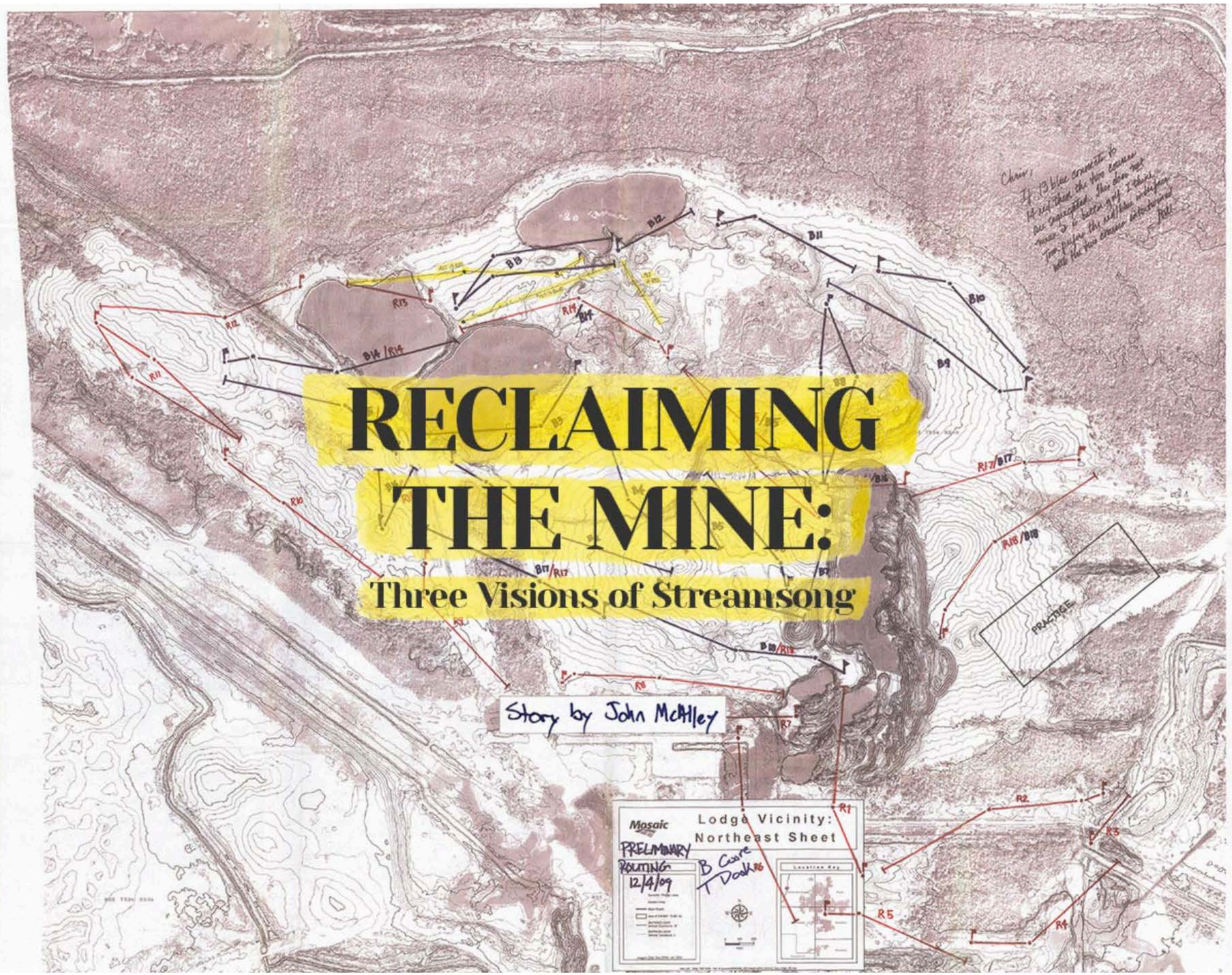


RECLAIMING THE MINE:

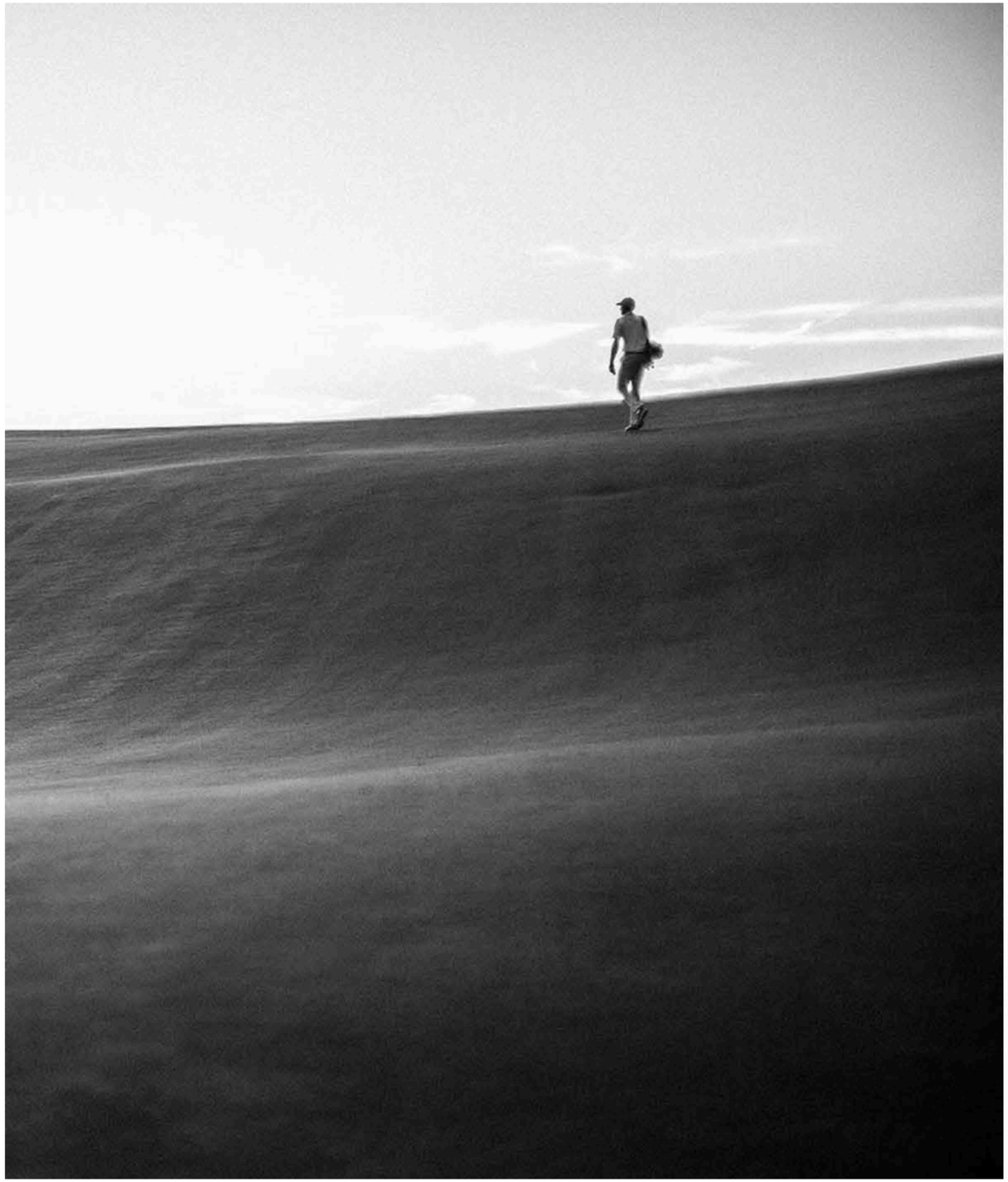
Three Visions of Streamsong

“THERE IS NO REASON TO DO THIS.”

That was Bill Coore’s almost immediate reaction when, in May 2009, he was asked to travel to Central Florida to look at a site for what an eager client had envisioned as a spectacular new golf resort.

“WELL, THIS IS DIFFERENT, AND YOU MIGHT AT LEAST WANT TO COME TAKE A LOOK.”

Said the dreamer on the other end of the phone.



As arguably the greatest golf-course architects of their generation, Coore and his partner Ben Crenshaw get these phone calls all the time. "Throughout our careers, we've seen a lot of interesting properties—and a lot of *not* interesting properties," Coore says, chuckling. "And the last thing Florida needed, I thought, was another golf course." Reluctantly, Coore did. And what he saw on the drive to the site in landlocked, economically depressed Polk County —60 miles southeast of booming Tampa and 90 miles southwest of golf-saturated Orlando—was exactly what he expected: miles and miles of flat pasture, a scattering of oaks and pines, crisscrossing networks of railroad tracks, cows. Not the stuff of compelling golf-course design. "Then, all of a sudden," Coore says, "we pull into the property that is now Streamsong, and I went, 'Whoa. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Let's get out for a walk.'"

Rich Mack, executive vice president of Mosaic—the multibillion-dollar, Minnesota-based corporation whose fortune has been made dredging mass quantities of rock phosphate from Central Florida's sandy soil and converting it to fertilizer that gets sold across the globe—had spent more than a decade surveying the otherworldly landscapes rendered by his company's invasive mining operations. The severely raked-over, 16,000-acre expanse that makes up Streamsong had been lying dormant for almost 50 years, and in that time Mother Nature clawed her way back. Winds reshaped the deep trenches into dunes reaching heights of 200 feet above sea level. Lakes rose up in the craters where Mosaic's dragline excavators had dug in their enormous, 65-cubic-yard buckets. Dense stands of tall grass, gnarled shrubbery, and misshapen trees—whatever willful life forms that could push up and out of the property's organics-stripped sand—proliferated. Wildlife ran, and continues to run, amok. Gators, bobcats, deer, quail, venomous snakes, swarms of dragonflies, and armies of feral pigs populate the place. "Everybody eats out here," one Streamsong executive likes to joke. Environmentalists looked at this fantastically strange moonscape and saw an expanse of land that, by law, needed reclaiming. Rich Mack looked at it and saw a golf course.

"I come from a bit of a golf background, and I've been lucky enough to have visited some of the great golf destinations in the U.S.," the 47-year-old executive says. "I felt there was a strong relationship in this land to the vibe you get at Sand Hills Golf Club in north-central Nebraska, or some of the great courses on Long Island, or at Bandon Dunes. Studying it, I knew we had two things that distinguish exceptional golf from just good golf: sand—*lots* of it—and elevation change."

Mack's company had, in recent years, been trying to think outside the box. In business since the dawn of the 20th century (Mosaic was formed by a merger of the 100-plus-year-old corporate behemoths IMC Global and Cargill, Incorporated), it was stuck in its standard operating procedures: to mine its vast holdings of terrain (300,000 acres in Florida alone, making it the state's sixth largest landowner) and, by mandate of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, reclaim the unsettled and depleted earth by leveling and replanting it.

"We do reclamation well, but not everybody recognizes that," Mack says. "The criticism is, essentially, 'Yes, you reclaim, but you don't put the land back into a form that represents the possibility of new economic vitality.'"

What could Mosaic do to change the game in reclamation, to be a model of corporate responsibility and to provide for the struggling people of Polk County? Mack's answer—and his crazily inspired leap—was to place a call to Coore, who, 15 years earlier, with Crenshaw, turned a similarly raw, undulating, inland and unlikely tract into Sand Hills, one of the most iconic golf courses in America.

On Coore's first visit, Mack took the 66-year-old architect to several sites on the property. A few of them with prairieland characteristics made Coore shrug; one of them explosively ignited his imagination. "It could have come from the mind of a science-fiction writer," Coore says, still sounding awed. "Precipitous dunes were immediately adjacent to ponds or lakes, and that's an odd combination. Native grasses were overgrowing everything. It looked like a random mess of contours, and you go, 'Wow, this is spectacular, this is unlike anything I've ever seen. How do you use it for golf?' I immediately called Ben and said, 'You've got to see this.'"

Five months after Coore's visit, Mack brought in another set of seasoned eyes. Like Coore and Crenshaw, Tom Doak—the design genius responsible for some of the world's most acclaimed golf courses—was on the short list of architects Mack had fantasized about setting loose on Streamsong's raw space. In courting him, Mosaic even ponied up for a helicopter. "*Not* the way I normally travel," Doak says, laughing. The man who'd carved the majestic Pacific Dunes out of 200 acres of rolling coastal property in Oregon shared Coore's reservations about Florida's pancake topography.

Still, he took the same tour of multiple sites given to his competitor and longtime friend. Not surprisingly, the same bizarrely contoured parcel of land quickened Doak's pulse. "I'd seen these huge mounds and dunes from the air," he remembers, "but you don't really get the incredible scale of it until you are right up on them."

Mack's vision—*grand* is the only word to describe it given his total absence of experience in the fields of hospitality and course design—was for a resort in the mold of thriving golf destinations like Bandon Dunes, Whistling Straits, and Pinehurst. To put such a place on the map, he knew he'd need to open with two world-class 18-hole tracks. Deals were sealed with both Coore/Crenshaw and Doak, and the question immediately became, who would have dibs on that one truly wondrous piece of real estate?

Doak still finds it funny. "There was quite a while where Bill and I were both dancing around it," he remembers. "Yeah, we both really want to work here, but we both really want the same *site*. In situations like this, the client will ask you questions like, 'Well, if you got the other site, would you do as well as the guy who got the first site?' And my answer is, 'Only if you got the wrong guy to do the first site!'"

Over the span of several months, Coore and Doak walked the property separately and together. And in an unheard-of collaboration between fierce competitors—in this case, competitors with a deep and uncommonly mutual respect for each other—the two began to compare notes. Coore, the boots-on-the-ground half of the Coore/Crenshaw duo, had roughed out ideas for a routing on Streamsong's most desirable piece of land. Independently, Doak did the same. In time, they agreed that with the addition of a small, adjacent parcel that Mosaic was still excavating, two 18-hole courses could be etched into that one remarkable tract. "Ultimately, Tom took our maps home and overlapped them," Coore says. "And he came back with one that had our holes mixed and matched. Some were his, some were mine. Interestingly, he had drawn one of the courses in red ink and the other in blue. And that's how the courses got their names."

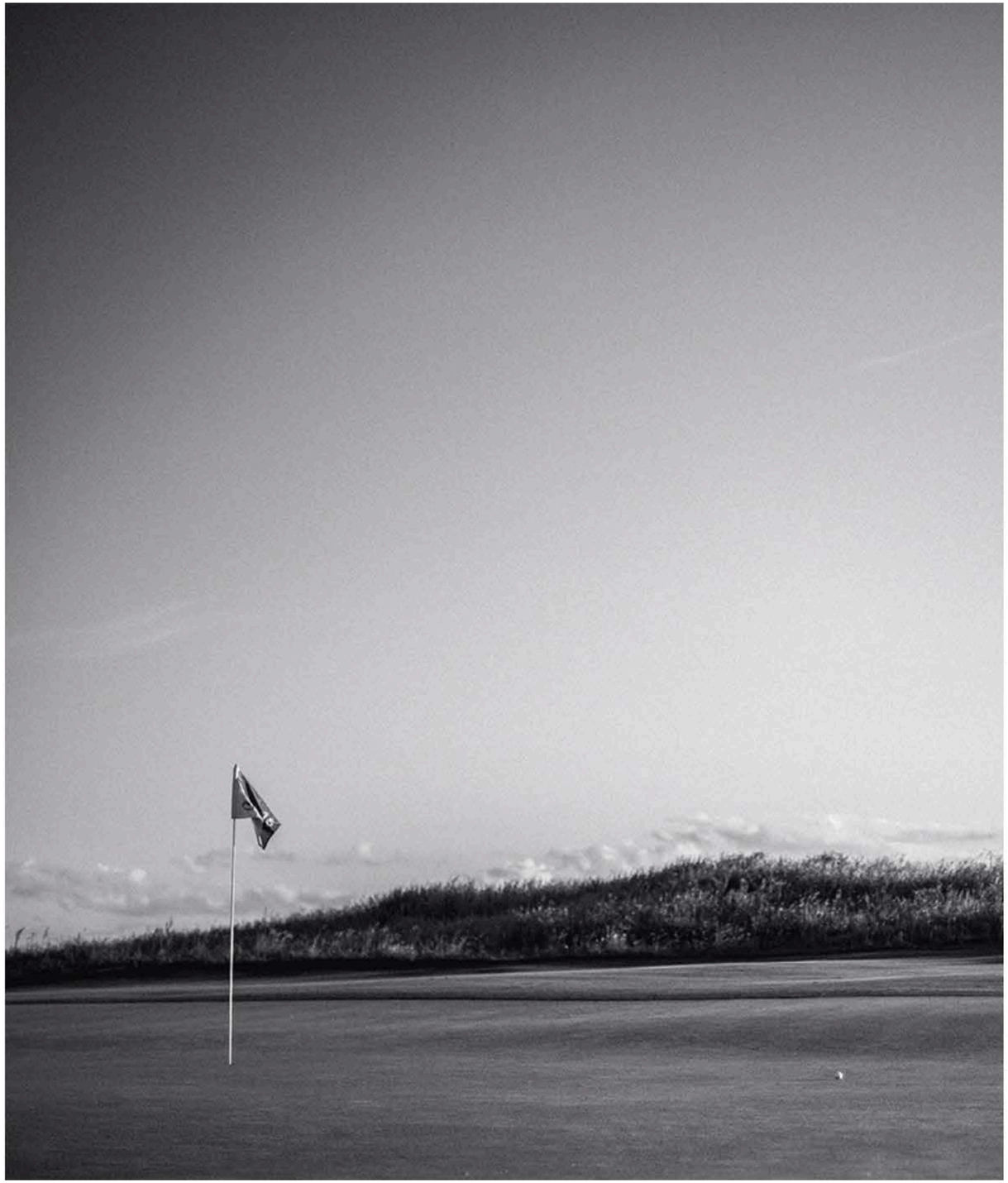
After a little more tweaking on paper by Mack's star architects, Red and Blue were ready for the shapers, bunker artisans, and agronomists. But which team would tackle what course?

"Neither of us knew!" Coore remembers, laughing.

"People don't really seem to understand this," Doak adds, "but we got to 36 holes without either of us deciding or knowing which 18 we wanted to do."

There was consensus that Red would be the tougher task. Its first six holes were situated on the watery plot still being torn up by Mosaic's draglines, which inevitably would leave behind tons of funk and guesswork about what those holes would be. Conversely, Blue was well defined. It had thrilling elevation changes and boasted a stunning array of vegetation and vistas—including, in the distance, Mosaic's ongoing and very active mining operations. Doak saw this one as obviously preferable but was insistent on giving his fellow architects first choice. Coore and Crenshaw walked the two layouts but just could *not* decide. Coore then proposed tossing a coin, an idea Doak didn't like at all. The prevaricating was making Mack crazy. "Pick one!" he finally told Coore.

"In the end, Jimbo Wright decided," Coore remembers. Wright is one of the great earthmovers in modern golf architecture, and at the time of the Red/Blue indecision, he was at Pinehurst, working with Coore and Crenshaw on their gorgeous restoration of legendary No. 2.



"Jimbo is astute," Coore says. "The economy was tanking at the time, so he said, simply, 'Take the one with the most work.' 'Well,' I said, trying to be more thoughtful about it. 'No!' he said, 'Take the one with the most work!' So I laughed, called Rich Mack and told him we'd do the Red. 'Would you mind calling Tom?' he asked. Well, Tom's a brilliant guy, but sometimes he doesn't say a lot. So I called him and said, 'If it's all right with you, Ben and I will take the Red course.' Silence. '*You,*' he finally said, 'are gonna take the Red course.' More silence. '*You* are gonna take the Red course,' he repeated. 'Yeah, okay,' he said. 'That's fine with me.'"

Both Doak and Coore are reluctant to be labeled minimalists, but their courses are among the most sublime examples of the aesthetic that's redefining golf in the 21st century. The return of the game to unmanicured settings—to sites that, Coore has said, "are naturally gifted for golf," sites like Sand Hills, Chambers Bay, Whistling Straits and all five of the stunning loops at Bandon Dunes—reflects the ebb and flow of life. The return of fast and firm, of the ground game, of natural over heavily bulldozed and elaborately manufactured courses—it's deeply satisfying in a time of breathtakingly rapid technological and cultural change. It's sustainable, and economical, too, although Doak is humored by the suggestion that minimalism is new: "Well, a lot of architects would say they've been minimalist all along—that it's all they've had the budget to do."

Rich Mack's hope for Streamsong was to deliver on this idea of rebirth: to provide jobs for residents of the five Central Florida counties in which Mosaic does its digging, to give those same people something they could be proud of—a first-class resort in their own backyard—and, of course, to invigorate the experience of golfers, not only those from the sunshine state but from around the world.

Red and Blue opened to raves in December 2012, and they already rank #12 and #16 on *Golf* magazine's list of the Top 100 Courses You Can Play. With their wide and rolling fairways, mammoth and radically undulated greens, and bunkers that look more detonated than shaped, they are the height of modernity, yet classic in feel.

Streamsong's immense (280,000 square feet), ultra-sleek, glass-encased Lodge opened in January 2014 and, with word of the "links-y" gems Coore/Crenshaw and Doak created, the hotel drew in visitors from, Mack says, at least a dozen different countries during its first months. It's a different experience than the one you'll find at, say, coastal, intimate, earthier Bandon Dunes. Like Bandon, the place is remote and walking the courses is mandatory most of the year. But quite intentionally, Mack and Mosaic are painting on a larger canvas. Golf—pure golf—is still the main attraction. But Streamsong wants to seduce you—and more than just golfers—with multisensory pleasures. Its 25 lakes are stocked with bass for a serene, first-class fishing experience. Its luxe spa is very much designed with women in mind; as is, it turns out, the resort's sporting clays course, where—at least in terms of marksmanship—ladies outgun the guys. The neo-European Lodge is equipped to host big conferences, something all the better to boost sagging golf business during Florida's scorching summer months.

If, increasingly, our dream-golf experiences are pursued in far-flung places like Bandon, or Cabot Links in Nova Scotia, or on the courses in Scotland and Ireland that centuries ago gave birth to the sport, Streamsong feels a little bit like the future. It's a wild, vast, beautiful, yet eerily quiet habitat. Think *The Hunger Games*—with a hybrid as your weapon.

"There is no reason to do this," Bill Coore said when he first heard about the Streamsong project. Lucky for us, he changed his mind. How does Coore make sense of golf's re-emergent and passionate embrace of nature, even the kind that rises up where machines had once given it a beat-down? "I can't," he says. "I'm not a psychologist. But I think there's the understanding that this is where the game began, on these rough-and-tumble landscapes. They convey a sense of simplicity, of excitement, of connection. It's as simple as how the ball rolls on the ground. When you're playing golf, things can *happen* on these landscapes."

Yes. There is a reason to do this.