

## SPORTS

# Jupiter's Schulties stays busy in golf course design

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Virtually every top golf course architect is doing less work in the U.S. these days because of the recession.

But one designer who is bucking this trend is Jupiter's Kipp Schulties, and that's in part because he got some great advice 10 years ago from former Tro president John Singleton, who ran the irrigation business.

"John told me to get entrenched in South Florida and stick with it, because as great as this business was, at some point it's going to turn downward," Schulties said.

That downturn hit more than two years ago, idling many of the top designers and forcing premier architects such as Jack Nicklaus, Tom Fazio and Greg Norman to look to China to continue getting work. But because Schulties has long been concentrating on re-designs and renovation work in South Florida — which is still affordable for most country clubs — he's never been busier.



Jupiter's Kipp Schulties has been in the golf course design business for almost 20 years, and has become one of America's busiest designers. Photo by David Drethuss

Schulties did six re-designs last year, he has three under contract — the work he did on just-finished High Ridge Country Club in Lantana is being acclaimed — and two more jobs are pending for next year. Business is very good for the 41-year-old, in other words.

"I say this a little jokingly, but there's a part of me that hopes the recession sticks around a little bit longer," Schulties said, smiling. "It's actually helped my business because nobody can afford to build a course these days."

Schulties never expected to be working in South Florida. He was studying civil engineering at Purdue when his mom suggested he think about designing courses. Having played competitive golf in high school and his freshman year in college, Schulties loved the sport but never thought he would make a living in it.

Almost as a lark, when he was visiting South Florida on a spring break in 1991, he opened a phone book and found a listing for Palm Beach Gardens-based designer Gene Bates. Schulties landed an internship that after graduation turned into a full-time job working with Bates and his partner, former Masters champion Fred Couples.

Schulties got to learn the business from the ground up — literally — and was fortunate to immediately work on big projects such as Boca Raton resort and Quail Lodge Resort in Carmel, Calif. Within four years, only in his mid-20s, he had the official title as "designer."

By 1998, Schulties was ready to start his own business, moving to New York for two years to get a master's degree in finance while he continued to work on his design company. When he returned to South Florida in 2000, he landed steady work, mostly in his specialty of re-designs and renovations.

"I would take jobs nobody else wanted," Schulties said. "A lot of designers despise renovation work because it's a

lot of hand-holding and it can be a pain sometimes. Instead of dealing with one owner, you're dealing with 300 owners — all the members of a country club."

But while he was staying busy, Schulties admits he was getting frustrated because he wasn't landing the big jobs. The nadir came when he was hired to work at the respected St. Andrews Club in Boca Raton in 2002 — only to lose the job when a new golf committee took over.

"They asked me if I could bring in somebody with a bigger name to work with me," Schulties said. "When I said I couldn't, they said, 'No disrespect, Kipp, but with the value of our real estate here, we need a name.' They went with Arnold Palmer. I couldn't win that one."

But the sagging economy has leveled the playing field for architects. Country clubs cannot afford to pay the seven-figure fees once commanded by the top designers, and Schulties has built a strong customer base during his two decades of work in South Florida.

Schulties may not have the national reputation of a Nicklaus and a Fazio, but the South Florida clubs who have worked with him think no less of his abilities.

"Kipp is incredible in that he sees things on the golf course nobody else sees," says Gary Spiegel, the greens chairman at Quail Ridge Country Club in Boynton Beach — where Schulties has re-designed the South and North courses while also installing a short-game practice area. "He doesn't do things in a flashy way, but he's among the best at what he does."

Spiegel said there was a troublesome spot on the South Course — a bunker in front of the 18th green — that half the membership wanted removed, the other half wanted saved. Schulties, knowing he had to make the course more challenging for the club's 130-plus single-digit handicappers but also user-friendly for the high-handicappers, eventually kept the bunker. But he twisted the green to still give access to the less-skilled players.

"We have gotten at least 300 comments since then about the bunker, and not one complaint," Spiegel said. "That's unheard of at a country club. I guarantee you Kipp will be our architect forever."

With Schulties almost two generations younger than most of the top designers such as Nicklaus, Fazio and Rees Jones, there will soon come the day when Schulties is the guy other designers are comparing themselves to.

"I look at this period where golf is in such decline as a chance to make my big leap," he said. ■