

The Short Game Doctor

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In the not too distant past, it seemed as though nearly every course in the Gulf States region was being renovated to some degree to keep up with the new courses being built. New public, private, and casino courses were either springing up or existing courses were making improvements every year. But like rounds of golf played in recent years, that work slowed and—in many cases—completely dried up. New course openings are non-existent and existing courses don't seem to be willing to shut down what revenue streams they have and spend the money to renovate. Clubs that are bleeding members are not going to borrow millions of dollars to renovate the whole course with no guarantee of payback on the other end. But there is one aspect of golf course renovation and construction that has quietly been moving along below the radar: practice facilities—and specifically, short game practice facilities.

When most golfers think about golf course architecture and golf course architects, they immediately jump to names like Fazio, Jones, Nicklaus, Palmer and the like or PGA Tour players with offices in places like Palm Beach or the West Coast. Not too many would jump to sleepy Magee, Mississippi—halfway between Jackson and Hattiesburg. And fewer still would assume that one of America's young golf course architects lives and works there. In an inconspicuous corner suite of an office building just a few blocks off busy US Highway 49, you'll find a fortysomething-year-old father-of-three golf course architect who continues to stay busy by adapting quickly to changes in the golf industry and the economy by being flexible enough to do anything from master planning renovations of an entire golf course to renovating a handful of bunkers and greens—and he says it's all according to plan.

You might recognize Nathan Crace from his guest column called *Lipouts* in previous editions of this publication. We sat down with him at the offices of his company, Watermark Golf (actually two separate companies: Watermark Golf/Nathan Crace Design and Watermark Golf Management) for an interesting Q&A with the person who has been directly involved with the design or re-design of more holes of golf in Mississippi the past 20 years than Fazio, Jones, Nicklaus, or Palmer—combined—and is now spearheading the movement to grow the game by growing the short game.

The offices of Watermark Golf are tucked away in a series of office buildings surrounded by home health agencies, dentists, insurance agents, and optometrists. Once inside, Crace's office is located through a door just off the front office and his desk is covered with the typical stacks of files and family photos you might see on anyone's desk...and a unique lamp made of deer antlers. There are two computers at his desk, boxes of rolled up blueprints in one corner, and (oddy) a number of power tools, including a circular saw and miter saw, on the floor in the corner. He explains that they are left there after he built a new oak countertop for his home's master bath as a birthday gift to his wife. *Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers* are currently



streaming from a wireless speaker on his desk and the built-in shelves rising above him on the wall behind his desk are overflowing with books, photos, collectibles, framed notes and letters from clients, souvenirs from trips to other golf courses, stacks of music CDs, and two Mississippi State cowbells (more on that later). He greets me, shakes my hand, brings me a chair from another room, and we get started:

BSM: First things first. Why is your office in Magee, Mississippi instead of Jackson or Hattiesburg, or anywhere else for that matter?

NC: I grew up in a small town in southern Indiana just across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky. Notice I pronounce it “Loo-a-vuhl.” That’s how you can tell someone is really from there. But [my wife] Michelle and I got married just a few days after I graduated from Mississippi State. She’s originally from south Mississippi and she was teaching at a local high school at the time and living here in Magee, so we started out here. Our original plan was to move to either the Jackson area or Hattiesburg, but then we both realized that we liked the small town atmosphere. It’s only 45 minutes in either direction to Jackson or Hattiesburg, and we fell in love with the town and the friends we’ve made here. Next thing you know, we’re building a house, we have three kids now, and the rest is history.

BSM: So how did a kid from Indiana end up in Starkville, Mississippi for college?

NC: [Laughs] I get that question a lot when people find out I grew up in the Midwest. My senior year in high school, I still wasn’t really sure what I wanted to do. Deep down I wanted to design golf courses, but where does a kid go to do that? There’s no undergraduate program for golf course architecture. Then a friend of my mom’s told us about the Professional Golf Management [PGM] program at Mississippi State. We visited the campus and I fell in love with the place. It’s also where Michelle and I met my freshman year. My time in Starkville was really a transformative part of my life.

BSM: But that still doesn’t answer my question. Why go to learn how to be a golf professional if you thought you wanted to design golf courses? Why not landscape architecture?

NC: Oh, I *knew* I wanted to design golf courses. I designed my first “golf course” when I was about 10 because there was no golf course in my home town of Charlestown [Indiana] and no one in my family even played golf. So I knew that if I wanted to play, I would have to build my own course and that’s what I did. I built a three-hole course and played it every day after school until dark. I even played it in the snow in the winter time. You couldn’t really putt on the greens, but you could hit all kinds of shots. [Laughs] I guess that was my first “short game” facility. But becoming a golf course architect was *always* the end goal, I just didn’t have a map showing how to get there. In my teenage mind, I thought that I would graduate from the PGM program, get a job as a pro at a course that was either about to be renovated or a new course under construction, meet the architect and say “Hey, I want to be a golf course architect. Sign me up.”

BSM: So that’s how it happened?

NC: [Laughing, again] No. Not exactly. In fact, not even remotely. I was working as an assistant golf professional at Old Waverly [in West Point, Mississippi] my senior year at Mississippi State—still one of my favorite courses by the way—and became friends with Bill Collerado, who was the superintendent there at that time. They were working on getting the US Women’s Open and Bob Cupp was coming to town to look at some ideas he had to get the course ready for the USGA visit. [Editor’s Note: Bob Cupp was the original architect for Old Waverly when it opened in 1988]. So Bill comes by the golf shop and says “I know you want to be a golf course architect so why don’t you tag along with us and ride the course while Bob talks about what he wants to do.” I couldn’t wait. There must have been a dozen people riding around listening to Bob talk about adding a bunker here, moving a tee there, it was great. When we got done, Bill introduced me to Bob and told him I wanted to be a golf course architect.

BSM: And he offered you a job?

NC: No. He said “Well good luck. It’s a tough business to get into. You might want to have a backup plan.” I was devastated. He was—and still is—one of my favorite modern day architects. I tucked my tail between my legs and drove back to my apartment in Starkville. But on the drive back, it dawned on me. “Who does he think he is? He doesn’t know me.” And it motivated me to prove him wrong. It lit a fire in me to get serious about setting a goal and doing something about it. I’ve told Bob about that since then and he sent me a very touching email about how he actually did remember that day and that he was proud of how I responded [Crace points to a frame on the wall of his office where he printed out the email from Cupp]. We’ve stayed in touch ever since. I really do credit what he said to me back then with motivating me to reach the goal of becoming a golf course architect and some days I’ll read that again to give me a boost.

BSM: We’ve gotten a little off track, so how did you get from an assistant golf pro at Old Waverly to a golf course architect?

NC: Sorry. Back at Old Waverly, Bill [Collerado] comes in the golf shop one afternoon and tells me that [Old Waverly owner] George Bryan wants to make some changes to the driving range and Bill asks me to draw something up. Ultimately, they didn’t use it—and I can understand that because I was just a college kid—but Bill’s looking at it and says “I know a guy in Jackson who is starting a golf course design firm. He could use you. You should call him.” And that’s when I met Max Maxwell. He had been the superintendent at the Country Club of Jackson for ten years and quit to start his own design company. So I met with him in Jackson, showed him some drawings I had done and he offered me a contract job on the spot to do the plans for a nine-hole addition project he had been awarded. He had the ideas, but he lacked the skills to put the ideas on paper. So I would work at night at a house we rented just after Michelle and I got married and create the drawings for that project. Soon after that, the Caroline Golf Club project [in Madison, MS] came up and he needed me full-time so I went to work for him and stayed there for eight years.

BSM: So you started your career as a golf course architect working for a superintendent and not a golf course architect?

NC: Yes, but it’s not as crazy as it sounds. My father was a general contractor in Louisville, Kentucky and I had been around big construction all my life so that part came easy to me. Plus I liked the turf classes I took in college so much that I nearly changed my major to turf my senior year. So I probably knew more than the average PGM graduate about turf, which was helpful. Max and I complemented each other really well on the projects we did in those eight years. He would want to do something crazy and I would say “Okay, but let’s pull it back a bit and try this instead.” Or I would want to do something in a design and he would say “Trust me. The superintendent is not going to want to maintain that for very long because it takes too much time.” And he was probably the best player of any superintendent I ever met, so he understood how to play the game too. So we worked really well together and I’m proud of the work we did, especially since a lot of our projects were on *much* smaller budgets than other architects were working with in those days.

BSM: So eight years comes and goes and what happens?

NC: I was ready to move on. I think he knew I was ready too. To his credit, with each new project, he would turn over more and more of the design to me. On one very high profile project, he designed nine of the greens throughout the course and I did the other nine—not front nine and back nine, just all mixed in. Nobody but us knows which are which and I’ll never tell. In fact, I’d have to really think about it to remember because its’ been 15 years, but I think the fact that no one can tell is a testament to the quality of the work we did.

BSM: So why leave after eight good years?

NC: Anybody that knows Max knows that he was very passionate about his work, but he's a good person and he knew it was time for me to go out on my own. I had been doing more and more of the design work in the later years anyway because he was busy running around the country chasing new projects for us. So we sat down and talked about it and that's when Michelle and I started our two companies.

BSM: Why two companies?

NC: [Laughs] At the time, I thought one might take off and the other might tank. I told Michelle it was because we might be so successful that someone might want to buy one company. In the end, it was a great move and I think part of what makes us unique in our industry. We have a design firm *and* a club management company under one umbrella that work together. I think the word "synergy" is overused, but that's really what it is. It helps our clients out all around and it keeps me up to date on both sides of the industry.

BSM: How so?

NC: Think of it as left brain/right brain. The management company is my "day to day" work. It's the number crunching, employee managing, business school side of what we do [Editor's Note: Crace also has a BBA in Marketing from Mississippi State]. For example, we manage The Refuge for the City of Flowood [Mississippi] and that's what I spend the vast majority of my time working with on a daily basis. And the City is a great partner. Better than you could imagine. They know they have a great product in a great location, but they also know they are not in the golf business. Our approach is centered on agronomic conditioning, customer service, and marketing to drive rounds and draw in players and that's what we do. Most people don't even realize The Refuge is owned by a municipality and that's because we market and operate it that way. We don't want it to be a "muni" because, right or wrong, there's a negative stigma associated with that. All of the staff members at the course are Watermark employees and the City doesn't have to worry about the daily operations so they can focus on City work.

BSM: And the other side of your brain?

NC: The other side is that my design work gives me a creative outlet that management, by its very nature, doesn't afford. In fact, for as long as I can remember, I usually do the actual drawings at night at home or in my office so it doesn't impact my time with the management work. But the satisfying part of design is the end result: I get to move dirt around and create things that golfers enjoy and that works for our clients. I still feel like a little boy in a sandbox, moving things and building things, watching it come to life. When I don't get that feeling any more, then I'll know it's time to walk away from it. But it's also humbling to know that these courses will be here long after my time has come and gone and my kids and grandkids can play them.



BSM: It sounds like you enjoy doing both. If you had to pick one, which would it be?

NC: Impossible. I enjoy both for different reasons and different challenges. I tell people all the time that I'm the luckiest person I know because I actually enjoy going to work every day. A lot of people can't honestly say that. In a nutshell, being involved with management helps me stay fresh in understanding how design impacts operations in a way other golf course architects may not understand; and likewise our management clients don't have to call in a golf course architect if they want to make some improvements on the course because I'm "in house" already. It's a win-win for all clients.

BSM: Did you design The Refuge?

NC: No. The Refuge was designed by a gentleman from south Florida named Roy Case.

BSM: Because I hear it's pretty tight and you lose a lot of balls.

NC: When the course first opened, yes. Absolutely. But if you look at what the course was 15 years ago when it opened compared to what we've done since that time with expanding playing areas, eliminating problem trees and opening up understory, it's night and day. Bill Whatley is a great superintendent and he and his staff really take a lot of pride in what they do and it shows. And our pro Randy Tupper and the clubhouse staff treat everyone that comes in the door like old friends and that all adds to the overall experience. We have a plan we call REFUGE2020. It's not about the year 2020, but about a focused vision we have for where the course is headed. We are building an indoor teaching building right now with the type of equipment that no other public course in Mississippi has and only two or three private clubs in the state have. And in the spring, we're undertaking a course enhancement program that will effectively widen the playing corridors on every hole and give the course a more player-friendly open feel without clear cutting trees. I'm very excited about it because I see where we're headed and I know golfers will love it too. Did you bring your sticks? We could go play.

BSM: No I didn't. Sorry, but definitely another time. You mentioned a new indoor practice building at The Refuge and the reason for this interview is to discuss your recent work with practice facilities and short game areas. Why do you think there's a renewed interest in short game practice facilities.

NC: Like anything else in the real business world, it comes down to time and money. And the time value of money and opportunity costs. Not too many courses the past five or so years have been willing to tear up the entire course for a year to renovate. They're pushing those plans back while they wait for the economy to rebound. But a lot of them feel like they need to do *something* to keep members and golfers interested and have a leg up on the other courses that may be cutting prices to nearly nothing just trying to keep their doors open. That's a death spiral for another discussion. But courses and clubs still have to offer new amenities to stay competitive. So cost is one side of the equation.

BSM: And the other side?

NC: Time. With so many people pressed for time more than ever before, people unemployed or under-employed, a lot of people with jobs are doing the work they've always done plus some of the work of another employee who was let go. Or maybe you have someone who used to have a full-time job and had time to play golf regularly but now they have two part-time jobs and no time to play a round of golf. Instead of taking four or even five hours to play golf, they can go practice for an hour or so instead. They can still get their golf fix and that's important. You have to get away from work for a little while, out in the fresh air, and do what I call "decompressing." Parents still have kids and those kids still have activities like ball games, dance recitals, you name it so we always seem to have less and less time and golf gets squeezed out. But everyone needs a little time for his or herself. It's human nature and it's necessary to stay sane, regardless of whether our client is a public course or a private club.

BSM: You say regardless of whether it's a public or private course and your web site shows a pretty wide range of clients.

NC: Yes. From private clubs to public courses and municipalities to counties to state agencies and universities and even the US Air Force. There are a lot of players in the golf industry and a lot of them are struggling to keep growing in the current economy.

BSM: And you think short game areas are the answer to growing the game today?

NC: Not the entire answer, but an important piece of the puzzle. No one is going to go out and play four holes of golf and leave. But a lot of people will practice for an hour. So if your club has a nice new short game area and new driving range and the competition doesn't, who is going to

get the members that have less free time? And it's also a great way to introduce kids and new golfers to the game. Go out and mess around trying new shots without worrying about holding up the group behind you. Tupelo Country Club is the perfect example of that.

BSM: What about Tupelo Country Club?

NC: A few years ago, we did a master plan to renovate the entire golf course and Phase I ended up being a new driving range, new chipping green, and new putting green. But while we're riding around looking at the property, I notice there's this eight acre area behind the existing driving range that's just overgrown with small trees and brush. It was underutilized and we always want to identify those types of areas when we're doing a master plan. So I float the idea of a "short course" to [superintendent] Jim Kwasinski with three double greens that allows members to go out and spend an hour or so doing whatever they want. They can play nine par-threes, they can play six holes, they can stay in one spot and work on their short game, they can introduce their kids to the game, you name it. He loved the idea and we pitched it to the green committee and the end result is a "wander and play" short course with two double greens, one triple green, a handful of bunkers, and no tees.

BSM: No tees?

NC: Right. I didn't want any tees. Too much structure for the concept. There are plaques in the ground with some yardages, but the golfer decides where to play from. You can play *from* wherever *to* wherever. It's a lot like the way the game began in Scotland...just without the sheep. [Crace pauses and scribbles a note about sheep and native areas on a notepad on his desk]. It's free form and a lot of fun. Now at a public course, it wouldn't work with a lot of traffic. Too dangerous to have balls flying around this way and that. But for a private club, it works and they love it.

BSM: How many short game areas have you done recently?

NC: Hmm. [Thinking as he drums his fingers on his desk]. Let's see. There's Ole Miss, Mississippi State, and the new one we finished this year for Southern Miss at Hattiesburg Country Club—another course I could play every day and not get tired of it—[Editor's Note: Crace was involved with the 1999 redesign of Hattiesburg CC and has since been back to make changes for various state wide tournaments and the new short game area], Tupelo Country Club, Annandale. That's what? Six in the past four or five years? I feel like I'm forgetting one.

BSM: That's a lot of short game facilities.

NC: Yes. We've been lucky to stay busy when a lot of other firms have been closing up shop in recent years. You know, they call Rees Jones the "Open Doctor" for all of his work on courses that host US Opens. Maybe I'm becoming the "Short Game Doctor." Don't print that. It doesn't sound as good saying it as it did in my head. [Editor's Note: Too late].

BSM: What's the key to a good short game facility?

NC: Chefs don't share their recipes, but I will say that each project has to be different. You can't create a cookie cutter design or even a blanket concept and just throw it on each site. Every site has different challenges and every client has different needs. Take Mississippi State for example. They badly needed to expand their driving range and create an area for the golf teams to practice. But that range has been too small since I was a student there and they were really cramped for space. When we were done, my final design tripled the size of the range, created a private team practice tee, private team putting green, and private team short game area while still expanding the public tee. To make it fit, we changed holes 10, 11, and 18 and now 18 is a great reachable par-5 with a green that looks like a bulldog paw from the air. You can't tell when you're playing it, but look on Google Earth. It's pretty cool. [Editor's Note: I did and it is.]

BSM: But are there any basic rules you go by when designing a short game facility?

NC: I spent four years during college as an assistant golf pro and gave a lot of lessons to beginners. I kept going back to the fundamentals and the things I taught myself on that course at my parents' house as a kid. So knowing what to work on and how to translate that into the ground to create something functional is vitally important. But I like to say that the end goal is for the golfers using the facility to be limited only by their own imagination. Different lies, different slopes, different yardages, different angles into the green, different elevations for bunkers. It's all part of it.

BSM: And how do you know when you have it right?

NC: It sounds stupid, but I know it when I know it. For example, when I watch PGA Tour players on the short game area we did at Annandale a couple of years ago and they're practicing during the week of the tournament and they're able to practice all types of shots they may encounter, you know it's right. But more importantly, when the Tour leaves, the members can improve their games the other 51 weeks of the year and they enjoy using it. That's when you know it's working. And it means a lot to me when people take the time to tell me they enjoy something I did.

BSM: What do they say?

NC: When we had the official opening of the short game facility for USM's golf teams at Hattiesburg Country Club back in the fall, the men's team had just come off their first tournament win in a while. They were excited about the future. And when the players on the team say they credit that win to being able to practice all types of shots on their new short game facility that I did...that's special. That means more to me than people saying how nice it looks because we're helping people enjoy the game more. And that's good for the game and for the people who play it.

BSM: So you really think you were born for this?

NC: I wouldn't go that far and I don't really believe in predestination, but here's an interesting story. I'll try to make it short. As a PGM student my junior year at State, I applied for a two-semester internship as an assistant pro at the Country Club of Jackson with Ernest Ross. He said he liked me, but I didn't have enough junior golf teaching experience on my resume and he had a huge junior camp every summer, so I didn't get the job. I wanted to be in the Jackson area because Michelle and I were about to get engaged—she didn't know it yet—and she was teaching about an hour away. So I applied

at Castlewoods in Brandon and went to work for Steve Hutton there. We hosted what used to be called the Thrifty Car Rental Mississippi Open that summer [1993] and Johnny Andrews taught me how to do calligraphy scoreboards with him. I took to it quickly and practiced all the time and started doing all the scoreboards for the member tournaments at Castlewoods. Playing in the Open was Mike Shannon, who was the pro at Ole Waverly at the time and is now a putting guru at Sea Island. I tell Mike that I'm heading back to Starkville



in January to finish up my PGM degree and ask if he has an opening. He says come see him in the spring. When I go, I take some of the scoreboards I had done at Castlewoods. After my interview at Old Waverly, Mike says he has a lot of good candidates to choose from and he'll have to decide. Then he asks me what I have rolled up in my hand and I show him the score sheets I did in calligraphy. He asks me if I did those, I say "yes," and he offers me the job on the spot. He didn't have anyone who could do calligraphy. You already know that at Old Waverly I

became friends with Bill Collerado who introduced me to Max and what happened from there. Then in 2008, in my solo career, I redesign Ole Miss Golf Club in a total course-wide renovation and it wins “Third Best Renovation for Public Courses in America.” By that time, Ernest Ross is back at Ole Miss as the men’s golf coach. So if Ernest had hired me in 1993, I probably wouldn’t be here today. I thanked him for not hiring me at the grand opening and I was serious. Funny how things work out. In the past 20 years, there are more people that I’ve met and become friends with than I can count and they all played a part whether they know it or not—even if all they did was tell a college kid not to get his hopes up.

BSM: Before you get too choked up about all of that, I’d like to wrap up the interview with some rapid fire questions. Just tell me what comes to mind.

NC: Lightning Round? I like it. Go!

BSM: If you could play golf with any three famous golfers, living or dead, pick them.

NC: Living. Definitely living. Not dead. I think that playing golf with three dead people would be very slow. And impractical. Unless they’re zombies. Zombies are very “in” right now I understand.

BSM: I meant famous golfers, either living now or when they were living.

NC: Well that makes a lot more sense. Probably Bobby Jones, Old Tom Morris, Lee Trevino, and Jack Nicklaus—because he taught me how to play golf.

BSM: Jack Nicklaus taught you how to play golf?

NC: Yes, and no. I taught myself how to play by watching him on TV and reading his *Golf My Way* book. So probably more “no” than “yes.” Actually, a lot more “no.”

BSM: You know I asked you for three golfers and you named four?

NC: Yes, but if I get to pick anyone, then I want to pick them when they were at their prime and I’d only get in the way playing with those guys. I’d enjoy just walking along with them and watching and talking to them—between shots of course.

BSM: I don’t think I can take any more of this Lightning Round.

NC: It was your idea.

BSM: I know. I was warned.

NC: Maybe it would be better if I asked you some questions?

BSM: I think we’re done here.

** END **