

Golf Course Architect Kipp Schulties Redefines Renovation

By CRAIG DOLCH

The busiest golf course designer in the U.S. these days isn't Jack Nicklaus or Greg Norman, not Rees Jones or Arthur Hills, nor Tom Fazio or Arnold Palmer. While these Hall of Fame movers of the earth look for work in South America and wait for the China market to re-open and the global economy to pick up, the busiest course designer in America is enjoying the best years of his career.

Meet Kipp Schulties, perhaps the best designer you've never heard of. That's because the Jupiter, Fla., resident made a calculated decision in 1998 to bypass original designs – the bread-and-butter work of the famous aforementioned architects – and concentrate on renovating existing courses.

To most top architects, renovation is like busy work because there are far greater restrictions doing a golf course the second time around and you're usually dealing with 300 owners – the number of members in the club – instead of one developer. But for Schulties, at 42 one of the youngest architects around, the strategy worked as he has built a client base that's enabled him to actually increase his business during a down economy.

"Nobody can justify building a new course these days," Schulties said. "Renovation and re-design is in demand today, and that's what I've been doing for most of my career. I made a point to specialize in what most others did not want to do in the late '90s when new-course development was at its peak."

These are not minor projects, either; the average cost of a re-design can exceed \$5 million. Nor are they minor-league – his re-design of High Ridge Country Club in Lantana, Fla., has received almost universal acclaim for the way he incorporated 25 additional acres into the layout and – gasp – created real elevation changes in South Florida.

One of High Ridge's most prominent members, former Reebok chairman Paul Fireman, admits he was against the idea of the re-design because he thought the course was already good enough. After he saw Schulties' work, Fireman changed his mind.

"I liked the course before," Fireman said. "It was nicely laid out, and the membership didn't have any problems with it. I don't like re-doing golf courses if I don't need to.

"But in rebuilding it, Kipp made it a much more authoritative and classy place to play. The holes are more interesting and more challenging. High Ridge is a wonderful example of the quality of design that allows so many types of golfers to enjoy a round of golf. It has plenty of difficulty, while still open and accessible to a more moderate-skilled golfer. Everyone is raving about Kipp's design and redo of an already well-respected course."

Chances are if you've played a golf course in South Florida, it has Schulties' fingerprints on it somewhere. He has done more than 40 re-designs, virtually all of them in South Florida, and plenty of smaller projects, as well. Schulties has virtually cornered the market – during the recessionary years of 2008-2011, 13 of the 21 renovations or major re-designs in South Florida were handled by the Kipp Schulties Design Company.



High Ridge Golf Club
Boynton Beach, Florida

"He did a phenomenal job here, and word gets around," said Carlos Perez, High Ridge's general manager. "Kipp is the type of guy who puts the interest of the club first. The final outcome here is exhilarating."

The membership at High Ridge was so impressed, it decided to add Schulties' name to the scorecard, just under the original course designer's – Joe Lee. Typically, most clubs with a marquee original designer such as a Nicklaus, Norman or Lee will keep their name as the architect because

they spent millions of dollars to say theirs is, say, a Jack Nicklaus-signature designed course.

During the last decade, Schulties has done renovation or re-design work on courses originally done by all the marquee names: Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Tom Fazio, etc. The only exception is Pete Dye – yet, at least.

Schulties has never asked a club to replace the original designer's name with his because he understands it sometimes makes business sense to go with the more popular one. "Jack's name will always be bigger than mine. I understand why they should keep his name on it," Schulties said.

But most of the courses Schulties has worked on are now using his name afterward. One reason is it's not as important to have a "premium name" on a redesign because the community already is sold out and the membership is nearly at capacity. The other reason is Schulties' work has become so respected, the club believes he deserves to be recognized for it. Either way, Schulties says he's fine.

"My main concern is making sure the course is fun and the members like it," he said. "I must be doing something right because we almost always get the phone call back for more work."

Schulties has done work for several South Florida-based clubs for more than 10 years, the longest being Quail Ridge Country Club, a golf-savvy community that has more than 150 of its residents with single-digit handicaps. There are dozens of Quail Ridge residents who shoot their ages all the time and have second homes filled with amateur trophies. Don't make a mistake with their two courses, in other words. Schulties hasn't.

"Kipp is incredible in that he sees things on the golf course nobody else sees," said former Quail Ridge greens chairman Gary Spiegel, an ex-railroad executive who knows about proper routing. "He doesn't do things in a flashy way, but he's among the best at what he does. We have had no complaints from him, which I think is unheard of at a club our size (800 members). I guarantee you Kipp will be our architect forever."

Schulties may not be well-known to the public, but he's become ubiquitous to the high-end club managers. "You hear a lot of architects talk about how many days they will spend on the job and then you never see them," said Michael McCarthy, CEO at Addison Reserve in Delray Beach, where Schulties is renovating their 27 holes. "Kipp is out there almost every day. That's really hard to find. He takes total ownership in the project."

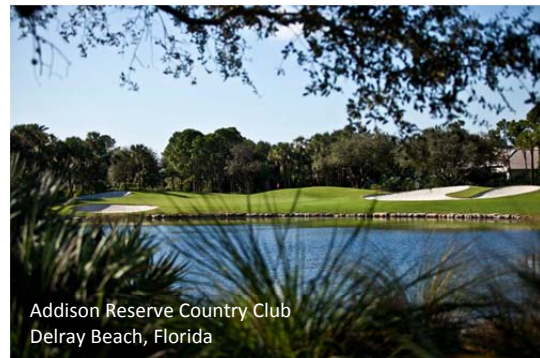
In 2002, Nicklaus volunteered to do a re-design at his home course, Lost Tree Club, for free. The club hired Schulties to coordinate the entire project and assist Nicklaus with some of the design

implementation with his guidance. Not only did the project give Schulties a chance to work with one of golf's top architects, it enhanced his own reputation.

"Kipp has carved out a nice niche for himself," said Brian Peaper, Lost Tree's director of golf. "He does some really nice courses that are fun to play."

Schulties didn't grow up dreaming of designing courses. It wasn't until he was studying civil engineering at Purdue that he first thought about becoming an architect – at his mother's suggestion. He was on spring break in South Florida in 1991 when he opened a phone book and started looking for local architects. He called Gene Bates, and soon landed an internship and later a full-time job, working with Bates and his partner, former Masters champion Fred Couples.

In his mid-20s, Schulties already was doing the job of grizzled designers, even though he wasn't getting paid as such. With an eye on opening his own business, Schulties went back to college and earned a Master's degree in finance. He opened his own company in 1997, starting with small re-designs and renovations.



“A lot of designers despise renovation work because it requires a lot of hand-holding with all the members,” Schulties said. “Plus, I had an inkling that too many courses were being built in the 1990s and early 2000s. At some point, supply and demand was going to take over and there weren’t going to be enough golfers. That meant more re-design work.”

Schulties had four other reasons to keep his business confined to renovation work in South Florida – his wife, Ashley, daughters Elliana and Ava and son Kolt. He didn’t want to spend 200 nights a year away from home, jetting from course to course like almost every other architect in the business.

The economic downturn starting in 2008 has leveled the playing field for architects. Country clubs realized they had to justify every dollar spent. With his extensive background in re-designs, Schulties has a history of finishing a project within 1 or 2 percent of the budgeted amount. That’s the kind of green that makes general managers such as High Ridge’s Perez smile.

“There’s a reason why Kipp is as busy as he is and a lot of architects are sitting around waiting for work,” Perez said.

While his youth worked against him early in his career – “Nobody wanted to hire an architect who didn’t have grey hair or a waist line,” he says – it will soon serve him well. After all, Schulties is at least 30 years younger than the premier architects such as Nicklaus, Palmer, Fazio and Hills, so he can remain patient. And busy.



Mayacoo Lakes Country Club
West Palm Beach, Florida

“The renovation program we developed more than a decade ago for the wave of golf course renovation and re-design that currently exists has worked to perfection during these challenging economic times,” Schulties said. “We have more business activity than ever, which is dramatically increasing our exposure on both a local and national scale. Plus, I’ll put our ‘end product’ up against any one of those ‘names’ work -- typically at a fraction of the cost to the club.

“We will have plenty of opportunities to design new golf course facilities in the future. Meantime, we will continue to expand our presence while we quickly bridge the gap between the ‘names’ and Kipp Schulties.”