

Mr. Affordable

Richard Mandell is not widely known, but he is influencing the industry in regards to affordable golf course renovation and construction.

BY JACK CRITTENDEN

Richard Mandell is not a household name. Most golfers have never heard of the golf course architect, and *Golf Digest* and other consumer golf magazines rarely write about his projects.

Yet *Golf Inc.* magazine named him as one of the most influential architects in the spring, and that's because he is quickly becoming "Mr. Affordable Golf."

This past November 75 people came together for his first annual symposium on affordable golf, and he hopes to attract 150 next year. And now his The Reserve Golf Club in Pawleys Island, S.C., placed third for Renovation of the Year under \$1 million.

Mandell oversaw the renovation for The Reserve that stayed within a tight budget of less than \$550,000.

"I had to do a good selling job because the owner was on the fence about spending the money," Mandell said. "He said I better be under budget."

Thanks to careful planning and close management, the project finished 2.5 percent under budget.

"It is really easy to stay under budget unless you hit rocks or something unforeseen," Mandell said. "You have to go in with an accurate number to begin with. The shape and size [for The Reserve] was thought out in detail beforehand and that is the key. In the past, architects had carte blanche and did not have to think things through ahead of time, but could work in the field. But that takes more time."

Greg Norman Golf Course Design originally designed the Reserve in 1998. John McConnell bought the previously private equity club out of bankruptcy last year



PHOTO BY LAURA L. GINGERICH

and wanted to add a 'wow' factor with more bunkers.

The course was closed, and construction began on July 1 of last year and was completed by Sept. 1. The G2 bent grass greens were re-grassed to Champion Bermuda, allowing for less hand-watering and an estimated cost savings of \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year on fungicides alone.

"There is always a tradeoff between the dramatic look of golf features and the cost to maintain them," said Michael Hurdzan, who was one of three judges for the Renovation of the Year competition. "This plan found the perfect balance point for not much money."

The Reserve is Mandell's 21st project in the ground in his 20 years in the business.

Most of those projects are renovations. He will complete his fifth new course soon, a designation that will allow him to apply for membership to the ASGCA.

"My projects have won awards, people like them, they are affordable and none have gone bankrupt," he said. "You can build a golf course that is award-winning without hiring a big name architect or spending a fortune."

Mandell has known he wanted to be a golf course architect since he was 15. He grew up in Westchester, N.Y., playing tournaments at Winged Foot Golf Club and Rye Golf Club, a private club in Rye, N.Y.

"My brother had a set of golf clubs and hardly played," he said. "In the eighth

grade, we snuck onto Rye and played the two through seven loop. Freshman year, I went legit with a junior membership.”

Mandell said the clubs he played in his youth impacted his view of design — they used the lay of the land.

“My mom tells the story that I came home one day from a crappy round of golf, and I was complaining about the course,”

he said. “I got laid off a few times, and as far as golf course design goes, I knew just as much as the other architects did about golf course design — in terms of book knowledge. I knew about theory, history, but had very little practical knowledge. But my civil engineer partners knew that.”

The company had two replica projects in the works when it formed. But both projects never materialized, and the next five years were tough for the young architect who no one had ever heard of.

“It was hard to get people to hire you,” he said. “In retrospect, I would recommend that someone work for a golf course architect for five years, instead of live under the poverty level for five years.”

But slowly Mandell got jobs, and in October 1999 he bought out his partners and changed the name of the firm to Richard Mandell Golf Architecture.

Today, he said his path gives him advantages.

“There are a lot of new guys out there from Nicklaus Golf Design and others, but they can’t relate to a muni golf

course with a soccer field attached to it,” he said. “I am not worried about competition from that regard.”

The past six years have been the most lucrative for his business, despite the recent development slowdown.

“We have been fortunate, and I think it is because of our reasonable approach,” Mandell said. “For years, I have been thinking about this idea of affordable golf. I don’t think 10 years ago [anybody] would have listened.”

“A lot of people have talked over the years but never addressed the issue of growing the game in terms of the costs. A lot of it is cost. A lot of people in the golf business don’t suggest [affordable] alternatives if it is coming out of somebody else’s pocketbook.”

While Mandell has taken on the mantle of Mr. Affordable, he still designs higher end projects.

“I don’t have a problem building a great \$3 or \$4 million dollar golf course,” he said.

He is currently completing a project in China that has an unlimited budget. But, he admits, he is trying to be smart with the money — even in China.

THIRD PLACE

The Reserve Golf Club

Pawleys Island, S.C.

Private

Owner: McConnell Golf

Architect: Richard Mandell Golf Architecture

Contractor: Frontier Golf

Year course opened: 1998

Renovation timeline: July 2010 to September 2010

Budgeted amount: \$554,925

he said. “My mom said, ‘why don’t you be a golf course architect.’”

So Mandell chose the University of Georgia for its landscape architecture program and graduated in December 1990. While he played in high school, he wasn’t good enough for the Georgia team, so focused on his studies.

He interned with Dan Maples and was given a job with the Pinehurst-based architect after graduation. He was soon laid off as the recession slowed work. He then worked with Denis Griffiths in Atlanta, until he was laid off again due to lack of work.

It was around this time that he wrote an article on replica golf holes for Golf Illustrated. That project introduced him to the three civil engineers who had worked on Tour 18 in Houston. Within months, they had formed a partnership — Whole in One Design Group.

“I remember the exact spot where I was standing when I made the decision,”

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The Reserve
Golf Club of  Pawleys Island