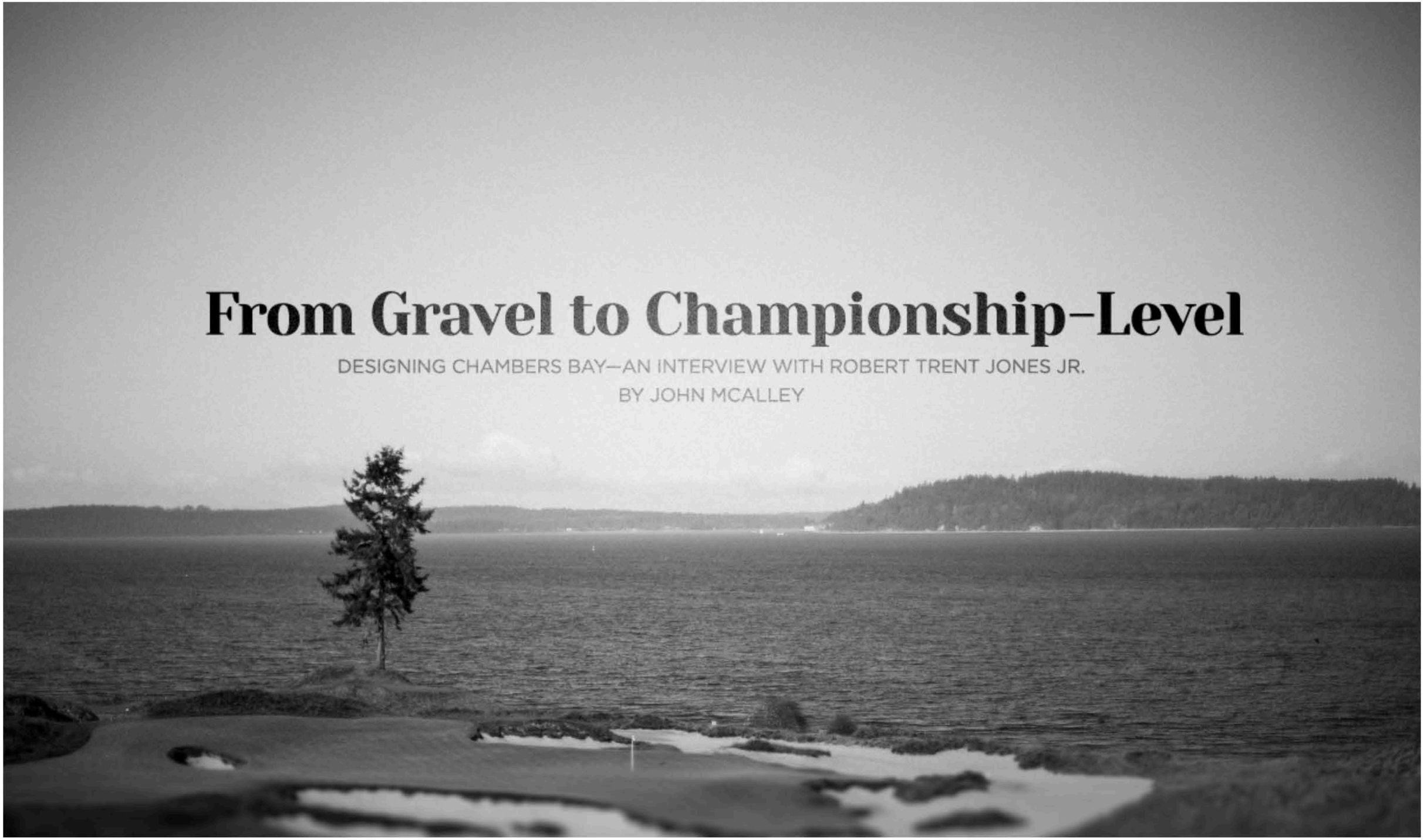
From Gravel to Championship-Level

DESIGNING CHAMBERS BAY—AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT TRENT JONES JR.

BY JOHN MCALLEY



A TALK WITH ROBERT TRENT JONES JR. CAN BE DIZZYING. Golf is the subject, but faster than you can say "Stimpmeter" he's comparing the beauty of the game to the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever" and evoking images of trench warfare on the Western Front. Soon to turn 76, the renowned golf course architect—and Stanford and Yale alum—is a wide-ranging intellect who prides himself on being a poet, too. A simple question about a malicious par-5 on one of his hundreds of celebrated tracks brings out the bard *and* the Bible student in him. "Straight is the tee shot, narrow is the fairway, and few there are who will make par," he says, giddily riffing on Matthew 7:14. "That's Bob Jones poetry!"

Chapter and verse on Bobby has to begin with his lineage. He is the son of Robert Trent Jones Sr., the legendary, English-born course architect whose prolific design work blankets the globe, but who put down roots in suburban New Jersey. Before he was mentored in the family trade, young "Bobby" played junior golf across the Hudson River at revered Winged Foot. The nearly hour-long trek made sense to him, then and now. "Skiers go where the snow is," he says. "Why not, golfers go where the golf is? That was where the games were. That was where the *better* games were."

Bobby's fierce competitive streak is still intact some 60 years later, and he expresses it with almost comical grit when talk turns to Chambers Bay. Arguably his crowning design achievement, the links-style course—located just outside of Tacoma, Washington, and built on an abandoned gravel-and-sand pit abutting Puget Sound—was completed in 2007 but is getting its full measure of attention eight years later.

It's an anomaly: a course paid for with public funding, open to public play, but designed specifically to challenge, frustrate, and dazzle the world's greatest golfers. It can play epically long, requiring the firepower of a bomber, and yet, because of its devilishly contoured greens complexes, test the patience of pros possessed of even the most sublime short game. And because this is war—the elite architect gunning for the elite athlete—Bobby has used every weapon in his arsenal. "This course," he says, "reflects everything I know about the game, and then some."

The inveterate globetrotter (he's built courses in close to 40 countries, including over 50 in the Far East) is based in Northern California, where, on the day we talk, he's bouncing between play dates. Rounds of golf, that is. "Can you call me back in 10 minutes? I'm putting gas in my car," he asks, having just made the nearly two-hour drive from the Monterey Peninsula to his home in San Mateo County. Motoring is Bobby's method of getting around—and communicating. Opinions, history lessons, laughter, impatience, and self-confidence pour out of the guy. And somehow, when he ends your conversation by improbably putting himself in the company of Beethoven and Monet, you're kind of thinking, *He's right.*

I wait my 10 minutes, then fire away.

So what were you doing in Monterey?

Playing golf at my course, Poppy Hills, and Spyglass—one round with visitors from China in the morning and one with the Winged Foot people in the afternoon. Now I'm heading to an event at The Olympic Club, so we've got a lot going on this weekend.

I'm curious: You stay in close touch with the people from Winged Foot?

I grew up there. Tommy Armour was a member, and he was my teacher. You may not know that, but I wrote a long poem about him. I played on the United States junior team in the '50s at Winged Foot, so he watched me and mentored me. I was playing very serious golf then. That was 55 years ago.

How's your game now?

Sloppy. I played pretty well at Spyglass, then I went up over to Poppy and played poorly on my own course. That's really weird.

You'd think you'd know where to hit it, right?

I know where to hit it; I just didn't *hit* it there. *[Laughs]*

You've got a long association with the Monterey Peninsula.

In the true golfer's mind, Pebble Beach and Eastern Long Island are the best ZIP codes in golf. There are seven very serious courses within the Pebble Beach gates, and there are another 20 around the place. We've done two courses there, Spanish Bay and Poppy Hills, and both have been influential. Spanish Bay—a links course built 25 years ago—was definitely an influence on Chambers Bay. What we did at Spanish Bay, we took up a notch at Chambers Bay. On the other hand, Poppy Hills is clearly the future. It has no rough; it's got a reduction in turf, so it's sustainable, and it's firm, fast, and fun.

Talk to me about what you often refer to as "golf art." You've said it usually falls into one of two categories: very natural or very crafted. Which would you use to describe Chambers Bay?

All golf courses are crafted in one way or another, some more than others. When the land is generous, meaning it's natural for golf, the goal is "less is more." You let the land itself guide you, which we always do. When the land is *not* generous, or it's degraded, as was the case at Chambers Bay, you have no choice but to craft it from beginning to end. The highest compliment you can get is when you elaborately craft a course—as we did at Windsor, in Vero Beach—and someone says, "Oh, where did you find this rolling land along Florida? We didn't even know it existed!" I smiled and thought, *OK, we succeeded. We crafted it in such a way that it appeared to be natural.* So, getting to the point, Chambers Bay was a degraded sand-and-gravel quarry, and, therefore, everything that's done within it is man-made.

It was, essentially, a blank canvas for you to paint on.

Well, no. You're putting words in my mouth. It was *not* a blank canvas. It was a sow's ear that we transformed into a silk purse.

How crucial was the sand on the site?

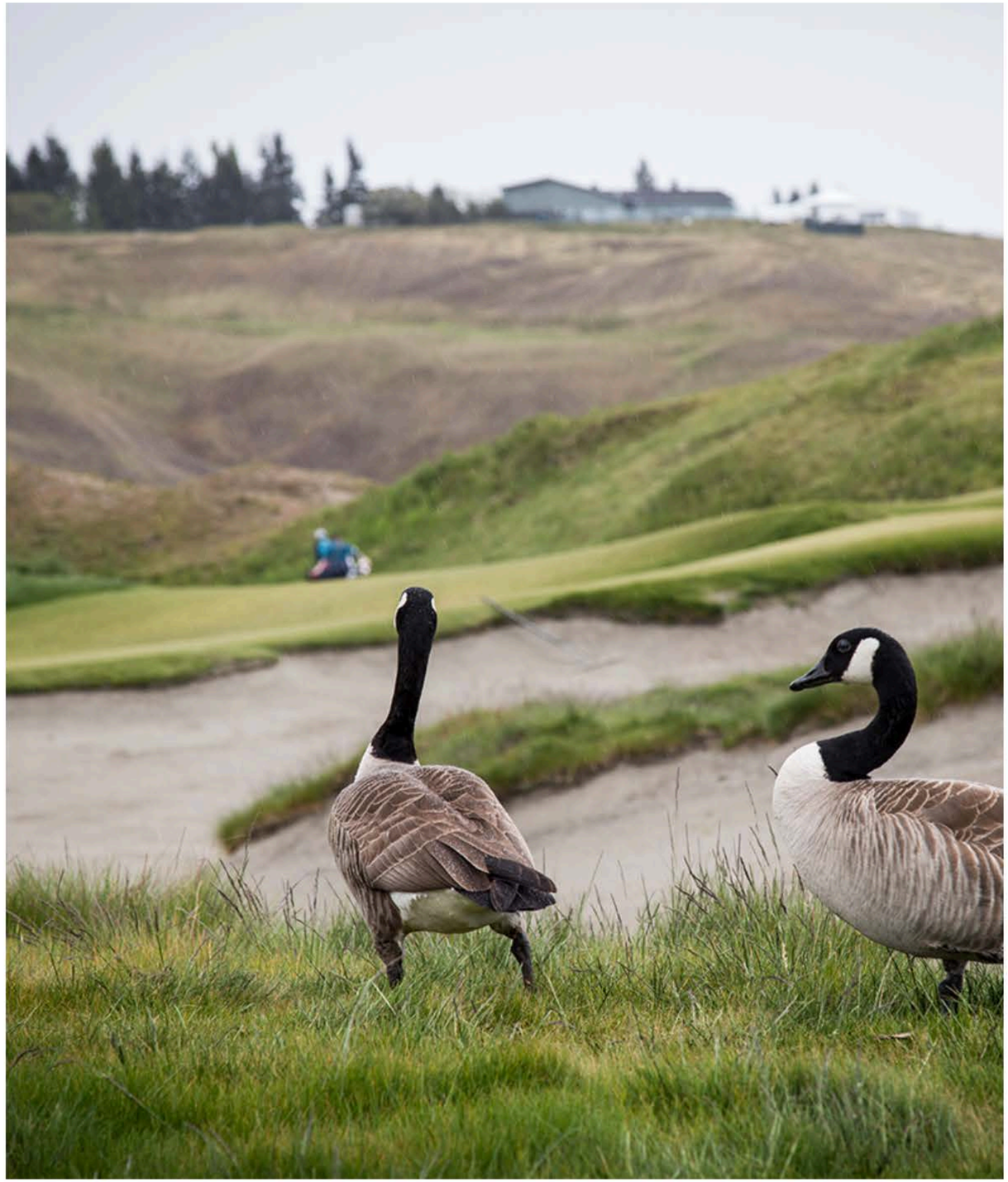
Very crucial. The gravel had been mined over a 100-year period of time. It was used for the asphalt to build the highways of Washington state. Any miner will tell you that there are always what they call tailings—or leftovers—when you remove that which you're mining for. In this case, the leftovers were sand. And the sand was of an extraordinarily high quality—perfect for tees, fairways, greens, everything. So it was crucial. At Chambers Bay, you're playing on an absolutely perfect surface.

What were your aspirations for Chambers? Did you want to design a course that was a bit more advanced, a little bit different?

Not a little bit; a *lot.* I've built 270 golf courses in my own name, and worked on 30 others with my father when I apprenticed with him in the '60s. Chambers Bay reflects everything I know about the game.

Your father was known as the architect the pros loved to hate. Do you take a similar pleasure in that? In designing a course, do you view the player as an adversary?

I'm an architect, having learned it from my father and having apprenticed in the field, but I think of myself as a player first. Let's use another sport as an analogy: In soccer, you have strikers. And if we think of a golfer as the striker, then the architect is the goaltender. I'm always thinking, *OK, if the ball is coming at me, how do I defend it? How do I defend the shot—barely?* I want my courses to yield to good play, but *only* to good play—to good shot-making and good choices and good thinking. Overall, I don't want it to yield to poor shots or poorly thought-out shots. A player might occasionally get a lucky bounce or an unlucky bounce, but that's just golf—and life. Now, unlike all other sports, the playing field in golf is different almost every time; it's mutable, including the setup. Here's another analogy for you: I'm the composer, the guy who does the course setup is the conductor, and the players—who are a little out of tune when they first see a course—ultimately can make some beautiful, very difficult music on it.



Are there certain defenses you were determined to put in place at Chambers Bay, assuming that one day Tour pros would get a shot at it?

Many. The pros, when they come in, are like artillery officers, and they're on the frontlines of a war. They don't care about the big thinking behind the game. It's irrelevant to them. They're playing for [millions of dollars] and their job is to earn it. So they come to a course and immediately start breaking down what they see. It's like a field general surveying the land upon which he's about to do combat. They're breaking down the terrain; they're looking at how to do this. They'll need some mortar artillery, and therefore, will need to know precise distances. That's how they think. They are on the offensive; they are at war with the course.

And Chambers Bay is a different, more advanced kind of war.

Yes. World War I was a ground war. It was fought in the trenches, in filth. It was an ugly, hand-to-hand-combat war. World War II was an aerial game—the Luftwaffe—the bombing of London and the blitz on Dresden. It was an aerial war. Chambers Bay is both: a ground war *and* an aerial war. You have to choose which approach to take, and once you have choice, if you're not psychologically strong and you can't make up your mind…

You'll get stuck in between.

Right. Chambers Bay was designed to test *every* aspect of a player's character—not only your shot-making abilities, but your patience, your creativity, and your physicality. I mean, there is 250 feet of elevation change on the course. It's like climbing a mountain, twice on the front nine and once on the back. And all that time you're thinking.

“

CHAMBERS BAY REFLECTS EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT THE GAME.

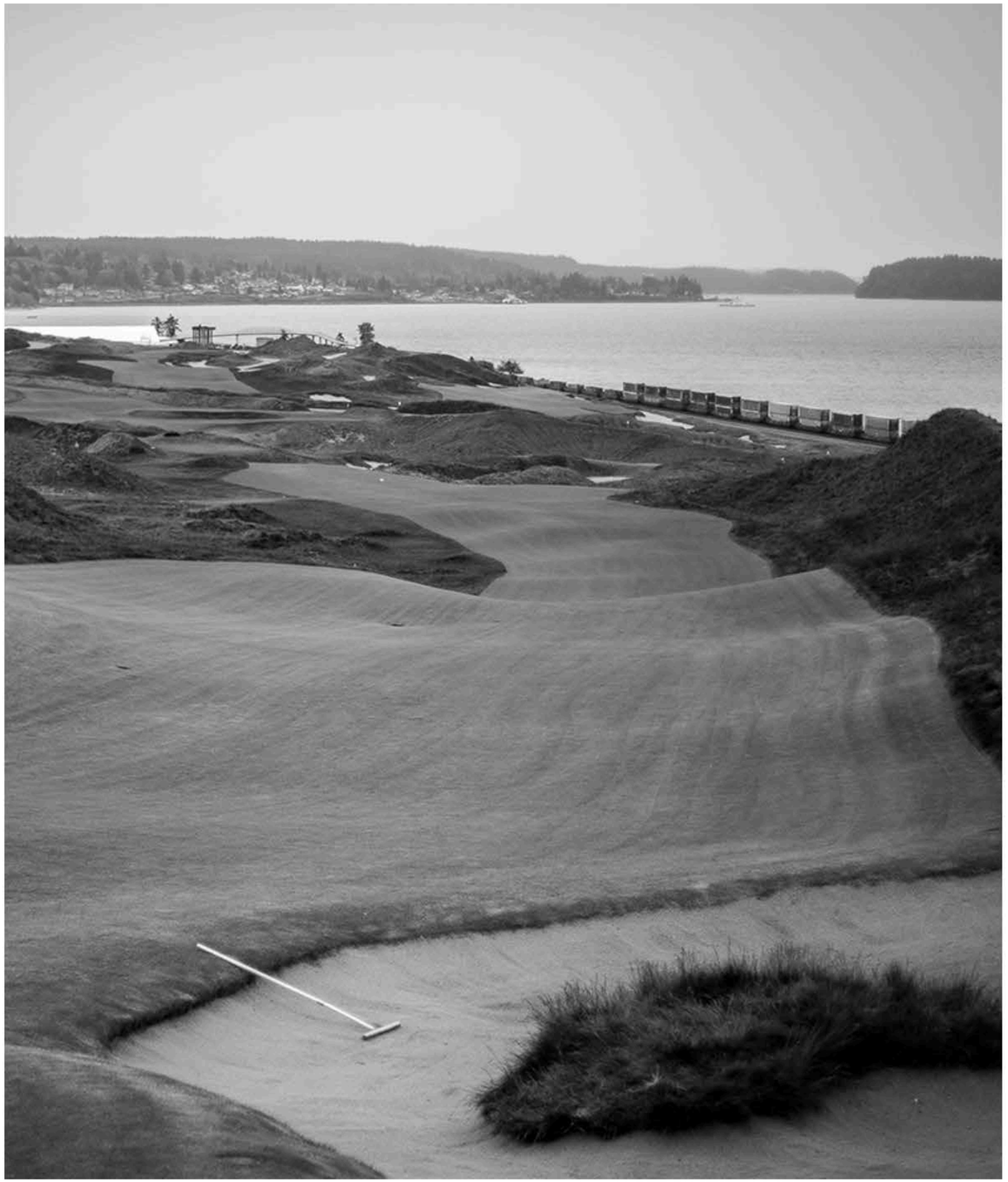
”

In terms of strategy and game play, is your philosophy about how to shape a course always evolving?

That's a good question, and the answer is yes. Since the '90s, what I've largely been concerned about is the new equipment, particularly the big-headed driver and how the stronger, younger, limber backs are using it and their athleticism to hit the ball prodigious distances. When I was working with my father, we built courses with a 250-yard drive as our marker. Today, the average drive on a flat, windless day is 280 yards, and up to 320 with a helping wind or roll. Obviously, things have changed. So to keep up with the highest levels of the game, you have to do something different.

One of those differences at Chambers Bay is the use of what you call "ribbon tees"—teeing areas that are less conventionally defined and that present the golfer with lopsided lies.

That's right. [As a solution to the equipment changes], everybody was talking about "containing the ball," and my response was, "Wait, wait, wait. Where does the game *start*? It starts on the tee." The tee box has long been an overlooked element of golf architecture, because the assumption is that it's to be dead level. That's what people like; they like to swing away off the tee with a perfectly level stance. But I began to think, *Why does the rest of the game have uneven lies and not the tee shot? And what would happen if we treated the tee shot like every other shot, by designing gently uneven, meandering tees?* Thus, the ribbon tees at Chambers Bay.



And what has the reception been?

A little controversial. But, frankly, if the setup is such that the entire width of the tee box is in use, ribbon tees will *assist* good players and thinkers, because you can hit more than one type of shot off of them. If you tee the ball a couple of inches above your feet, it will assist you with a sling shot, right to left, if you're a right-handed player. On the other hand, if the tee's below your feet… The point is to give the player choices, and once that happens, you're into the player's mind on the tee. Once a player makes a choice, he has to *commit* to that choice, and if he doesn't, then I'm in his backswing. Ron Whitten [the architecture editor at *Golf Digest*] has said that our ribbon tees are the first original golf design idea of the 21st century. Now it has been copied by [Tom] Doak at Sebonack, and by [Gil] Hanse on the course he built for the Olympics in Rio. We [bid] on the Olympics course, as did others. And they took all of these ideas and…, as T.S. Eliot said, "Good poets borrow, great poets steal." [*Laughs*] So now ribbon tees have become a popular concept. It's a brand-new kind of defense against good players.

Do you interact with Tour players with any regularity?

Of course. They come to me asking for information on how to play this course. Henrik Stenson is a friend, and Martin Kaymer and I are very close. I talked to him at Augusta about Chambers.

What kind of questions do they ask?

They ask tactical questions. How wide are the fairways? What lines should I be taking? What are the course's defenses? First, you have to talk about the defenses that are *not* there. At Chambers Bay, there are no trees. None—just one, which is iconic but out of play. And there are no water holes. The Puget Sound is beautiful, but it's not in play. So we've eliminated vertical and horizontal hazards. What defense does that leave? Weather, length and width, the firmness of the fescue, and [the unpredictability of] the ground game. Everything is shaped. *Everything.* And it's shaped very thoughtfully. You can't, for example, fire the ball at a flagstick and expect it to hold; it will not hold, especially downwind.

In the past, you've talk about "tricks of the eye" on a course. Are there any on Chambers Bay?

Let's get rid of the word "trick." A trick is what magicians do. There are, however, *illusions* on the course. Every really good architect is an artist. [A.W.] Tillinghast was an artist. Obviously, [Alister] MacKenzie was an artist. My father was an artist. People say that I'm an artist. It's in my genes, so I use it. An artist uses perspective; an artist uses trope and other techniques. An artist uses colors and shadows, and lack thereof. An artist uses all of these tools to create a three-dimensional perspective on a two-dimensional canvas. I think Chambers Bay is *at least* a four-dimensional course. It's three-dimensional because it's got a lot of change in elevation, which is typical of the Pacific Northwest. The weather—the wind and rain—is the fourth dimension. Finally, the *psychology* of it might be a fifth dimension.

In addition to Chambers Bay, you've built a number of courses in Oregon. What would you say characterizes the Pacific Northwest?

Well, great, beautiful, wild terrain. The Northwest is dramatically beautiful, but it's also violent.

At Chambers Bay, bald eagles circle the Puget Sound, fishing for salmon, and in the spring, the orcas come in and eat the sea lions. So, "a beautiful violence" is the way I'd describe it. I mean, Mount St. Helens blew up! The bridge fell down at Tacoma Narrows! These are strong, strong natural elements in the Pacific Northwest.

Chambers Bay is a links course. Are your Oregon courses built in the parkland style more typical of the Northwest?

Eagle Point, in the Medford area, is parkland. I played in the NCAA at the Eugene Country Club, and my father eventually came and reversed the course. I was on-site and did a lot of the back-nine work. So that's a parkland course. The courses we built for the city of Portland—Greenback and Great Blue, at Heron Lakes—are kind of marsh courses. A lot of Canada geese come in without a passport and stay there. I don't think of the Pacific Northwest stopping at the Canadian border. We did a couple of courses in British Columbia—one is Chateau Whistler, and a little nine-hole course up in Big Bay, which you can only get to by boat or seaplane. Chambers Bay is, in a way, an anomaly, because it is *not* big fir trees, even though there are millions of trees within sight. And it's different. They gave us the sand, so that's what we used. Opening day at Chateau Whistler, there was a shotgun start, and the women were upset when we came in. "Bears came across the first and 18th fairway, and we didn't know what to do!" And I said, "They're members." "What do you mean, they're members?!" "Well, they're really strong, and they play at scratch, so I'd be careful."

Scratch golfers.

Scratch golfers. They didn't think that was funny.

Back to Chambers Bay. What do you want the golfer to take away from his or her time there?

Well, it goes back to golf art, which is not just the look of a course, or the design and craftsmanship of it. It's the most singular thing. It's that you feel like you've walked into Monet's garden and you're *in* his painting, or that you've entered the concert hall when Beethoven played his first Fifth Symphony. And you come out saying, "I was moved by that." The worst form of a compliment is when someone tells me my course is "nice." I want them to tell me they hate it, they love it, they're going to go back and play it again, but that they're emotionally engaged. That's the highest form of a compliment. And Chambers Bay stirs that kind of emotional response. Mark my words.

Robert Trent Jones Jr. photo by Rob Perry, courtesy of Robert Trent Jones II.

www.rtj2.com