

THE EDUCATION OF AN ARCHITECT

WITH HELP FROM TRIPP DAVIS, JACK SKIRKANICH IS LEARNING THE ROPES—AND PIPES—OF HIS CHOSEN FIELD BY THOMAS DUNNE

From humble municipal layouts to the most exclusive private clubs, the Met Area is in the midst of a renovation and restoration renaissance. One architect who has been at the forefront of that movement for quite some time is Tripp Davis.

Tripp Davis (left) and Jack Skirkanich review plans.



"We're not just looking for a good idea, but the **best possible idea.**"
—Jack Skirkanich



Enter Jack Skirkanich.

Skirkanich was a leading New Jersey junior amateur when he was growing up in Rumson, runner-up in the Met Junior in 2000 and a Met Amateur finalist in 2001 when he lost to Johnson Wagner at Hudson National. In college he was a starter on Vanderbilt University's golf team for three years; he was a teammate of Brandt Snecker's.

Skirkanich graduated in 2005 with an economics degree, and like many ambitious young people who flock to New York after college, he put his golf life on the back burner. He lived in lower Manhattan with his girlfriend (now wife), and went to work for the Coleman Research Group, putting together information packages on the media and real estate sectors for banks and hedge funds. However, the game's magnetism gradually reasserted itself. "I loved the company," he said. "But it wasn't for me. I wanted to get outside."

Skirkanich was serving on the green committee at Rumson Country Club, the private establishment on the Jersey shore at which he'd grown up, when the club hired Tripp Davis in late 2011 as the consulting architect for its 1908 Herbert Barker design. (Barker, a top-flight player in the early 1900s, was the head pro at Garden City Golf Club on Long Island, Arcola Country Club in Paramus



Left: Tripp Davis uses a wood to level a course project in China. Below: Davis finishing a green at Old American Golf Club, north of Dallas.

Skirkanich eventually realized that he wanted to move from being on a country club green committee to working in an architecture firm. Davis was encouraging, but Skirkanich's skill on the links and interest only got him a foot in the door. "Playing on your college team and loving golf architecture isn't enough for a job in most firms," Davis said. "I strongly advised Jack to go back to school, not only to understand the design process, but also so that he'd be employable elsewhere if he ever needs a change."

Switching from the amateur to the professional side hasn't so much shifted Skirkanich's perspective on design, he said, as it has allowed it to evolve.

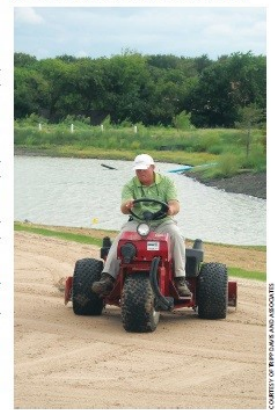
"It's interesting to be interacting from the other side of the table," he said. "Actually, a lot of good ideas come out of green committees. Many times, these are people who have been playing their courses for years and have a passion for the place." The difference is that the architect has the advantage of distance, and uses that as a filter. "Tripp can talk about all the nuances" of how any given suggestion might play out. "After all, we're not just looking for a good idea, but the *best possible idea*."

Skirkanich took his mentor's advice and is currently finishing up his master's degree in landscape architecture at Rutgers University. While he says he feels a bit like the black sheep of the program—

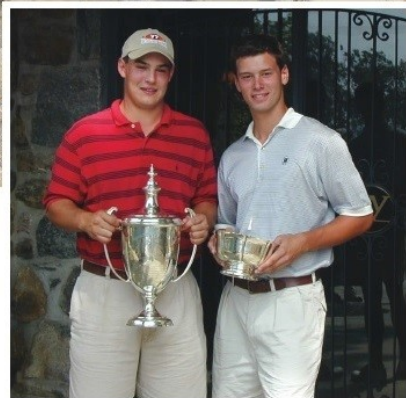
and Raritan Valley Country Club in Bridgewater, N.J., are among his other Met Area designs. He took special interest in collaborating with Davis on Rumson's master plan, which had added importance once the coastal club was hit by Hurricane Sandy. "I was reading one of Geoff Shackelford's books—I think it was *Grounds for Golf*," Skirkanich said, "and there was a line in there about how there's always one guy on the greens committee who thinks he's an architect. I really didn't want to overstep my bounds, but I was thinking hard about the potential of our club's property and how to take the course to the next level."

"Tripp was patient with me. It's amazing, given how much I badgered him, how good a listener he was. I saw how he was able to identify and incorporate good ideas, how he made those ideas functional, and how he balanced an understanding of the history of the club with what people want now."

Skirkanich also noted that he and Davis "fit an immediate player's kinship." Indeed, both are highly proficient golfers; Davis was an NCAA All-American and member of a national championship team at the University of Oklahoma, and he has been a fixture on the national amateur golf scene for years. (Among his victories are back-to-back titles with James Reidin in the Anderson Memorial at Winged Foot.) While one doesn't need to be a great golfer to be a great golf architect—Dr. Alistair MacKenzie and Tom Doak are proof positive—like tends to attract like. As Pete Dye—an excellent player in his own day—wrote in his autobiography, *Bury Me in a Pot Bunker*: "Whenever possible, I want [to hire] a good player who loves the game, since from the earliest days of design it's been recognized that one who knows how to play the game well has greater ability to produce courses of merit."



COURTESY OF BRITAINIA ASSOCIATES



Skirkanich in the field in 2015, and with Johnson Wagner (left) after Wagner defeated him in the Met Amateur final in 2001.

The Oklahoma-based Davis has been active in the area since 1999, when he signed on as consulting architect at Engineers Country Club, the 1917 Herbert Strong design in Roslyn, N.Y. Since then, he's conducted successful projects at a bushel of fine clubs—from Deepdale and Meadow Brook on Long Island, to Whippoorwill in Westchester, to Spring Lake Golf Club on the Jersey Shore.

"The Met Area has the greatest concentration of [classic] courses in the world," Davis said. And while his (partial) local résumé above is already impressive, "I've always wanted to develop a more solid presence up here," he added.



The 18th hole at Burning Tree Country Club in Greenwich, another of Davis's renovation projects in the Met Area.

most of his classmates are focused on parks and other urban community spaces—grad school has given him “not so much the everyday tools of golf architecture” but rather a foundation for thinking about design. In his day-to-day work with Davis, he's gained experience handling the nuts-and-bolts parts of the job—things like producing construction documents, drainage and grassing plans, and re-drawing topographical lines. If those aspects that are visible to the golfer playing a course—routing, shaping, and hole strategy, for example—can be thought of as the vocabulary of design, this is the grammar. It's every bit as important as the stuff that gets discussed by the golf community at large. The best architects, of course, are able to take vocabulary and grammar and turn it into style, melding the art and science into a unified whole.

“It's just another part of the process,” Skirkanich said. “You ask yourself if something is technically feasible, and you quickly find out how much things really cost—what can be done on a given budget. It's so much fun to be out in the field, letting your mind's eye run wild, and then running home and sketching it all out. It's inspiring. [But] you can get overly wrapped up in how things look. I'd like to become a full-time project manager for Tripp, so this will enable my suggestions to be grounded in solid technical reasoning. And I'm starting to learn how you can build creativity into that side of the job.” After all, while most firms (including Davis's) have a familiar crew of shapers on hand, a lot of holes and courses are built by

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third-party contractors. With that in mind, Skirkanich added, “You have to be really good at those construction documents, because that's what the builder sees. That's how you get your vision in the ground.”

While winter slows most golfers down, Skirkanich is keeping busy, converting sheaves of Davis's drawings into digital renderings in preparation for a major renovation job at the Northwood Club in Dallas, where Julius Boros out-duded Ben Hogan for the 1952 U.S. Open title. Later in the year, Davis intends to deploy Skirkanich on another job close to his Oklahoma base, a bunker and tee renovation at Tulsa's Cedar Ridge Country Club, a 1969 Joe Finger design. The two men intend to continue making their presence felt here in the Met Area, both as players and designers. “One of the reasons we've consistently gotten projects here has been through golf—being a part of the competitive scene,” Davis said, “But it's also been through doing great work.” As this issue was going to press, Davis emailed to mention that the team had just landed a new job, at Rolling Hills Country Club in Wilton, Conn., an Alfred Tull layout that he described as “one of the best hidden gems I've ever seen.”

Like any associate in a golf architecture firm, Skirkanich would love to put his stamp on a virgin piece of ground someday, but he's pragmatic about the time it takes to get there. “Sure, I have a fantasy of building something on the cliffs of some far-off land,” he said. “But that's so far down the road. And I also know that Mike Keisers are few and far between.”

Conversation quickly returns to the subject of restoration. It's clear that the project at Rumson gave Skirkanich a taste for this side of the business. Like other young architects and shapers working in the area, he sees it as a continuation of his architectural education. “I couldn't be more excited to be getting into the business right now,” Skirkanich said. “Having grown up in the Met, I know what an amazing opportunity it is to go into these clubs. Sometimes people overlook the fact that these courses are typically on really good properties. With every new project, you get to study a great architect at a certain point in his design life. It doesn't really feel like work. For me, this is the best place to be.” ■