

MAVERICK OF THE GREEN

18TH HOLE, TRUE BLUE GOLF CLUB
Pawleys Island, S.C.

The life and architecture of Mike Strantz

By David Moore

The architecture of golf has been an endless fascination for golfers and golf historians since the inception of the game. It has allowed us to compare and contrast the classic works of A.W. Tillinghast, Dr. Alister MacKenzie or C.B. Macdonald, with the work of modern architects such as Gil Hanse, Tom Doak, or David McLay Kidd. Like all art, “beauty is in the eyes of the beholder,” but we can all agree that these individuals were able to take a landscape and transform it into something special for generations to enjoy.

One architect who has seemingly merged the golden age legends with the new school of design is the late Mike Strantz. A trained artist who looked more cowboy than golf architect, Strantz created some truly unique designs in the American southeast that took classical elements honed by

Macdonald and MacKenzie and gave them a modern flare and look that makes many who play his courses clamor to get back out there as soon as possible... others never wanted to play them again.

His designs are evocative, volatile, and downright electric. His death at the age of 50 is one of the biggest “what ifs” in the world of golf architecture, with many lamenting the courses he might have created with just a little more time. This is the story of Mike Strantz, a true maverick of the green.

Michael Strantz was born on May 27, 1955, in Toledo, Ohio. A regular Midwestern kid, Strantz took to art and golf at a young age. He began working in golf at the age of 14, when he took a job on the grounds crew at Chippewa Golf Club in nearby Curtice. After graduating high school in 1973, he enrolled in the studio art program at Miami (Ohio) University. Three years later, he transferred to Michigan State, where he graduated in 1978 with a degree in turf grass management. That summer, he married fellow Ohioan Heidi Walker, and got an internship with Inverness, which was preparing to host the 1979 U.S. Open (won by Hale Irwin).

It was Mike’s internship at Inverness that started him on

his life's work. During his short tenure, he connected with renowned architect Tom Fazio, who saw the immense potential Mike possessed. He offered him a job after the Open, and Strantz became one of Fazio's top shapers over the next decade. Among the courses Strantz worked on for Fazio were Wachesaw Plantation in Myrtle Beach (1984), Lake Nona Golf Club in Orlando (1985), and The Farm in Georgia (1986). Mike was ascending the ladder, making connections that would lead to future opportunities.

What happened next shocked everyone—Mike walked away. In 1987, he decided to step away from golf course design to settle in Charleston, S.C., with his growing family. He opened Strantz Studio, a commercial art studio that he intended to be his life's work moving forward.

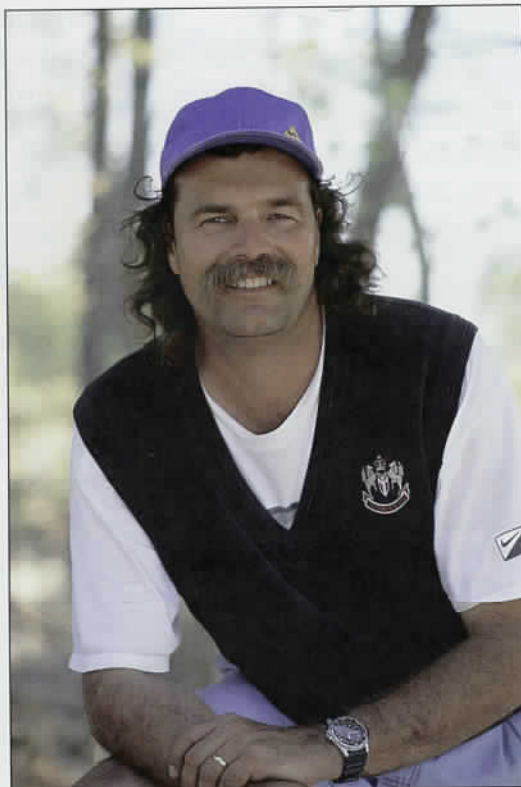
Then Hurricane Hugo struck.

Hugo formed on Sept. 10, 1989, as a powerful "Cape Verde Tropical Cyclone" that ravaged the Caribbean and the Atlantic seaboard over the next two weeks. Classified as a category 5 hurricane when it hit the United States, Hugo produced record storm statistics, killed 67 people, and inflicted \$11 billion in damages (\$28 billion in 2024 money). Hugo was so strong and deadly, the name was actually "retired" from the list of Atlantic hurricane names.

The Wild Dunes Resort in Charleston was devastated by Hugo. Mike had been a part of the Fazio team that built both the Links (1979) and Harbor (1984) courses, and since walking away from Fazio's company, he'd been working on the green staff in conjunction with his studio. The resort asked Mike, who lived nearby, to reconstruct the courses after the damage inflicted by the storm. With Fazio's blessing, Mike took the job and returned to the game.

After reconstructing Wild Dunes, Strantz started Maverick Golf Designs in late 1989. Up to this point, he had devoured the writings and works of Dr. Alister MacKenzie and would ultimately use his experiences with Fazio and MacKenzie's principles as the basis of his future works. He was then hired to complete the construction of the Arthur Hills design, Dunes West Golf Club, in Mt. Pleasant, S.C.

Two years later, he got an opportunity to work in Myrtle Beach, thanks to Toro distributor Steve Smith. The two had become acquainted during Mike's time with Fazio. Smith visited the construction site for the Parkland course at the Legends resort, which Tom Doak was slated to design. After



MIKE STRANTZ

a disagreement with owners/developers Larry and Dan Young, Doak walked away from the construction. The Youngs inquired whether Smith knew anyone locally, and he recommended Strantz who was then hired to complete Doak's design. He later partnered with the Youngs on some of his original designs.

Strantz's first "official" original design was on Pawleys Island in 1993, thanks to an association that began a decade earlier with developer Doc Lachicotte who hired Mike to create what became Caledonia Golf and Fish Club.

The property dates back to the early years of the United States. It was acquired in 1797 by Scotsman Dr. Robert Nesbit, who is believed to have gained the 2,500-acre property through either purchase or marriage to Elizabeth Pawley. He named the property "Caledonia," the Roman name for Scotland during their em-

pirical conquests. During its peak, Caledonia was one of the largest and most productive rice plantations in America, producing 350 tons annually. The property stayed in the Nesbit family until World War II, when parcels were sold to other investors. The current property was purchased as a fishing and hunting preserve in 1971.

Strantz proved to be just the man for the task of creating the course at Caledonia. Lachicotte and the other property owners wanted a golf course, but not at the expense of the natural habitat. Mike created exactly what they envisioned, a golf course built into the natural landscape, by a man who viewed the construction not as an engineer, but as an artist. In fact, because of his art background, Strantz could draw the approach to a hole and show it to the developer on the spot, soothing their concerns with a few swift pencil strokes.

The course opened for play in 1994 to rave reviews. Since its creation, it has consistently been ranked among the "Top 100 Public Courses" by *Golf Digest*, "Top 100 You Can Play" by *Golf Magazine*, and one of "America's Best Modern Courses" by *Golfweek*. His career then took off.

In 1995, Mike was hired to build Stonehouse Golf Club in Toano, Va. It was named "Best New Upscale Course" by *Golf Digest* in 1996. That same year, he built Royal New Kent in Providence Forge, Va., which received the same award from *Golf Digest*, making Strantz the first architect to win that award in consecutive years.

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5TH HOLE AT TOBACCO ROAD. This course, just north of Pinehurst, N.C., is considered a Strantz masterpiece.



3RD HOLE AT TOT HILL FARM in Asheboro, N.C.

After completing Royal New Kent, Mike returned to Pawleys Island to build Caledonia's "sister course," True Blue Golf Club, on adjacent land. Mike crafted a stern test that had many comparing it to the likes of Pine Valley and Pinehurst No. 2, thanks to the tremendous bunkering. His design earned him *GolfWorld's* Architect of the Year in 1998, and True Blue would earn the same accolades as its sister course across the street.

In 1999, Mike created what many consider to be his "magnum opus" – Tobacco Road. The property, located about 25 miles north of Pinehurst, was once a tobacco plantation and peach farm before it became a sand quarry owned by the Stewart family. According to owner Mark Stewart, "Mike was originally reluctant to take the job, but once he explored the property with Doc Lachicotte he took on the task."

Mike dove headlong into Tobacco Road. As construction got underway, Stewart knew he had the right man for the job. Strantz spent 4-5 days a week at the site, often manning the heavy machinery himself, a key factor in Stewart hiring him. As Stewart told me, "Mike was a singular talent. He broke the mold from the typical designs of his era. He

sought to create not a solitary signature hole on a golf course, but 18 of them. He saw things as an artist, and he could make those holes come to life with a few sketches while you looked at an expanse of land."

Opening for play in 1999, Tobacco Road opened to great acclaim. It has often been referred to as the "Pine Valley of the South," and to this day, Tobacco Road is among the "Top Public Courses" in all the major publications. In his 2003 book, *Grounds for Golf*, author Geoff Shackelford compared America's greatest courses to the best films Hollywood has produced, with the likes of Pine Valley characterized as Francis Ford Coppola's "The Godfather," and the National Golf Links to "Citizen Kane." When it came to Tobacco Road, Shackelford likened it to Quentin Tarantino's "Pulp Fiction," often considered the director's top work. Tobacco Road is unique and often polarizing, just like the cult classic film, but there is no denying it is a masterful work of art.

Not to mention difficult. The holes are visually intimidating, featuring blind shots and vast expanses of sand, exactly as Mike intended. While the course isn't overly long (just over 6,500 yards from the back tees), it requires accuracy, particularly in finding fairways and greens. Stray off the intended path and that intimidating view becomes an epic battle of man vs. course. Strantz wasn't bothered by criticisms of difficulty. In fact, yardage books at Tobacco Road carry this blunt quote from him: "I don't care if people think my courses are too hard."

With the turn of the century, Mike continued his work. He designed Tot Hill Farm in Asheboro, N.C., in 2000. Another classic Strantz design, it features magnificent vistas and outstanding usage of rock throughout the property. That same year, *Golfweek* published its rankings of the "Top 10 Golf Course Architects of All-Time." Among the likes of Donald Ross and his hero Dr. MacKenzie, Mike Strantz was named to that list, with just a handful of courses to his name. In a mere decade, he became one of the best ever.

He followed up Tobacco Road and Tot Hill Farm with his first private club to date, Bulls Bay in Awedaw, S.C., in 2001. The following year, he went west and oversaw the renovation of Silver Creek Valley Country Club and later the Shore Course at Monterey Peninsula Country Club (2003).

Tragically, Mike's career and life were cut short. Though he wasn't a tobacco user, he developed sores in his mouth that proved cancerous. After a valiant battle, Strantz succumbed to cancer in 2005. He was just 50 years old.



THE MAVERICK. Mike Strantz's approach to golf course design was as original as the man.

The legacy of Mike Strantz has only grown since his premature death in 2005. His designs have cultivated an almost "cult-like" following, with one group, the "Strantz Fantz Club," hosting an annual event called "The Iron Maverick" at one of his designs. To this day, the likes of Tobacco Road, Caledonia, and True Blue annually rank among the top public courses in America. His designs at Tot Hill Farms and Stonehouse came under hard times during the recent recession years but, since 2020, have reopened to positive reviews under new ownership, fully restored to Strantz's vision. (This author can confirm Tot Hill Farm is a special course to play.)

I don't know what exactly has drawn myself and so many others to adore Strantz's work to such a degree. Maybe it is the thick mustache that would give Mike "Fluff" Cowan a run for his money, or the flowing mullet he sported under a cowboy or baseball hat. Perhaps it was the fact he looked more cowboy than architect, riding a horse like the infamous desperados of a bygone age who saw the true beauty of the land around them.

Maybe it was his work ethic. Unlike some architects, Mike

was not afraid to get down in the dirt. In fact, when Steve Smith would visit a site, he'd often find Mike, all 6-foot 3-inches of him, wearing overalls with a shovel in hand digging alongside the laborers. There was no ego with Mike, just work ethic and artistry. That very thing drew Mike to his clients. Mark Stewart said as much in our conversations about Tobacco Road.

I have been fortunate enough to now to play about half of Strantz's original designs. Playing on these courses, I often think of the words of Neil Schuster, host of the video series "No Laying Up," when he spoke of Pacific Dunes during season six of his "Tourist Sauce" series. Schuster said:

"Pacific Dunes is big, bold, brash, dare I say, electric... It's a sensory overload. It'll punch you in the face. It's American. It's the F-150. It's Van Halen's 'Eruption'."

This describes Mike's courses so well. They are not "cookie-cutter" or traditional. They are different, thought provoking, against the norm. They require you to play the appropriate shot and reward you for doing just that, but stray from the path and you'll be left with your head spinning, questioning your sanity, with little hope of saving par. Golf architect Ron Whitten might have put it best when he compared and contrasted Mike's design at Tobacco Road with nearby Pinehurst in *Golf Digest*, saying:

"While it's just down the street from Pinehurst, it's a different planet. Pinehurst is horse-drawn carriages, Tobacco Road is motocross. Pinehurst is Monet, Tobacco Road is graffiti. Pinehurst is horseshoes, Tobacco Road is hand grenades."

While all of his designs are not as dramatic as Tobacco Road, they do invoke similar feelings, and I think Whitten's statement fully encapsulates who Mike Strantz was and what he created.

Mike Strantz was truly a different breed. He was alien compared to the norm, a cowboy on horseback who used his artistic skills moving earth instead of putting paint to canvas. He broke the mold, and it is hard not to lament his loss. What would he have created with a little more time on this Earth? We will never know, but while his work lives on in the American southeast, we will all get to enjoy what this maverick of the green created in a short period of time. 🐎

Author's Note: Thank you to Mark Stewart, owner of Tobacco Road, and long-time Toro distributor Steve Smith for sitting down with me. Their conversations were incredibly useful for this article. Thank you to the folks at many of Mike's courses, as they not only welcomed me, but have helped continue to share Mike's story.

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