golf found me," says Griffiths. He did fight the kismet at various times. Griffiths entered Iowa State, majoring in aerospace engineering. A course load of calculus, physics and chemistry in the same term quelled that potential calling.

In his youth, the 6-foot-5-inch Griffiths played basketball, ran track and participated in "about every sport," but golf. His hometown did not have a public course. Griffiths says his parents did not have the means to belong to the local nine-hole country club.

"Golf (for me) was mostly the driving range and beating the ball around the backyard with some of my uncle's old clubs," he says. "I am not that old, but the irons had wooden shafts. It would be pretty loose terms to say that I played golf in my early years."

But he has embraced his chance encounter. Once entrenched in the sport, Griffiths' industriousness and intelligence (his demeanor, beard and bespectacled appearance remind you of a favorite history professor) have carved an increasingly respected position in the profession. Griffiths served his peers as the president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects in 1996. He has collaborated on course designs with



some of the legends in the sport: Gene Sarazen, Sam Snead, Lee Trevino, Johnny Miller, Bruce Devlin and Kathy Whitworth to name a few.

Griffiths' early years on the job involved being "thrown into the mix" on a Davis, Kirby & Player project at Lake Lanier Islands north of Atlanta. Griffiths says he got to be "the run-around guy right out the gate" on the Stouffer Pine Isle Resort course. Within a year, he had a passport and was traveling to foreign destinations.

"It was an interesting combination of Ron (Kirby) coming from the Robert Trent Jones organization and being an excellent golfer," says Griffiths, reflecting on his first job. "Arthur (Davis), being a Georgia boy growing up in Tifton, a (University of) Georgia grad, having worked for Willard Byrd, and being very articulate and design oriented. And, then, with Gary (Player), obviously, having his input, I got to draw something from each one of those individuals."

As happens in business, things change, and sometimes rapidly. Davis left the business. Griffiths and Kirby began designing courses themselves for several clients not interested in paying the premium that comes with using Player's name on their course. Player eventually moved on – a decision that was based on new marketing strategies implemented by his management company. Griffiths and Kirby forged on for several more years, including taking on behind-the-scenes work for Jack Nicklaus' design firm. The Nicklaus group later offered to absorb them both. Kirby accepted. Griffiths did not.

"It didn't take long for me to say, 'No, I'll stay here and we'll keep going on the way we have been,'" says Griffiths. "So I bought the original Davis, Kirby & Player Corporation. I have been working from Atlanta as Denis Griffiths & Associates ever since

(1987). I was very fortunate with the timing and where the golf swing went at the time. It was the golf boom, if you may."

Griffiths lives off the 17th hole on one of the three courses he designed at Chateau Elan in Braselton, north of Atlanta. Chateau Elan provided a springboard for Griffiths' solo design career and marked an ongoing and mutually beneficial relationship with entrepreneur Don Panoz, whose holdings include Chateau Elan Winery & Resort, Road Atlanta and Scotland's St. Andrews Bay.

Panoz even offered Griffiths a piece of property at Chateau Elan to use for his office, which he still maintains after almost 20 years.

Griffiths piled up international frequent flyer points in his initial experience. His name was attached to courses in England, Japan, Scotland, Puerto Rico, The Philippines, Spain, Thailand and elsewhere. Griffiths then made the strategic decision, once working for himself, to keep his projects closer to home. Georgia's golf landscape has benefited from that choice. His prolific number of in-state designs includes Chateau Elan, Brasstown Valley Resort in the mountains near Young Harris, St. Marlo's in Duluth and The Georgia Club near Athens. In total, he has designed or renovated approximately two dozen courses in Georgia. But Griffiths has also left his mark in states ranging from New Mexico to Ohio to California to Virginia. He totally redesigned the historic Audubon Golf

Club in downtown New Orleans, which he called "a special achievement."

These days Griffiths prefers to stick near his own bed and to put his time in on course sites and not in airports. Being more of a homebody has also allowed him to pursue his avocation. "Most weekends my hands are greasy, and speed and authenticity are an issue," he says. Griffiths is a car buff.

His prime interest is a 1970 Ford Mustang Mach 1. He bought it new and sold it 10 years later. More than two decades after selling it, he happened on it at a car show in Charlotte, bought it again and restored it.

"Anybody that knows me says, 'Man, he is never in the office because he doesn't like to be there.' I like to be out in the dirt and facilitating and making decisions and getting things done out there," says Griffiths, who has seen several of his courses on Top 100 lists in national golf publications. "To me, that is the essence of what I am doing and I just love to

do that. Getting up on the bulldozer is my best time."

Approaching four decades in the business, Griffiths still enjoys his work. He gets a kick out of formulating memorable recreational landscapes to be enjoyed by the public.

"I love to have the opportunity to paint a picture," says Griffiths. "When you have taken this 150 or 200 acres and, hopefully, put it out there to be used in perpetuity and it enhances the landscape and also provides a means of enjoyment for many people."

The game was fortunate to have found Denis Griffiths. ■

DENIS GRIFFITHS

BEST SCORE: 83 at The Old Course, St. Andrews, Scotland. "It was one of those benign days. I had a good caddie. His name was Dinger. He picked up on my game real quick and that probably helped me more than anything."

HANDICAP: Does not maintain one
CLUB MEMBERSHIPS: Legends Course at Chateau Elan; The Georgia Club.

IN THE BAG: Ping I-2 Nickel Beryllium, TaylorMade, Ping putter, Wilson R12 sand wedge specially made for the opening of Hilton Head Plantation in 1972.