

Kipp Schulties

THE HOTTEST GOLF COURSE DESIGNER IN SOUTH FLORIDA CHOOSES THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED TO CARVE OUT A HARD-EARNED NAME FOR HIMSELF.

When the exclusive membership at High Ridge Country Club reviewed the proposed alterations to their beloved 18-hole tract in Lantana, only seven of the more than 100 people in the room voted against the renovations envisioned by golf course designer Kipp Schulties.

Later, after the private course re-opened in 2010 with more acreage folded into its design, elevation changes reminiscent of a Northern layout and lush elegance that continues to draw raves from those fortunate enough to play it, Schulties ran into one of the original dissenting voters, billionaire Paul Fireman.

He asked the founder and ex-chairman of Reebok International why he voted no. "Paul told me that he didn't think I could take a course as good as High Ridge and make it better," Schulties recalls. "But you proved me wrong," he said.

Changing perceptions is nothing new for the man whose fingerprints are all over country club courses throughout South Florida, from Gleneagles in Delray Beach to Hunter's Run in Boynton to the Boca Raton Resort & Club, his first project as an independent designer, back in the late 1990s.

While the industry's A-list (and highest-priced) golf course architects—think Pete Dye, Tom Fazio, Jack Nicklaus—are busy with original projects in exotic locations around the world, Schulties has quietly carved a six-county niche in Florida by doing the work that, especially in the beginning, no one else wanted to do. Along the way, the Jupiter resident not only has become the king of golf course renovation in South Florida, he's earned his own lofty reputation for thoughtful, accessible and aesthetically striking revisions—on courses, in many cases, originally designed by an industry heavyweight.

Not bad for someone who, by his own admission, didn't know Robert Trent Jones from James Earl Jones as a civil engineering major at Purdue University. But not long after his mother planted a seed about golf course design as a career path—he was a standout player growing up in Evansville, Ind.—Schulties opened the phone book while on spring break in Palm Beach County and, much to his surprise, found the names of 12 different golf architects.

"I didn't know there was such a job," says the father of three children (ages 6 to 10) with wife Ashley. "Coming from a small town, nobody paid attention to who built the courses; half of them were built by farmers."

Schulties would send his résumé to the Palm Beach Gardens office of a design firm

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run by Gene Bates and PGA golfer Fred Couples; an internship there led to a full-time position in 1993. Two years later, when a pair of senior employees left the company, Schulties was thrown into the fire as a lead designer, a fast track that, by 1997, gave him the confidence to strike out on his own (initially as an independent contractor still working for Bates, then as a solo act by August 1998).

Along the way, Schulties made several astute observations about the industry, in addition to picking up the renovation projects that other designers balked at, that would distinguish his business model.

"Everybody in this industry lives on an airplane," he says. "I have friends who leave town

on a Monday and don't come home for 17 days because they're flying all over the world for projects. I never wanted to do that. So instead of dealing with associates and third parties, my clients get to deal with the principal [designer] on every transaction. I'm not here for 36 hours. I'm on your site several days a week."

While there, Schulties also delivers serious bang for the buck. In coordinating a renovation project, he walks the decision-makers through any necessary permitting and even secures bids for review from engineers and landscapers. Most importantly, he engages membership, making the redesign a collaborative effort by often establishing focus groups with high-handicap and low-handicap golfers of both sexes.

"It's a challenge to get the consensus of a country club with 270 members," he says. "But what happens is that we take all that information [from the focus groups]—more bunkers, fewer bunkers, more trees, bigger greens, fewer forced carries—and address as much of it as possible. The membership loves that someone listened to them."

Over the next few years, Schulties is slated to revamp several courses in our backyard, from Turtle Creek in Tequesta to Stonebridge in west Boca to Delray Dunes in Boynton—a layout originally designed by Pete Dye. Tweaking the work of such "name" designers, more and more, is becoming par for Schulties' course.

"[Last year], I redesigned an Arnold Palmer course in Coconut Creek [Adios Golf Club]," he says. "Arnold's team had also done the first redesign in 2002, but the members didn't invite them back. It's not my place to worry about [whether that ruffled feathers]. I work for the client, and the client wanted something different. So we modified nine holes significantly, and the other nine we kept mostly the same."

"At the end of the day, the club was thrilled with the result. That's all that matters." ☺

THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE

Schulties calls the Boca Raton Resort & Club, his first renovation project as an independent contractor (for Gene Bates Design), one of the most complicated golf course projects of his career. Here's why:

"It's 10 pounds of potatoes in a five-pound sack. There's just not enough room out there. ... In 1997, the sale of home lots between hole No. 9 and the range on the resort course, about 8 acres, paid for the golf project. So they made an already small piece of land even smaller. ... I sat at my desk for three days just trying to come up with a routing that worked. Usually I can do that in two hours. To do all the changes in five months, we had 90 people working on 88 acres—it looked like the bustle on an ant hill. But it got done ... and got done well."