

THE AXLAND FILE

ALTHOUGH HE'S BEEN A KEY PLAYER IN THE CREATION OF SOME OF THE WORLD'S FINEST MODERN COURSES, DAVE AXLAND HAS ALWAYS KEPT A LOW PROFILE. NOW, AS HIS BUNKER HILL PARTNERSHIP UNVEILS ITS FIRST ORIGINAL DESIGN IN TWENTY YEARS, A NEW CHAPTER ARRIVES FOR ONE OF GOLF'S MOST INFLUENTIAL BUILDERS.

BY DEREK DUNCAN





Barnbougle

Pine Point

ON A MUGGY DAY IN LATE JULY, DAVE Axland is walking through the north Georgia mountains with his design partner, Dan Proctor. They're looking out over a treeless ramble of terrain where a wide swath of prickly underbrush has been slashed to ankle height, an area soon to be formalized as the first hole at Old Toccoa Farm.

A summer downpour the previous night had left a pool of water in a muddy basin surrounding a drainage pipe and a brownish-black dog splashes happily in the diversion. Notched large into a hillock on the left is the outline of an irregular clay-bottomed bunker. Farther up to the right, white sand covers what appears to be the green. Various pieces of construction equipment—excavators, backhoes—stand like forgotten relics at points across the landscape.

The dog belonged to Jack Dredla, a shaper and longtime associate of Axland and Proctor. Dredla is in charge of the day-to-day construction. He's been working the Old Toccoa property off and on for over a decade and has temporarily relocated to the nearby town of Blue Ridge.

Axland looks up at the clearing and pauses. "Jack's the only shaper we know that needs four tractors for one guy," he says.

Proctor waits a beat. "There's five out there, actually."

The hole has been roughly fifteen years in the making. Back in the early 2000s, investors began parceling together this development two hours north of Atlanta. Over the next decade the project, known back then as Blue Ridge Golf & River Club, lurched through bankruptcies and aborted starts—including the brief completion of seven holes—before being abandoned in 2008. Several years ago, another formulation of developers resurrected the endeavor and, in 2015, opened a non-sequential nine. Construction resumed on the remaining holes in the spring of 2018.

Axland and Proctor joined on around 2004, inheriting an existing land plan and routing that strung the course up and across the property's steep slopes, with a wonderful four-hole reprieve along the Toccoa River. The design work, after numerous alterations, is bold and visually arresting, with passionate ground movement and an abundance of shot-making decisions. But mostly at Old Toccoa the focus has been simply to make the scenic but challenging frontier playable.

"It's mountain golf," Axland says. "We're just trying to find ways to slow the ball down."

"Gravity's our greatest hazard," adds Proctor.

The dog bounds from the puddle and shakes, showering the men with brown mist. Axland looks at the dog, then pats it, and the team starts moving up the future fairway. Everything seemed to be in place for Dredla to carry on with the build. Except for one thing.

"We still don't have a ninth hole," Axland says. "Jack's given us until tomorrow morning to figure it out."

THOSE WITH MORE THAN A PASSING INTEREST in the insular world of golf course architecture will recognize Axland as one of "The Boys," the small house band of shapers and specialists that add tone and texture to Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore's collection of international golf hits. Inside the industry, however, Axland is revered as one of the most inventive and intuitive machine operators as well a brilliant project manager, the relentless engine that powers the Coore and Crenshaw construction operation. He's become a mentor and confidant to a generation of shapers and designers, and has stepped outside the C&C umbrella to build several acclaimed courses with other architects, most notably with Proctor under their own Bunker Hill Golf label.

Proctor has had a clear view of Axland's talents. "Dave's a natural," he says. "He's got a laser in his body that tells him when a tee is flat. Perfect. You don't even have to laser his tees when he's done. He's so efficient in the amount of dirt he moves—Dave can push it into one spot, and it'll be perfect."

Bill Coore insists Axland has long been the company's secret weapon. "Dave has through the years become basically the lead guy in our organization on the ground, responsible for the production of so many of our budgets and schedules and organizational efficiency," he says. "He's been so influential in so many ways to so many people, and certainly Ben and I have been the great beneficiaries of it for all these years."

"Dave was one of the first guys that all of us really modeled ourselves after," says Jeff Mingay, who worked with Axland on several Canadian endeavors under Axland's longtime friend, Rod Whitman. "He's been such an amazing mentor to so many people. If you add up the people Dave's had an influence on over the years, it's gigantic. It's everyone from

Rod Whitman to me, Jeff Bradley and the Coore and Crenshaw guys, James Duncan and Keith Rhebb. It's a long list of people Dave has taken in on projects."

Bradley was working on the labor crew at Hot Springs Country Club in Arkansas when Axland began training him. Today he's among the most admired bunker artists in the profession. "It's hard for me to put into words what Dave Axland has meant to me," he says. "I wouldn't be standing here on a golf course today if I hadn't met that guy. It changed my life. Instantly, really."

Axland's first full-time work for Coore and Crenshaw was at the Plantation Course at Kapalua, primarily as a shaper and bunker builder.

Early on at Sand Hills, several years later, Coore put him to work creating the bunkers surrounding the 8th green, the hole nearest the main access road. Coore joked that there was no pressure—the bunkers would be the first things everyone would see of Sand Hills Golf Club, and they would likely define what the rest of the course looked like.

"Just try to do something good," he said.

It was friendly ribbing, but Axland ran with it and slowly started moving sand around, roughing in bunker shapes but not quite able to make them look as natural as he wanted. After a few days he was still unsatisfied, so he began scooping up excavated native material and adding it to the bunker edges.

"Dick [Youngscap, Sand Hills' founder] was there," Coore remembers. "While now he thinks Dave is one of the great people in the world and relies on Dave's opinion so significantly, at the time he didn't know him. He says, 'Bill, what the hell is that guy doing back there? I drove by and he's picking up the grass he just [dug] up and he's putting it back where he got it from!'"

Coore laughs. "That was the very beginning of the Sand Hills golf course." It also was the beginning of the Coore and Crenshaw chunked, eroded bunker aesthetic, a technique now widely utilized throughout the profession.

After Sand Hills, Axland focused less on shaping and more on project management, serving as the on-site director at Coore and Crenshaw's

most prominent designs, developing construction programs customized to each property and locale. At Friar's Head, he devised a system using a drum and conveyor belt that blended the site's contrasting soils—from the heavy topsoil of an old potato farm to the upper dunes sand—to create unique greens and fairway mixes that provide consistent turf character throughout the course.

At each design from this era—Friar's Head, Chechessee Creek, Bandon Trails, Old Sandwich and others—Axland was typically first in and last out, living on location and remaining until the next job began somewhere else. In fact, he was without a permanent address until he bought a house for

the first time in 2005. That commitment and tactical structure enabled the shapers and crew members to maximize their respective creative abilities.

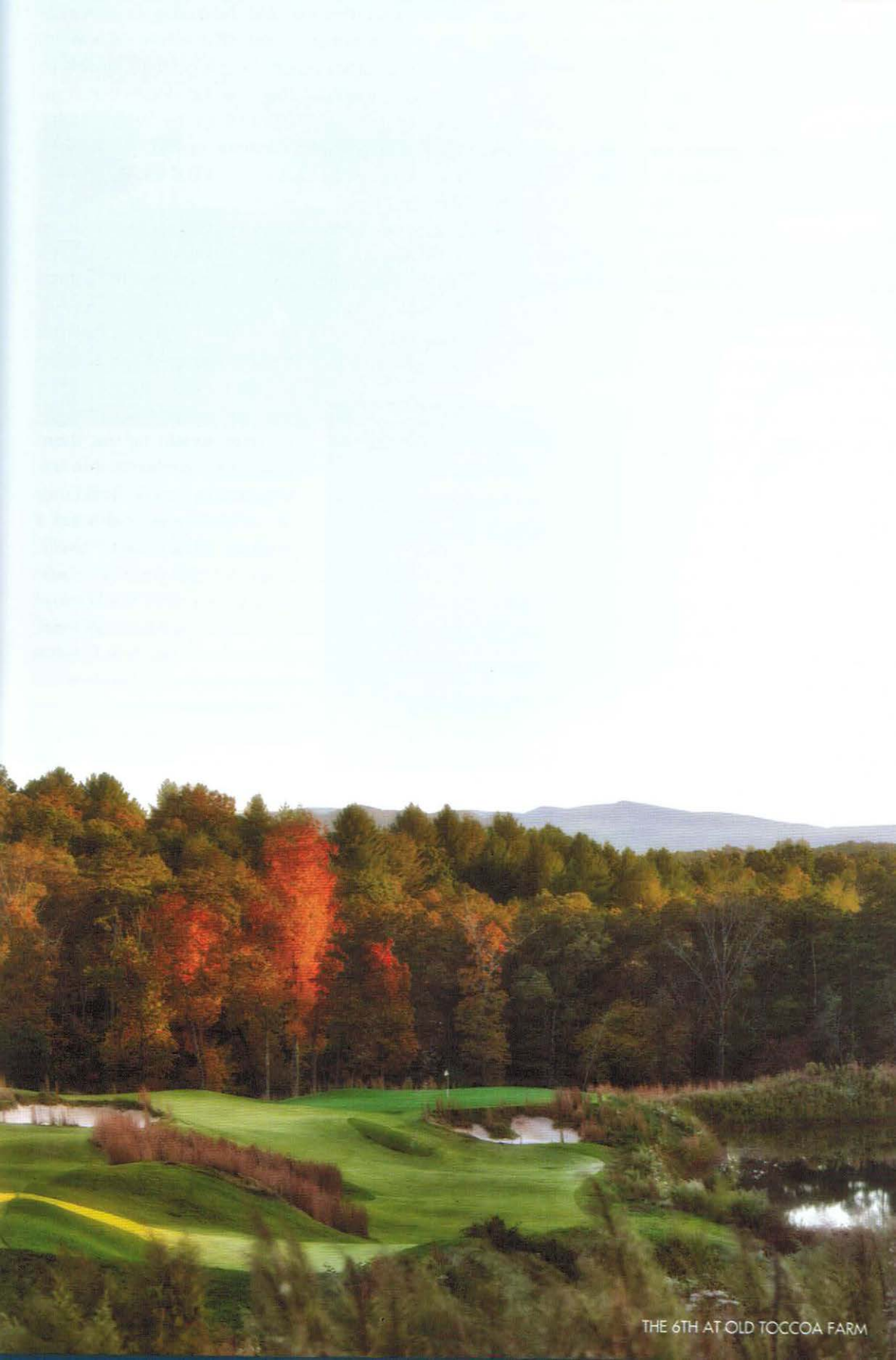
"Dave commands respect without asking for it—you can't help but admire him," Bradley says. "He was always three weeks ahead. He knew exactly what was coming, when it was coming and made sure you had the things you needed so that you could get to that point he wanted you at."

Despite the absence of detailed plans and construction documents, Coore credits their ability to stay on budget and schedule to Axland's understanding of golf design and knowledge of each given site. "This sounds a bit self-serving and I don't mean it this way," Coore says, "but if you look at the golf courses he's been involved with, if you're into those rankings of best courses, you can track Dave Axland's career literally right down through one of those lists."

AXLAND GREW UP IN THE KANSAS CITY SUBURB of Overland Park playing golf and other sports, and earned a degree in turf management in 1983 from Kansas State University. He's athletic and fit with a resonant Midwestern voice and deep eyes that show both mirth and sincerity. His calm but commanding presence leaves no mystery why Coore has been so comfortable letting him run jobs for clients. Coore says when Mike Keiser was considering becoming an investor in Cabot Links

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in Nova Scotia, one of his biggest questions was whether Axland would be available to help with construction (Axland spent parts of three years helping Rod Whitman build the course).

The last several years have been a time of personal and professional growth, what Axland calls “an interesting time.” He recently relocated to Mesa, Arizona. Missing the more instinctive aspects of building golf courses, he also began scaling back his logistical roles to pursue—to a degree he hadn’t previously—more of his own design work. “When I think about the past I think about everything that I’ve learned, and it’s important for me to do the best I can to apply it over the next ten years,” he explains. “It’s not like I had to get out on my own, but I need to expand the amount of work that this education and experience has allowed.”

The challenge for Axland has been to balance these individual opportunities with his naturally inclusive nature. His career has been spent in collaborative environments, and continuing “the spirit of team play,” as he says, remains essential to his process. “Out there alone, standing in the middle of 240 acres saying that I just figured out the best way to use this piece of ground, that is not me,” he says.

He continues to support Coore and Crenshaw (with budgets, creative shaping projects and during the preliminary stages of construction), and is adamant about joining forces with others, be it Proctor, Whitman or the business’s new wave of designers. “I just think about being able to contribute to this group of independent contractors (who) are designers, have graphic skills and know construction,” he says. “When I think about the future I think about working with some of these highly talented people.”

Getting back in creative mode, Axland is currently collaborating with Rodney Cole to develop master plans for Oak Ridge Country Club outside of Minneapolis and also for a restoration of the Fred Findlay-designed course at Farmington Country Club in Virginia, slated to begin this year. He’s the consulting architect at Prairie Dunes and hopes to soon begin planning for a par-3 course

there with Proctor, and he’ll also be partnering with Whitman in the near future on a short course at Cabot Links. The job perhaps closest to his heart involved the time he donated recently to shape a collection of 25- to 50-yard holes for the youth golf program at Twin Oaks Golf Complex in Eudora, Kansas, called the Red Bridge Wee Links.

“It’s almost like I’m back to where I started,” he says. “And that’s where I want to be.”

Mingay remembers roughing in the Road Hole-inspired bunker that guards the 7th green at Blackhawk Golf Club in Alberta. It was his first job, and the thing wasn’t taking shape. Axland, on-site to assist, jumped on a backhoe and quickly finished it. “Dave would be out there [managing projects], but every once in a while he’d jump on an excavator and build a bunker,” Mingay says. “Everybody on the project would later go see that bunker and go, ‘Holy shit, who built that?’ It was always the best looking bunker on the golf course.”

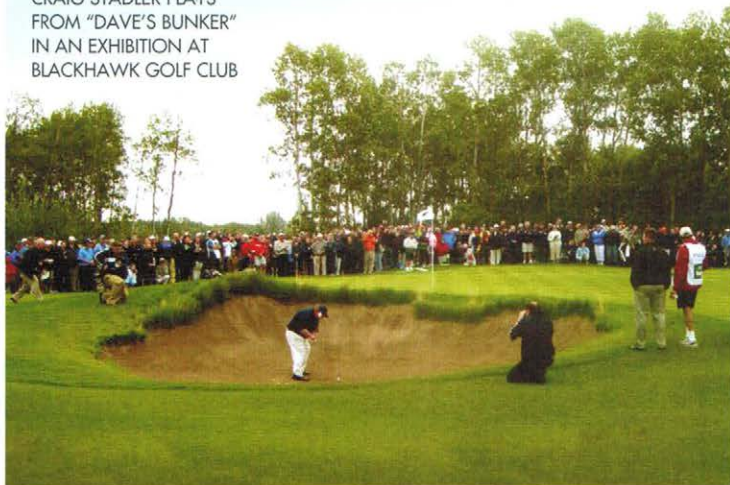
That bunker at Blackhawk is called “Dave’s Bunker.” When asked about it, Axland laughs and talks about how it drains.

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His normal reaction is to deflect accolades and refer instead to a broader network of people and factors. It’s still not natural for him to be the center of attention, or the subject of a magazine profile. When contacted for this story, his first response was, “Which one of my buddies in the industry am I really talking to here?” At one point during the site visit to Old Toccoa Farm, Axland, not very subtly, walked off with Dredla to ensure that I would have a moment alone with Proctor.

It’s clear Axland and Proctor are old, comfortable friends. They often communicate non-verbally, thinking together on something in the landscape before arriving at an agreement that needs only the shortest proclamation to ratify. They met in 1986 while helping Coore finish Kings Crossing in Corpus Christi and played many rounds of golf together on courses they didn’t find particularly satisfying. “At some point in time, Dan said, ‘I think we could do golf course design work,’” Axland remembers. “We really felt it

CRAIG STADLER PLAYS
FROM "DAVE'S BUNKER"
IN AN EXHIBITION AT
BLACKHAWK GOLF CLUB



was almost criminal the way people were going through 200 acres and not getting the most out of it. It's a blessing to be given 200 acres."

Their first blessing came in the early 1990's when the Texas town of Burnet hired Bunker Hill to build Delaware Springs, a sporty design that flows economically over the site's natural slopes. In 1997, they went to see the property for Wild Horse Golf Club in Gothenburg, Nebraska, and were mesmerized by its variety and potential. Proctor and Axland threw themselves into the build, producing, on a shoestring budget, a design that's now entrenched on every list of the best public courses in America. They built a second Nebraska course, Bayside, before joining Old Toccoa Farm. Then, nothing.

"I always thought, as naïve as I am, that if we did [a course] at a good price and it was a good product, we'd get more work," Proctor says as we walk together. But getting jobs is a hustle and clients, persuaded by bright lights and big names, don't always do their homework. While he and Axland had steady work on different Coore and Crenshaw courses, other architects were out selling. Years passed.

The dog is back, nipping at Proctor's pant leg. Her name is Rooney, and she's a cattle dog mix that's bred in the Sand Hills where Dredla is from— part German Shepherd, part Blue Heeler, part Australian Shepherd, among other things. He pulls her off and turns his attention back to Axland. Proctor is as eager as anyone to see the next phase in his career. "Dave's just good at whatever he does,"

Proctor says. "He's got it all, man."

But for now there's a palpable excitement about what's happening here in Georgia, the completion of another Bunker Hill course. It's been a long time coming. But the original architect's vision for Old Toccoa's ninth hole would have required them to essentially blow up the side of the mountain. "We weren't going to do that," Proctor says. Several factors had delayed the hole, including a relocation of the

driving range and positioning of the future clubhouse, but they had at least settled on a general location, a stretch of land benched into a long perpendicular slope. When we arrive there Axland is away in the distance shooting yardages with a range finder.

The clubhouse will be built somewhere up on the ridge to the left, and the owners have requested that it overlook the prospective green. There appears to be enough room to angle a deep, narrow putting surface between the base of the hill and the wooded ravine that runs along the right of the hole.

Axland returns. "How far was it?" Dredla asks.

"318," Axland says. "Maybe a nice little risk-reward [par] four."

"Maybe in front of that green you can do a big valley that will drain into the creek," Proctor says. "They can go for the green but if they don't get out of the valley, they have the tough little chip."

"Sounds good," Axland says after a moment. "Carry bunker off the tee? If you read that MacKenzie book: economy of bunkering. You only need one bunker for a good golf hole."

"One bunker in the valley," Proctor jokes.

We stand there, envisioning players launching drives across the corner of the ravine. The three men are quiet, staring at the curved terrace, the cropped scrub, the area where the narrow green might go. A minute passes. So, was that it? Did they have a ninth hole now?

Axland gives Proctor a quick look and the two begin to walk, followed by Dredla. Rooney nips at Proctor's pants. They all keep walking.