

Designing golfer

Preston resident shapes jungles into fairways, rice paddies into greens

By Ron Page

The sun was bright and directly overhead. It was time for lunch. But Preston resident Rick Robbins wasn't anywhere near a restaurant or diner. He was sitting in a thatched tree house, deep in a wilderness in Northern Chiang Mai, Thailand. His morning had been spent tramping through a thousand acres of a dense forest laced by rivers and rice paddies looking for a place that was to fill a special need.

Robbins, you see, has a somewhat unusual job. He's an international designer of golf courses and resorts. This particular day he was with his hosts, Asian businessmen who had invited him halfway around the world to find a site just right for such a facility. They had been scouring the countryside since early morning.

Robbins was getting hungry and asked one in the group when they were going to eat. "Quite soon," the man answered, politely. "Lunch will be here shortly."

"Now, since we'd been hiking all morning in as dense an area as we were in, I couldn't imagine having a reservation for a restaurant," he said. "A few minutes later a motor scooter appeared as from nowhere, drove up along the dirt path, carrying a bunch of plastic envelopes filled with rice, vegetables, and assorted meats. We had lunch and it was quite good. It's an experience I won't forget. I recall sitting there and thinking how lucky I was to be doing what I was doing."

Robbins heads his own company, Robbins & Associates International, which designs, plans, and manages construction of golf courses and golf resorts in the United States and the Far East. Headquartered at 100 Hardaway Court in Cary, with a second office in Bangkok, Thailand, the firm also has active projects in China, Turkey, Sri Lanka and Mexico.

His life today is a far cry from his early years as a Watauga County High School golfer in the mountain area of Boone, N.C. His father, Spencer, and two uncles were developers of golf course communities, projects that harmonized the sport by crafting its lands with residential areas. In the winter, his father was general manager at the Pine Needles golf resort in Pinehurst. "I can remember playing golf from daybreak to sundown," he said. So when he graduated from N.C. State University in 1973 with a degree in Environmental Design in Landscape Architecture, the transition was "one of the easiest."

During his college days, he lived at the Eastside Mobile Home Park in Cary. That was the early 1970s and the area was quite different than today. "High House Road as nothing more than a narrow two-lane roadway, and all of Cary had a population of 7,600," he said. "Today it is 65,000 and growing to the point where Raleigh could be a suburb of Cary in the not-too-distant future," he laughed.

Robbins and his wife Ginger have a daughter, Erin, 14, who is in the eighth grade at West Cary's Davis Drive Elementary School. The family moved to Preston Trails in July 1993 from Florida. He and his family had spent a year earlier in Hong Kong developing a project in that area. "It was our first time in Asia, in a very dynamic city, and a very exciting experience," he said. "It was a big jump for a North Carolina boy, from Charlotte to Hong Kong, a big deal to say the least." Today he makes two- and three-week trips to projects in the Asian area several times a year.

Robbins' work experience began with the firm of von Hage & Devlin (first in Miami and later in Houston) and continued for 13 years during which he rose to vice president and lead designer. He was instrumental in the design and



AT WORK ON THE GREENS—Rick Robbins is owner of an international company that designs, plans, and manages construction of golf courses and golf resorts in the United States and the Far East. His headquarters are in Cary.

master planning of more than 25 major golf course developments in the U.S. and Mexico. Some of the projects he worked on during these years include the Doral Country Club-Silver Course in Miami, the North & West Courses at the

Woodlands Country Club in Houston, Admiral's Cove East in Juniper, Fla., and Tucson National Country Club in Tucson.

In 1986, Robbins left von Hage & Devlin to become vice president of planning and golf course devel-

opment at the Nicklaus/Sierra Development Corporation, the real estate and community development division of Golden Bear International. Jack Nicklaus designs the golf courses for Golden Bear International, and J. Robert Sierra (recognized as one of the U.S.'s leading residential community developers) handles all of the development aspects.

As vice president with the Nicklaus/Sierra group, Robbins was responsible for golf course construction schedules, golf course budgets, master planning of new developments, and coordination of all golf course activities and site visits. Among the developments that Robbins was affiliated with while in this position are Wynstone Country Club in Chicago, English Turn in New Orleans, and Avila Golf & Country club in Tampa.

In 1990, Nicklaus asked Robbins to become a senior design associate in the Golden Bear Hong Kong office. It was here that he was responsible for the design of golf courses in the expansive Far East market. He served as senior design associate on courses in Japan, Thailand and Taiwan.

After almost two years in Hong Kong, he returned to the U.S. to pursue his ultimate goal — the formation of Robbins & Associates International, a design and management company dedicated to the development of golf courses "par excellence."

Among the golf facilities he's designed is Mill Creek Golf Club in Mebane, a semi-private facility named by North Carolina maga-

zine's golf panel as the best new course opened in the state in the past year. It beat out the new Arnold Palmer-designed Oak Valley course in Advance. Mill Creek is part of a 665-acre development in an historic area that straddles the Alamance-Orange county line.

Among the latest and more intricate courses Robbins has perfected is Sukaharta Golf and Country Club in Jakarta, Indonesia. The area experiences wet monsoon seasons, so the course was designed to be separated from home sites by a continuous lagoon system. The course is entirely contained within the lagoon which allows for water drainoff from the course in the wet season, as well as water storage for the dry periods of the year. The fill removed to carve the lagoons was used to shape the land contours on the greens and fairways.

The difference in traditions and beliefs in the Far East were in evidence to Robbins one day at Kuala Lumpur where he was involved at a new golf course and resort. The day's events had been hampered by a continuing rainy spell. A Hindu group was quite adamant about changing the weather pattern through a ceremony in which a goat was to be sacrificed by cutting off its head.

Robbins watched them sacrifice the goat on the side of a nearby hill. "Within no more than five minutes the rain came down so hard and heavy as to almost wash away the whole course. You literally couldn't see the course," he said. "I told those next to me it might be time they change religions."

Pine needles a mulch of choice

Straw's neat look, inexpensive price make it popular

Drive around Preston and Morrisville areas now that the days are getting warmer and you'll notice freshly mulched trees and flower beds everywhere. The needles-called "pine straw"—are a sought-after commodity among landscapers who use them for mulch. Also, building contractors spread them at building sites to reduce soil disturbance by equipment.

But now a study by the Department of Agriculture suggests owners of vacant land might also find "pine straw" a valuable commodity.

In the Mid-South, pine straw yields can reach 150 bales per acre at 30 to 40 pounds per bale, selling for as much as \$8 per bale, beginning when the trees are about eight years old.

Robert and Regina Wood operate Triangle Pine Needles on High House Road just west of Davis Drive in Morrisville. They lease land in Harnett County where they rake and bale their own needles. "We have automatic balers, but also bale some by hand," Mrs. Wood explained.

Bales come in a variety of sizes

and cost from \$3.45 to \$5.50 in this area. "They differ in size, ranging from 14- by 18-inches by either 25 or 28 to smaller 12-by 14-inch packages," Mrs. Wood explained. "We know one contractor who actually brings a bathroom scale with him when buying, because there can be a difference of up to 10 pounds in a bale."

James Powers, who owns Beauty Lawn, Inc., a landscaping firm in Morrisville, says pine straw has become the material of choice insofar as mulch is concerned. "It has a fresh, crisp appearance, a just-finished look and sells well because it gives an immediate gratification to the site," he says. He explains that no one grows pine in this area for its straw and that most of the growth found in vacant lands are field pines that have reproduced themselves over the years.

"Several of the larger horse farms in Harnett have set aside 100 or 200 acres to grow the long-leaf pine which is excellent for mulching," said Mrs. Wood. She said pine-tree farms also can be found in Sanford, Rockingham and Moore County.

Researchers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Beltsville, Md., explain the pine straw must be raked into piles, taking care to avoid sticks and other trash that can lower the value of the product. But

it can then be baled with the same machinery used to bale hay. Straw can be harvested anytime during the trees' shedding season from August to January, but maximum yields generally come during October and November.

Mrs. Wood explained that while pine straw protects a tree or plant's root system, it doesn't collect moisture as other mulches such as peat moss, shredded or double ground

hardwood, ground cypress or ground palm trees, nor does it stabilize soil, or provide any soil additives. But for looks, it can't be beat.

The Department of Agriculture cited field tests from 1990-1995, in which pine straw yields from 16-year-old loblolly pines averaged 480 pounds per acre in August, slightly more in September and October, and a maximum of 1,603 pounds per acre in November.

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