



THE COWBOY WAY

For such a gentle soul, Mike Strantz lived an unusually large life, creating golf courses that embrace minimalism but manage to explode with originality and maverick boldness. Even in death, his passion is still palpable.

By Alan Shipnuck

Left: Strantz (in white hat) and Forrest Fezler survey the fifth of Strantz's nine courses: Tot Hill Farm, in Asheboro, N.C.

IN

June 2004, the Pebble Beach aristocracy gathered at the Monterey Peninsula Country Club to celebrate the reopening of its Shore Course. There were plenty of sparkly people in attendance at the gala, but one man commanded the room with his mere presence: Mike Strantz, the architect who had reimagined the course. Over the preceding 16 months of construction, Strantz had become an almost mythical figure around the club. He arrived as an unknown curiosity, a hulking six-four former hockey and football star with shoulder-length hair, a bushy mustache and South Carolina drawl as thick as U.S. Open rough. Strantz had never done an original design west of the Mississippi but he beat out a host of brand-name architects for the Shore commission with his unique vision, which the former studio art major had brought to life with dazzling watercolors. But a few months into the renovation Strantz was diagnosed with a virulent strain of oral cancer. He kept working straight through the chemotherapy and radiation treatments, shedding 100 pounds along the way. Most of his tongue was cut off in a desperate attempt to slow the cancer's onslaught. Yet day after day, Strantz could be found in the dirt, birthing a course that would become a monument to his artistry—though this down-home character would surely recoil at such a grandiose description.

By the time the Shore was finished, it was clear that it would be Strantz's last course. For the gala, he scribbled down a few words for his wife, Heidi, to read to the assembled members, but when the time arrived Mike was overcome by the moment. He slowly made his way to the dais. "It got very still and very quiet," says MPCC's director of greens and grounds Bob Zoller, a fixture at the club for more than four decades. "We all sensed we were witnessing something extraordinary." After the tongue surgery, Strantz largely lost the ability to speak. Now, he grimaced, gagged and exhaled billowing breaths, desperate to connect. The words refused to come but the message was crystal clear. "There were several hundred people in that room and I'm not sure any of them didn't have tears in their eyes," says Zoller. "The love that Mike had for his work, it just poured out of him."

A year later, Strantz was gone at the age of 50. He left behind only nine courses, but they attest to his genius. The Shore Course



(ranked 67th in GOLF's most recent Top 100 in the U.S.) is Strantz's "Water Lilies," the understated elegance of the work reflecting the supremely picturesque setting. Tobacco Road, in Sanford, N.C., is more vintage Strantz—among the biggest, baddest, boldest, most audacious golf courses ever created by god or man, defined by heroic carries, semi-blind shots and the heaving terrain of a former sand quarry. The opening tee shot is among the most polarizing in the game, its fairway pinched by two towering mounds that invite disaster and daring on a serpentine par 5. Royal New Kent looks and feels like a rollicking Irish links...in the hills of Virginia. Bulls Bay, outside of Charleston, is Strantz's most ambitious achievement; a dead-flat tomato field giving rise to a course that climbs as high as 70 feet in spots, with 44 acres of man-made lakes, and on only one occasion do two consecutive holes play to the same point on the compass, making this wind-blown coastal site an everchanging riddle. The sheer quality and originality of the architect's Caledonia and True Blue courses helped forever alter the image of Myrtle Beach.

Strantz's heyday overlapped with the beginning of the neo-minimalism movement that reshaped how modern golf courses look and are considered, making a fetish out of finding holes in the existing earth. Strantz moved tons of dirt but was so meticulous in his creations it is usually impossible to tell his hand from Mother Nature's. If Strantz's style needs a name it might be called maximum minimalism.

"You look at a Mike Strantz course and there is no doubt who did it," says Ben Crenshaw, one of the high priests of modern design. "The huge, wild bunkers, the unique greens, the way the

fairways snake through valleys and mounds...it's just so distinctive. And yet it looks like it was always supposed to be there."

"He was so far ahead of his time," says Barton Tuck, the owner and manager of Wingfield Golf, which through the years has been part of the development and management of more than four dozen golf courses; Royal New Kent is now in the portfolio. "People thought his designs were too different, too extreme. But he opened the can up and let everybody see what was possible. Look at Pacific Dunes, Whistling Straits—a lot of these modern classics that push boundaries, you see Mike Strantz's influence there."

"He is my all-time favorite because of his unique take on design," says David Kahn, of the upstart architecture firm Jackson-Kahn. "He was an original. He bucked every trend."

More than 15 years after his death, Strantz's legacy only continues to grow. Tuck is in the process of forming the Mike Strantz Society to properly memorialize his life's work and bring together the true believers who return again and again to the courses. The shapers and moneymen who supported Strantz have recently resuscitated Maverick Design, the firm Strantz founded, to build courses that reflect their friend's style and philosophies. Many other course architects are appreciated by golfers but with Strantz the connection is more personal: At Royal New Kent the bar is named for him; a locker in the clubhouse at Tobacco Road is set aside for him in perpetuity; within the Monterey Peninsula clubhouse there is a huge painting of Strantz, and his watercolors adorn the walls. All of this is a tribute to the deep impression made by a gentle soul and a man's man who was fiercely loyal to his crew and uncompromising in his vision.

"He was a big guy already, but his presence was huge," says Jeff Jones, a shaper on many of Strantz's courses and now a part of

the reconstituted Maverick team. "He was a larger-than-life character. There will always be guys out there building golf courses, but there will never, ever be another Mike Strantz."

Strantz grew up in Toledo—"on the other side of the river," says Heidi with a knowing laugh. He fell hard for golf at an early age and used to pedal his bike to a local muni, clubs slung across his back. At 14, he began spending summers working on the maintenance crew at Chippewah Country Club, and for the first time had reason to reflect on what goes into the presentation of the playing field. Strantz was a terrific golfer and that deft touch carried over to his artistic pursuits. Watercolors, pencil drawings,



At Miami of Ohio, Strantz (left) studied studio art, and his innate gifts translated perfectly to a second passion: golf course architecture. Below is his sketch for the Shore Course's 224-yard par-3 9th hole.



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mixed media—he did it all, even wooing Heidi by making a faux concert poster memorializing the night they met in the parking lot of a disco after it had been evacuated due to a bomb scare. Strantz matriculated to Miami University (of Ohio) to study studio art but during his sophomore year had the epiphany that he might starve to death with that as a major, so he transferred to Michigan State’s turf management program. His dream was to become a golf course superintendent.

In 1979, Strantz was interning at Inverness Club in Toledo as it prepared to host the U.S. Open. Tom Fazio was brought in by the USGA to tweak the course, and “I just kind of fell in with Tommy and his crew,” Strantz said in a previously unpublished interview with Eagle Video Productions, of Raleigh, N.C. He did on-site design work at courses such as Lake Nona, Wade Hampton and

Wild Dunes. According to lore, the first thing Fazio would do when he winged into town was to see what Strantz had built and soften it to conform to a safer aesthetic. Still, Strantz was always complimentary of Fazio. Asked directly what he learned from his mentor, he said, “Hoo boy, probably things that he would’ve never realized I would learn from him, more about personal relationships with people, dealing with clients, how to be diplomatic with contractors and clients and how to solve problems between those groups of people.”

As a doting dad to two young daughters, Dana and Andrea,

“YOU LOOK AT A MIKE STRANTZ COURSE AND THERE IS NO DOUBT WHO DID IT,” SAYS BEN CRENSHAW. “THE HUGE, WILD BUNKERS, THE UNIQUE GREENS... IT’S JUST SO DISTINCTIVE.”

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From detailed Strantz watercolor (above) to magnificent oceanside playing field (left)—the Shore Course's 181-yard, par-3 11th.

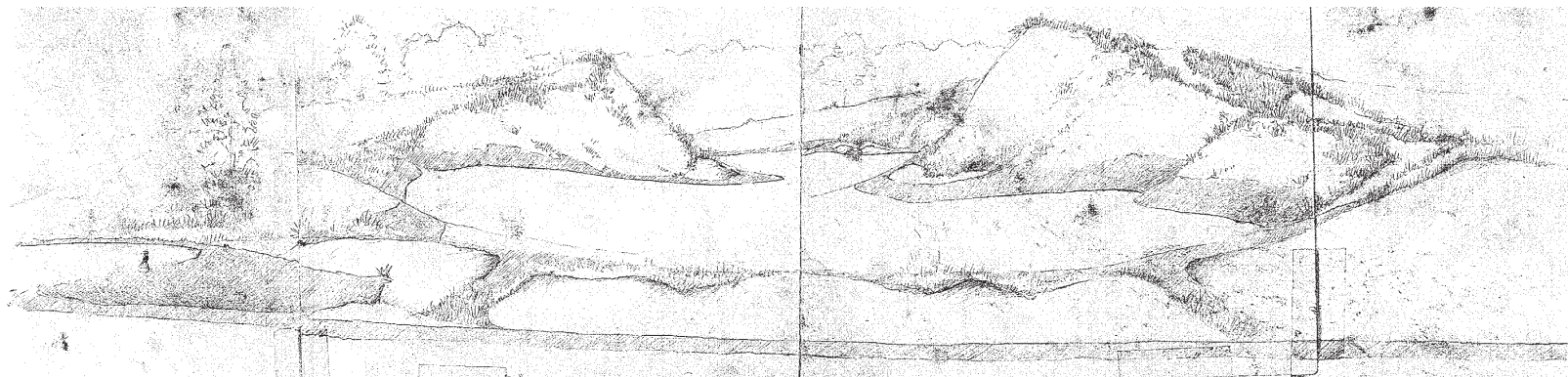
Strantz grew tired of life on the road, and in 1988 he hung up his own shingle, seeking jobs close to the family home in Mt. Pleasant, S.C. His first commission was Caledonia Golf & Fish Club, a bewitching layout around and across waterways and through mossy oaks, which was quickly hailed as one of Myrtle Beach’s best courses and became a staple of GOLF’s “Top 100 You Can Play.” Strantz’s next design, Royal New Kent, drew even more praise, and then Stonehouse (Toano, Va.) joined its predecessors on various lists of the best public courses in the country. It was no accident that Strantz eschewed the big-ticket private club offers that came his way after his first blush of success.

“He grew up on public courses,” says Heidi. “He always felt connected to the everyday golfer, and he’d say that he wanted to build public courses that were as good as any country club so regular guys could experience them.”

Strantz always did things his own way. He insisted on taking only one job at a time so he could be on-site to fuss over every detail. (Many other top architects of the era spent more time making deals than making golf holes, largely farming out the actual building of the courses to underlings.) Before he ever put pen to paper, Strantz would spend weeks exploring a site, preferably on his trusty horse, Scout. “Topographic maps don’t take into account any kind of unique vegetation that you might have, any kind of specimen trees or rock formations,” he said. “It just doesn’t show up. To get a real feel for the land you have to explore every inch of it. That’s the way the old guys used to do it. They didn’t have the high-tech stuff to do all this aerial topography so they spent a lot of time on the ground. Most people in the business now don’t want to put in that kind of time on a project, but that’s the way I like to do it.”

Strantz would then draw or paint each hole in forensic detail. This was the blueprint for the course-to-be; there were no engineered plans, no topographical renderings, just an idiosyncratic vision put down on paper. With an ever-present can of spray paint, Strantz would then mark up the land itself, providing a road map for his talented team of shapers, whom he worked alongside.

“My first jobs as a shaper were with Tom Doak, Gil Hanse and



Mike DeVries,” says Jones. “They were awesome, but I couldn’t believe the talent that Mike had. I mean, I grew up on a tobacco farm. I had never met an artist before in my life. But he would hand me these drawings, and it was like, You want me to build this? Every tree was there in the picture, every rock, every elevation change, every bunker contour, every ripple in the green. It seemed overwhelming, but he’d talk us through every step, and he’d be down in the dirt working with us. And when we were done it looked exactly—and I mean exactly—like his drawing.”

No detail escaped Strantz’s notice. Jones recalls being lovingly chided while toiling on the giant bunker down the left side of the 14th fairway at Bulls Bay. “I was working so hard to make the cross ties perfectly straight and Mike comes up and says, ‘Jeff, they’re too straight—I want this wall to look like it’s been there for 100 years, it fell over and we had to patch it up and fix it.’ Every little detail was like that. By the time you were done, Mike would make you feel like you were the one who had thought of it even though it was him all along.” An accomplished chef, Strantz would often end the day by whipping up a feast for the whole crew.

The loyalty he inspired was best embodied by the late Forrest Fezler, the journeyman PGA Tour pro who nearly won the 1974 U.S. Open and nine years later at the national championship donned a pair of shorts for the last hole of the last round to thumb his nose at the USGA, with whom he had been feuding. After retiring from the Tour he was at loose ends until a chance encounter with Strantz. They struck up a friendship and soon a partnership, with Fezler serving as a jack-of-all-trades project manager. Strantz wasn’t one to worry about budgets or entertain the suggestions of outsiders. He rarely carried a cell phone. It was left to Fezler to insulate his friend from real world concerns so Strantz could build the courses that lived in his head, and the old pro gladly did so because of their shared passion.

“I always talk about those two in the context of the westerns I grew up watching,” says MPCC’s Zoller. “Forrest might have been the most loyal sidekick I’ve ever seen, even more than Tonto or Hopalong Cassidy. They loved each other like brothers. And their bond was built on golf. They talked about it all day and then all night. I’m sure they dreamed about it, too.”

A few years ago, the owners of Royal New Kent ran out of money and the course shut down. It was fallow for nearly 18 months and became so overgrown that when Tuck visited the property he drove his car into an unseen sand trap. He bought the course and then spent a full year restoring it, working off old photographs and Strantz’s own drawings, which are now displayed in the clubhouse. “I guess I just feel a deep obligation to preserve his work,” Tuck says. “His courses are so rare and so precious.”

Mark Stewart, the cofounder of Tobacco Road, thinks the current Strantz renaissance is being driven in part by “the larger context of current societal trends,” he writes in an email, “like the artisan-maker movement in food, drink, clothing and other things. Mike was hands-on, every day. His work was small-batch design-build, authentic and singular, and in that respect his process is timeless and timely.”

Every February the larger golf world gets to appreciate Strantz when the Pebble Beach Pro-Am visits the Shore Course. Since it joined the rota in 2010 the Shore has received raves from the pros. Phil Mickelson calls it “one of my favorites now on Tour.” Stuart Appleby tweeted, “Monterey is a great course, better than P.B.” Steve



The sketch for Tobacco Road’s opening hole (top, left) is panoramic—and almost as daunting as the real thing (above). At left, Royal New Kent’s par-5 10th, and below, one of Strantz’s greatest creations: daughter Andrea, in 2001.



Elkington upped the ante: “Perhaps the greatest course in the U.S.”

The original Shore opened in 1961. By the time Strantz was brought in the playing corridors had long been defined by houses, roads, the coastline and other considerations. But he conjured an entirely different course by reversing the routing, building 12 new holes and dramatically reworking the other six. Strantz’s most inspired decision came at the 11th hole, where he placed a tee box atop a craggy rock outcropping, revealing forever views on what is now the course’s signature par 3. (Naturally, Strantz hated the term *signature hole*.) During construction, the holes were not worked on sequentially. In fact, number 11 was the last one to be built. By then Strantz was at death’s door. When the final touches were completed on the 11th hole, he and Fezler slowly climbed up the stairs that had been hand-carved into the rock to admire the view one final time. “This is our last hole together, old friend,” Strantz said. Fezler’s voice cracked telling this story years ago. But he brightened at the thought of what his sidekick has left behind. “Some people get a gravestone,” Fezler said, “but Mike has a monument.” 🍷

