

The Gospel according to

DAVID McLAY KIDD USED TO BUILD GOLF'S MOST DIFFICULT COURSES. NOW, WITH THE OPENING OF GAMBLE SANDS, HE IS PREACHING THE VIRTUES OF PLAYABILITY WITH A MISSIONARY'S ZEAL

Gamble Sands' drivable, par-4 second hole looks out over the Columbia River.



David

PHOTO BY LARRY LAMBRECHT

By **Martin Kaufmann**

On the final day of a weeklong golf trip through Oregon and Washington last month, David McLay Kidd stepped onto the 18th tee at Chambers Bay Golf Club, which is scheduled to host the 2015 U.S. Open. He piped his drive 275 yards, on exactly the line he had intended, as pure a shot as he had hit the entire week – only to watch it run through the fairway and into a bunker. So he calmly took his medicine and punched out, only for his ball to trickle into a cavernous pot bunker.

The irony wasn't lost on Kidd.

"A few years ago, I would have agreed that was the right (design) approach," said the 46-year-old architect.

That's no longer the case.

Kidd burst upon the golf scene in 1999 with his first design, Bandon Dunes, a course beloved by players of all skill levels. The young, unknown Scotsman seemingly had bottled the essence of links golf and transplanted it to the remote shores of southwest Oregon, laying the groundwork for one of the game's great destinations.

After his stirring breakthrough at Bandon, however, Kidd soon became the *enfant terrible* of the architecture world. He got swept up in the industry's demand for increasingly difficult courses. "Resistance to scoring" became one of the key ratings benchmarks, and Kidd's courses scored highly on that metric. Like that 18th hole at Chambers Bay, Kidd displayed a knack for tormenting golfers, even when they hit their best shots.

Most notable was his work on The Castle Course in St. Andrews, Scotland, which *Forbes* said "can feel more like a survival test than a game of golf." *Travel & Leisure* named The Castle as its 2008 course of the year, but with this qualifier: "The greens have to be seen – make that played – to be believed." One dismissive blogger simply said, "Take St. Andrews Castle Course – please!"

Kidd has changed in many ways from the

days when he was building courses such as The Castle and Tetherow, in his adopted home of Bend, Ore. The overweight architect who used to spend many nights drinking with his construction crews now is a fitness fanatic who never touches alcohol, other than an occasional sip of pinot noir with dinner. His office wall includes a picture of him competing in a triathlon.

Nowhere is Kidd's transformation more apparent than in his work. Philosophically, his career and design approach have come full circle. That was evident on a recent trip that began in Bandon, continued east to Bend, then north to Brewster, Wash., to see his latest design, Gamble Sands.

Gamble Sands, which opens Aug. 2, already has received extensive preview play, and comparisons to Bandon Dunes have been common. That's not by accident. After years of building courses that were as different from Bandon as Judas Priest is from James Taylor, Kidd has re-embraced Bandon's simple, unapologetic emphasis on playability and fun.

He openly scoffs at the concept of resistance to scoring. (In Gamble Sands' course guide, Kidd wrote, "I want you to play your best golf here!") He now preaches the gospel of playability with the full-throated zeal of a missionary.

"I don't want people to come off the course and say, 'What an unbelievably good test of golf.' That's horsesh--," Kidd says. "If

Kidd, P32 >>>

David McLay Kidd, who burst on to the U.S. scene in 1999 with his design of Bandon Dunes, has a new look - and approach.



COURTESY OF DAVID McLAY KIDD/MIKE HOUSKA (DOGLESTUDIOS.COM)

<<< Kidd, P30

people say that, that means it was too hard, unless they're really, really good. So how do I get back to, 'That was just ragingly good fun?'

'NOW I'VE GOT TO LIVE UP TO THIS'

John Keats wrote "Ode on a Grecian Urn," arguably the greatest poem of the Romantic era, at age 23. Two years later, he was dead.

Orson Welles co-wrote, produced, directed and starred in "Citizen Kane," often called the greatest movie of the 20th century, at age 26. He had other triumphs, but nothing approaching the success of "Kane."

Kidd was 26 when he first visited the site of Bandon Dunes 20 years ago, in July 1994. At the time, Kidd had no solo design credits, only an intriguing pedigree. His father, Jimmy, was the longtime superintendent at The Gleneagles Hotel, and David was working on staff at Gleneagles Golf Developments. To Bandon Dunes founder Mike Keiser, a man who adores the great Scottish links, that carried some weight.

Keiser took a flyer on the young Kidd, reasoning that Jimmy, his collaborator, would keep him in line. But Keiser's trust came with a caveat: "I knew we had no contract, so if I was disappointed, I could fire him. So it was a no-risk attempt."

Bandon Dunes was an instant sensation. It appeared on this magazine's cover on March 13, 1999, debuting at No. 10 on Golfweek's Best Modern Courses list – all of this coming two months before the course even opened to the public. It has been ranked as high as No. 2, and never has fallen out of the top 10.

From obscurity, Kidd suddenly found himself among the industry's A-list architects. He struck out on his own, forming DMK Golf Design in 1999, and soon was juggling multiple projects in the United Kingdom, U.S. and South Africa.

"People said, 'Oh, my goodness,

you're David McLay Kidd, you did Bandon Dunes, you must be so good.' And then you're like, 'Holy sh--, now I've got to live up to this,' " Kidd recalls of those heady days. "So then you start showing every trick you've got. You don't realize that the simple stuff you were doing was great. Why did you feel the need to start pulling tricks?"

Those "tricks" began to manifest themselves soon after Bandon.

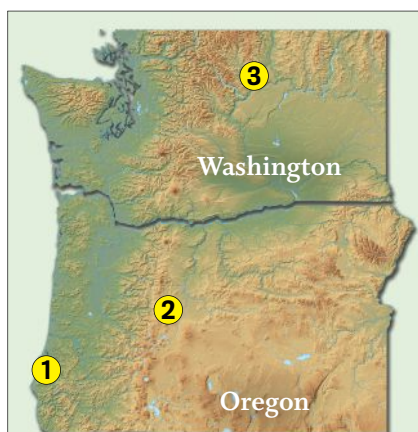
Jimmy Kidd recalls visiting Nanea Golf Club in Hawaii during construction and walking the course with his son. He took particular note of a steep falloff on the back-left portion of the par-3 17th green, but held his tongue. Later, over dinner and a glass of wine, he gave his son some stern advice: "I said, 'If you don't plow up green No. 17 tomorrow morning, there's going to be hell to pay.' " The elder Kidd recalls finding his son making revisions to the green the next morning, though he later had to tear it up and start anew because it still wouldn't hold shots.

"All of the guys on the project said, 'We knew he would listen to you. He hasn't been listening to us,' " Jimmy Kidd says.

But Nanea, which opened in 2003, was a private club, and Kidd had been given the mandate to build a course that would challenge low-handicappers. The criticism of Kidd's work peaked in 2008 with the opening of two public courses, The Castle and Tetherow. Both courses have their admirers; The Castle is rated No. 14 among Golfweek's Best Modern Courses of Great Britain & Ireland,



COURTESY OF TETHEROW/JONATHAN KINGSTON



Northwest road trip

Seven days, six courses, 25 hours together in the car. That's the scorecard from writer Martin Kaufmann's road trip through the Pacific Northwest last month with architect David McLay Kidd. That included three Kidd designs (see map) that capture the arc of his career from Bandon Dunes to his newest course, Gamble Sands.

1. Bandon Dunes
2. Tetherow
3. Gamble Sands



David McLay Kidd (near left) was on staff at Gleneagles Golf Development when he was tapped to design Bandon Dunes. His father, Jimmy (far left) was the longtime superintendent at Gleneagles.

while Tetherow is No. 5 in Oregon, trailing only the four courses at Bandon Dunes Resort. Still, upon their openings, there were strong sentiments that Kidd had overcooked the greens and tricked up the fairways.

The Castle, St. Andrews Links Trust's seventh course, was one of the highest-profile projects in recent memory. In 2002 Kidd beat out 16 other architects for the commission, earning the Scotsman a chance to make a splash in the home of golf.

The site, however, was hardly noteworthy. It is bounded by the North Sea, but otherwise was featureless, save for the wastewater treatment plant that Kidd had to build around.

"It obviously had to be manufactured, and instead of going to my paint box and taking my easel and four or five beautiful pastel shades and painting the picture, I went to my paint box and took out every color I had," Kidd acknowledges now. "There wasn't enough restraint."

Kidd sprinkled fescue-laden mounds in the fairways at The Castle and Tetherow, and cranked up the volume on the greens to a level that sometimes made even his father wince. Upon seeing The Castle's 14th green as it was about to be grassed, Jimmy Kidd recalls telling his son, "David, you've got to be kidding me. This is not what DMK Golf Design is all about. This is crazy golf."

Keiser, the man who had launched Kidd's career, had a decidedly negative reaction upon visiting The Castle.

"He put hummocks in the middle of the fairways that were blind on the tee shots, and greens that defied playability to the average golfer. Those two things disappointed me greatly," Keiser says. "So many people (thought) if he did Bandon Dunes, with its very puttable greens, that's part of what you get from David Kidd, and he went off and did those crazy greens."

In retrospect, Kidd reasons that it is easy to dial back the difficulty of a design after a course has opened. At The Castle and Tetherow, for example, Kidd's infamous hummocks were removed and some of the greens reworked. (The Castle jumped 11 places in the *Golfweek* rankings since 2013, perhaps indicating that it's growing in favor.) At Tetherow, the par-3 third green was softened by expanding the back-right portion. Kidd thinks that's a good fiscal lesson for developers: Don't blow up troublesome greens; make them bigger.

"You'll probably fix your problem and spend half the money," he says.

Tetherow is much less imposing than when it first opened, and Kidd would like ownership to further enhance playability by thinning the rough so that all errant shots can be advanced. Still, its first impression lingers. Kidd noted that locals took to calling Tetherow "Death Row." That nickname amused him, but he also admits to feeling "a little wounded."

"People would play Tetherow and say, 'It's such a cool-looking golf course, I really loved it, but I'm sorry to say my game's not good enough, so I won't be playing it again,'" Kidd recalls. "I would hear that over and over and over. And eventually I thought, 'What kind of (an ass) am I? Nobody ever says that to me about Bandon.'"

"So how do I get back to that? What did I do so right (at Bandon) that I didn't get right (elsewhere)?"

'LIVING IN A FANTASY WORLD'

When the recession hit in 2008, Kidd returned repeatedly to Bandon Dunes Resort, playing all of the golf courses, "deconstructing" the entire business – design, maintenance, operations – to try to understand why golfers love the place. He also talked to the caddies, asking about their players' average score.

"They all said 100. 100!" Kidd recalls. "As a designer, I was living in a fantasy world. . . . I've overestimated golfers my entire life."

Kidd already could sense that he was "pushing too hard" with some of his more radical designs, and those visits to Bandon confirmed it. He had read the reviews, talked to golfers, listened to people close to him, especially his father. His artistic nature sometimes obscures his pragmatic approach to business.

"I could be sitting in an ivory tower and say, 'I'm a golf course designer. It's an art.' But that's bullsh--," he says. "I'm in the entertainment business. If the vast majority don't enjoy what I produce, then I'm failing."

Kidd and his staff talk about green lights and red lights – holes that can be attacked, and others on which even the best players happily will accept par.

"Tetherow and The Castle are 200-acre red-light districts," Kidd says. "Eighteen pars would be a very good round for a good player."

But that got Kidd to wondering: "What happens if we give golfers 18 green lights?" That was his objective at Gamble Sands.

Kidd, P34 >>>

<<< Kidd, P33

To illustrate the shift in his thinking, Kidd asks a visitor to imagine a perfectly rectangular par 4 – 400 yards long, 200 yards wide. It's dead flat, no hazards, utterly devoid of features.

"What would the average player make if he played it 18 times?" Kidd asks. "He'd probably struggle to break 100. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe he'd struggle to break 85 or 90. But the logic of our business says if it was that easy, they'd shoot 50. And they wouldn't. Because the biggest hindrance to a golfer is himself. It's not the golf course. It's nothing I can do. When you hit a bad shot, it's got nothing to do with me. You did it to yourself."

Kidd began thinking about what he could do to help average players keep those errant shots in play, eliminate big numbers and – here's a crazy thought for an architect to voice – have more fun. In short, how could he replicate the Bandon experience?

On those trips to Bandon, Kidd broke down the concept of playability to its component parts. Start with fairway width; that promotes a confident tee shot.

"If I stand on a tee (during construction) and feel nervous or intimidated, I'll change the hole," he says. "If I stand on the tee and can't see a clear strategy, I'll change the hole."

Kidd also noticed that all of the resort's green tees topped out around 6,300 yards, so he accepted that figure as a good guide and made a mental note to make the regular tees bigger so they feel relatively important.

He noticed something counterintuitive: Bunkering inside the perimeter of the fairways "is the best way to make playable holes. The average golfer sees edge of fairway to edge of fairway, or rather he sees lost ball to lost ball. And everything in between, he's still going to be playing the hole."

Rough should allow players to find errant shots easily and advance them. And he wanted softer green contours and surrounds to promote better putting and more straightforward recovery shots.

Kidd's renewed focus on playability was evident with the 2010 opening of Huntsman Springs in Driggs, Idaho – another manufactured course on a pan-flat pasture, but this one with a restraint that hadn't been evident in some of his earlier work. Those who looked past the artful design found a course with generous fairways and gently contoured greens and surrounds. The response was immediate and positive; on Golfweek's Best Modern Courses list, Huntsman Springs is No. 23.

"At Huntsman Springs, I took my volume that was at 10 or 11, and I dialed it back to seven, and it came out better," Kidd says. "And that made me realize that if seven was really good, then let's dial it back to five and see how that works."

Kidd's next project, at Mukul Resort in Nicaragua, convinced Jimmy Kidd that his son had rediscovered his game.

PHOTO BY WOOD SABOLD



On a visit to that site, the elder Kidd recalls David telling him of his desire to make greens and fairways even bigger, with endless options to attack hole locations so that people of all ages and skill levels could enjoy his courses.

"I'm fed up being on the opposite side of the line from the golfer," Kidd says now. "I want to reposition myself on the same side of the line as the golfer."

'THE MAGIC ELIXIR'

Gamble Sands is the best example to date of that philosophical shift. The course is a new venture for family-owned Gebbers Farms, which operates 7,000 acres of orchards and 120,000 acres of cattle range. The family already had started developing a course five miles from Sands, and called in Orrin Vincent, chairman of OB Sports, to shepherd the project.

Vincent surveyed the early work on the first course, then asked if the family had any land that might accommodate links-style play. He reasoned that the family needed a course that would create excitement not just regionally, but nationally.

Cass Gebbers, the CEO and family patriarch, knew he had a special site – sand-based, high above the mighty Columbia River, with long views of the snow-capped North Cascades – but was holding it in reserve until he found the right person to develop it.

When Vincent visited that site, the first thing he recalls seeing was a huge sand blowout. Vincent asked how much land sat on sand. About 1,300 acres, came the reply. That's all Vincent needed to hear. He "called a timeout" on the first course and



The file: David McLay Kidd

Age: 46 **Born:** Johnstone, Scotland **Resides:** Bend, Ore.
Education: Writtle College, (HND, amenity horticulture), Chelmsford, England

Courses (opened)

- > Bandon Dunes, Bandon, Ore. (1999)
- > Queenwood, Ottershaw, England (2001)
- > Powerscourt (West), Enniskerry, Ireland (2003)
- > Nanea, Kialua-Kona, Hawaii (2003)
- > Fancourt (Montagu), George, South Africa (renovation, 2005)
- > TPC Stonebrae, Hayward, Calif. (2007)
- > The Castle Course, St. Andrews, Scotland (2008)
- > Tetherow, Bend, Ore. (2008)
- > Machrihanish Dunes, Machrihanish, Scotland (2009)
- > Huntsman Springs, Driggs, Idaho (2010)
- > Laucala Island, Laucala Island, Fiji (2010)
- > Guacalito de la Isla, Rivas, Nicaragua (2013)
- > Gamble Sands, Brewster, Wash. (August 2014)

Under development

- > Comporta Dunes, Comporta, Portugal (2015)
- > Beaverbrook (co-design with Tom Watson), Leatherhead, England (TBD)

plans were initiated to develop the Gamble Sands site.

Vincent recommended that the family interview two design candidates: Kidd and the team of Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw. Vincent had a hunch that Kidd would charm the Gebbers clan.

“He’s a great storyteller and he has the accent that fits with

the whole program here,” Vincent says.

Sure enough, Kidd’s pitch to Gebbers was almost lyrical.

“David told me he was going to build a course that would fall out of the sky and lay softly on the land,” Gebbers says.

As befits the dramatic high-desert landscape of central and eastern Washington, Vincent wanted a course that was expansive – big tees, big fairways, big bunkers, big greens – but also an easy walk. Kidd had the same idea. There are 115 acres of maintained fescue, and greens average 12,200 square feet.

Kidd says he and Casey Krahenbuhl, his senior design associate, had a simple objective at Gamble Sands: “This thing has to be super fun.”

During a two-day preview of the course last month, it immediately was clear that he had succeeded on that point.

When a mid-handicap playing partner hit a weak pull on his approach to the first green, Kidd chased after it, yelling, “You think that’s a sh-- shot. Wait until you get up there.” Sure enough, the ball had kicked off a 25-yard-long mound and fed onto the green for a routine two-putt par. More subtly, the fringe on No. 1 is gently canted upward to discourage weak fades from releasing into the front-right bunker.

The 261-yard, par-4 second, with its breathtaking panorama of the Columbia and North Cascades, is easily drivable, setting up realistic eagle opportunities. On the par-3 sixth, you can block it 40 yards right of the target and the mounding will kick the ball back to the front of the green. The par-3 16th has what Kidd calls “the world’s biggest backboard,” feeding balls into the center of the green. Even on the par-5 13th, where the third shot is blind, a poorly struck wedge shot will funnel safely onto the green. Anything less than a birdie on the par-5 18th is a missed opportunity.

If it sounds as though Kidd has made too many concessions to high-handicappers, consider that PGA Tour player Kevin Chappell last fall shot a pair of 68s from Gamble Sands’ medal tees – good scores, but nothing that suggests that the course is defenseless against top players.

But these days, Kidd is far less concerned with flummoxing great players than he is with entertaining mediocre ones. Early reviews of Gamble Sands have been glowing. During last month’s preview, the mood was festive, the excitement over the opening tangible – just as Kidd had hoped.

“Thank God, because that’s what happened at Bandon,” Kidd says. “And I thought I had lost the magic elixir. How am I going to get that back? I realized it’s there. I just had to think it through again.”

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