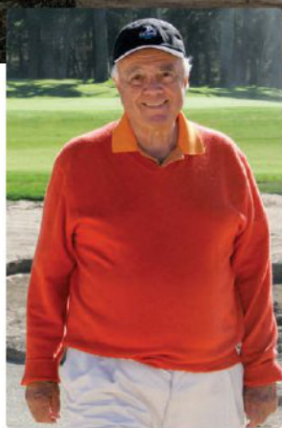


The Evolution of Robert Trent Jones Jr.

BY RON KROICHICK



Poppy Hills' creator has changed considerably in the 28 years

Back in the mid-1980s, in another generation and another era of golf course architecture, Robert Trent Jones Jr. simultaneously tackled two appealing if disparate projects.

Jones worked with five-time British Open champion Tom Watson and former USGA president Sandy Tatum on Spanish

Bay, a visually striking seaside links (which opened in 1987). Watson taught Jones about approach shots to unusual places on the green, and that education helped shape the layout—and its modern-day descendant, Chambers Bay outside Tacoma, Wash.

At the same time, Jones designed Poppy Hills (which opened in '86) for his own

regional golf association, the NCGA. It was only a few miles away from Spanish Bay but practically on a different planet, bobbing and weaving through the picturesque Del Monte Forest.

Nothing illustrated the tenor of those times better than Old Poppy's greens. They were big and bold, with sweeping contours. They were the golfing

BEFORE AFTER



The old 15th (left) was popped up in the air, but the new hole (right) has been lowered six to eight feet to let the land dictate a right-to-left shot. The new 12th hole is now a par 4 with a view of Monterey Bay (opposite page).

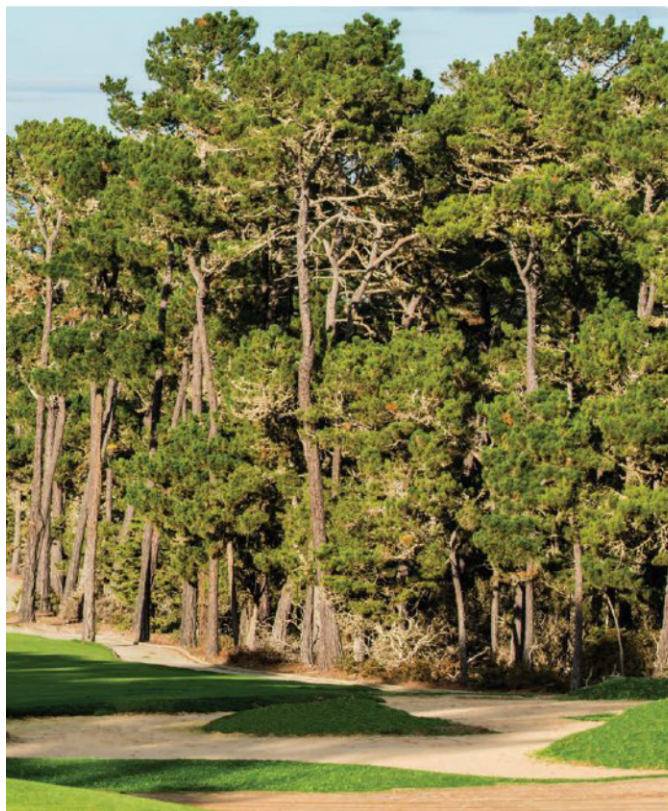


PHOTO: JOANN LOST

since the course's inception.

equivalent of a rollicking, ear-splitting concert.

Fast forward nearly 30 years, as Jones and longtime colleague Bruce Charlton complete the renovation of Poppy Hills here in 2014. Those greens offer a revealing window into how times have changed—and how Jones' design philosophy has evolved to reflect the new reality.

"The greens used to be 8 or 9 on the stereo knob of rock music, and we've turned them down to 5 or 6," said Charlton, president and chief design officer of Jones' golf course architecture company. "We're playing more mellow stuff now."

Jones and Charlton took the large, obvious contours and made them more subtle. They left plenty of slopes

and tilts—but the change speaks to how the emphasis in course design has shifted in the past quarter-century.

Just a quick thought: It's headed in the right direction.

Charlton candidly called the '80s a "dark period" in golf course architecture, as designers followed Pete Dye in building courses to be photographed more than played. They looked great, as Charlton put it, but then people got in a deep bunker and couldn't get out.

That's a problem.

Now, in the 21st century, architects such as Jones and Charlton are listening to the land. And, with all due respect to Dye, the land is no longer screaming for artificial, attention-grabbing features.

"In the '80s, we had been asked to keep up the dramatic shapes of that time—thus, the hills in the course," Jones said of Poppy. "Now we're smoothing it out and tying it back into the forest. . . Bottom line, we opened up the forest and popped the hills of Poppy."

This renovation, of course, had its roots in an outdated irrigation system. The new Poppy will allow NCGA officials to manage water use more efficiently, and sand-capped fairways—now there's a concept that didn't exist in the 1980s—will greatly improve the course's drainage.

Jones and Charlton also sought to make the course unfold more naturally in its scenic, tree-lined setting. They softened doglegs, introduced abundant sandy-waste areas, moved some greens and brought a few ravines into play.

They took a whole new approach, in other words.

"We originally built this course on top of the land—we imposed our will on the land," Charlton said. "The new Poppy says, 'Let's take it back to what the land has given us and let the course flow with the land much more.'"

"The way the holes are tied in, you don't see the big mounds as much. The tee complexes are not lifted into the air. That gives the course the impression of much more width. It just feels so much bigger, and I think that's true. You squish the mounds and take out the contours."

No. 8 offers one vivid example. That hole, a par 4, was a sharp dogleg right in its previous life—really, really sharp—but now the fairway bends more gently. The green was moved significantly to the left, and the site of the old green will be re-forested.



Chambers Bay (above) in Washington reflects Jones' modern beliefs in course design. The old first hole (right) at Poppy Hills typified Jones' former style: dramatic, unnatural shapes. The 11th hole (below) is the only brand new hole at Poppy Hills.

Or consider No. 15, a par-3 stretching more than 200 yards from the back tees. The old green was popped up in the air, but it has been lowered six to eight feet to let the land dictate a right-to-left shot. Players might be tempted to bounce their tee shots toward the right side of the green, illustrating an important element of New Poppy—the ground game.

Jones revered his father, acclaimed golf course architect Robert Trent Jones (whose notable works include Spyglass Hill). So when the older Jones visited Spanish Bay for the first time, strolled the course and told his son, “Bobby, you got this right,” Jones Jr. took it as a high compliment.

He finds even deeper satisfaction in the way Chambers Bay turned out. Much as New Poppy reflects modern theories in course design, and the evolution of Jones' ideas, so does Chambers Bay improve upon his work at Spanish Bay more than 20 years earlier.

Jones called Chambers Bay, set to host the U.S.

Open in 2015, a more authentic links. He had a large swath of land as his canvas, an old gravel mine alongside the shores of Puget Sound. Jones created a distinctive links layout on which golfers must contemplate what will happen when the ball hits the ground.

If you want to picture Watson metaphorically whispering in Jones' ear from the 1980s, go right ahead.

This embrace of the ground game prompted Jones to essentially eliminate rough at Chambers Bay and New Poppy—a stark contrast to Spanish Bay and Old Poppy. But it makes for a creative and interesting golf experience, even if the outcome for wayward shots isn't always favorable.

“If you hit a long shot off line at Chambers Bay, it will run 30 yards and it might run in the wrong direction,” Jones said. “It's not just distance, but it's distance and control. Chambers Bay is asking players to think about both those things on tee shots, and that's a big difference.”

Jones and Charlton are posing the same question, in many ways, at Poppy Hills. This cuts to the heart of larger issues in the 21st-century game, with designers trying to combat bigger, stronger, longer players



smacking their tee shots into distant frontiers.

“We're on defense,” Jones said. “I'm a goal-keeper, so I'm saying, ‘These guys are hitting the ball forever and they don't care where it lands.’ The USGA rough is something of another era, in my opinion. That's their traditional philosophy, especially on classic courses that are smaller.

“I'm a strategic architect. If you hit it long or hit it improperly, I want you to have options to get back in the game. You can play carefully, but if you do you're going to face a much harder second shot.”

Many second shots at New Poppy will carry intrigue. If the course plays firm and fast—and that's part of the plan—players

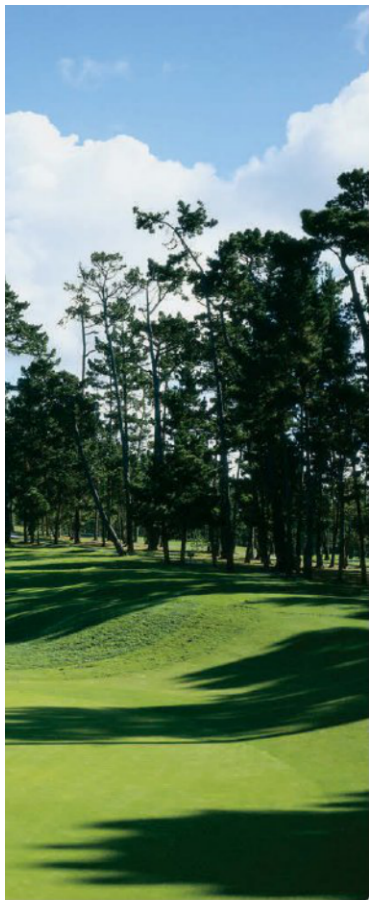


PHOTO: JOANN BOOT

If the New Poppy plays firm and fast — and that's part of the plan — players often will have the option of hitting the ball short of the green and using the ground as their ally.

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Charlton expects this to become a popular feature of the redesigned course. It could level the playing field a bit, allowing high-handicap golfers to use their imagination to hit cool recovery shots.

"Old Poppy was all about aerial attack into most of the greens," Charlton said. "There are still some greens like that. But if you're a sly, smart fox, and the course plays firm and fast, there are a number of places where you can use the ground."

This is not a concept Jones and Charlton espouse only at Poppy. They once

belonged to the crowd of architects prone to surrounding every green with deep, menacing bunkers.

They strayed from this habit in recent years, discovering the joys and effectiveness of variety.

"I'd say about eight or nine years ago, we went away from every green complex being so well guarded that you had to attack by air," Charlton said. "In the past five or six years, we've taken the open-entry concept—take away some of those bunkers and use short grass as defense.

"It seems to frustrate the heck out of top players. They used to be in a 4-to-6-foot bunker and now they're 4 to 6 feet below the

green in short grass. Now players have to think."

That's a guiding principle of the way Jones and Charlton approach golf course design in 2014. So is water conservation.

Water use was top of mind in the redesign, from New Poppy's sprawling sandy waste areas (no sprinklers needed) to removing the lake alongside No. 5. In all, the project reduced irrigated land areas by approximately 25%.

Nope, we're not in the 1980s anymore.

"It's a renovation," Jones said, "but it's really a new course." 🏌️

RON KROICHICK covers golf for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

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