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HAWKS RIDGE

The Ultimate Dream Course

BY DEREK DUNCAN

Living THE Dream

» *The excellence of Hawks Ridge is the culmination of a dream shared by two business partners. The facility continues to set a high bar for high-end golf clubs to meet.*



MOST SERIOUS GOLFERS HAVE FANTASIZED,

if only in passing, about designing their own golf course, but for almost all of us the idea will forever remain in the realm of fantasy. For **Joe Jillson** and **Mike Nixon**, business partners and avid players, golf's ultimate dream became reality when they founded and built **Hawks Ridge Golf Club** near Ball Ground, about an hour north of downtown Atlanta.

Jillson and Nixon first conceived of creating their own golf course in the mid-1990s after they sold a large share of their national subcontracting materials company, Q.I. Corp. Suddenly, they were in the rare financial position to not merely construct a golf course, but to create an invitation-only golf club that might be viewed among the finest facilities in the Southeast.

Hawks Ridge opened in late 1999 to great accolades, quickly soaring into the upper tier of Atlanta-area luxury clubs. The **Bob Cupp**-designed course steadily gained a reputation for difficulty, beauty and ideal putting greens, widely recognized as among the purest in the region for speed and quality.

Now entering its 18th year, Hawks Ridge remains a cutting-edge golf course and premium membership experience despite a period of recession-inflicted stagnation and changing golf demographics.

After weathering the worst of the golf industry's recalibrations the club is once again bullish about its future. Hawks Ridge will host a U.S. Open Sectional Qualifier on June 5, the sixth time it has

been the event's site. *Golf Georgia* spoke with the individuals responsible for the creation and development of Hawks Ridge — here is the story, in their own words.

» *Jillson and Nixon, originally from the Northeast, operated their company from headquarters in Tennessee and Connecticut, respectively, before relocating to Atlanta in 1987.*

JOE JILLSON: We found we had to fly through Atlanta to get to most of our branch locations, so we relocated there to make it more efficient for us to travel.

» *Work and family obligations prevented Jillson from taking up golf until he was 40. One of his first exposures to the game was at a Golf Digest golf school featuring instructors **Hank Johnson, Peter Kostis, Dick Aultman, Davis Love and Jim Flick.***

JILLSON: It was a pretty good group of guys. Generally, you only get one or two of (those instructors) but this particular school had them all there.

» *An extensive travel schedule enabled Jillson and Nixon to play many of America's greatest courses.*

JILLSON: Mike had started playing golf five or six years prior to me, and he had encouraged me to play. Being in business, golf is a good venue to do business and find business opportunities. We got to see a lot of places.

» *Around 1996, Jillson and Nixon sold off 50 percent of their business. It was then that their conversations about building their own golf course turned serious.*

MIKE NIXON: We both had a passion for golf and wanted to do something outside the scope of what our normal business

was. We were interested in trying to build a golf course as well as we could do it, independent of the considerations of real estate and the things that normally drive those developments.

JILLSON: We'd been kicking around the idea of building our own golf course for a long time, and we finally decided, let's do it.

» *The first order of business was to find a suitable Atlanta-area property. The location of a 270-acre property near GA-400 was intriguing, but they couldn't reach an agreement with the owner. Ultimately, they were able to assemble a 550-acre parcel of heavily wooded land around Dean Lake, about eight miles southeast of the small town of Ball Ground.*

NIXON: The Ball Ground property was inviting because it was: what can an architect do with 550 acres and no restrictions — no homes, no streets, no anything?

JILLSON: We were very fortunate in selecting that property. (It) was all woods...but I guess we thought with 550 acres we would certainly be able to build an adequate golf course.

» **Jim Dusch**, *Golf Course Superintendent*, joined Hawks Ridge in 1997 as the site was being cleared.

JIM DUSCH: It was nice, north Georgia rolling hills with a good mix of hardwoods and pine trees. We didn't move that much dirt — maybe 300,000 or 400,000 yards. In the scheme of things it was a minimal earth-move since the lay of the land was so good.

NIXON: I think we have a better piece of property now, but the 400 location



NO. 16, PAR 3, 213 YARDS

would have been an easier sell to prospective members.

» *Arguably, the most difficult step was selecting an architect to design and build the course. Jillson and Nixon interviewed Tom Fazio, Rees Jones, Robert Trent Jones II and Bob Cupp.*

JILLSON: We gave them each a topo map and they all came back with a routing. It was a difficult decision. What was unique about Bob Cupp was that he gave us about 28 different routings for Hawks Ridge.

NIXON: We [also] asked each potential architect to take us to what they considered to be their best, most recent golf course. Unfortunately for us, Cupp said, 'I want to take you to Pumpkin Ridge.' I said, 'Where the hell is that? Portland, Oregon? Can you pick one farther away?' (*Laughs*). But that was a worthwhile trip because it was on the higher end (of) anything I'd seen of his. We played out there and that convinced me that he could do what we were looking to do.

JILLSON: He was just an artist. He could envision things others couldn't.

» *Despite not being as familiar with him or his work, Jillson and Nixon decided to hire Cupp, who passed away in August 2016 after battling pancreatic cancer, to build the golf course, practice facility and a short par-3 course.*

JILLSON: Mike and I laid out a bunch of (Cupp's) routings on a big conference table, and there were two we liked most. We took one nine from one routing and another nine from another. It was a difficult challenge for us, not being architecturally blessed, but we knew what we wanted to

see. Once we selected the final routing, Bob put it together for us. The routing is titled SK-18, and it's dated July 15, 1997.

BOB CUPP [TO LINKS MAGAZINE IN 2000]: I'm lucky to have had the job. Everybody in the business wanted this job. » *Jillson and Nixon cite highly regarded parkland courses like Winged Foot, Muirfield Village (which Cupp helped build while working for Jack Nicklaus), Firestone and Augusta National (where Cupp also oversaw a number of renovations) as inspirations for Hawks Ridge's design aesthetic.*

NIXON: We knew we wanted it to be very manicured, very clean and open, not where you lose a ball in deep grass. We wanted a variety of holes...so you would remember each one clearly — no holes that run together.

JILLSON: We're traditionalists, so it had to be a more traditional layout versus a rough look with a lot of wild grasses.

CUPP [TO LINKS]: It's somewhere between Muirfield Village, Pumpkin Ridge and Augusta National. It's all three of those. It's Augusta National with hardwood trees.

» *PGA golf professional Ryan Joyce joined Hawks Ridge in 2002.*

RYAN JOYCE: It's one of the greatest golf courses I've ever played, and I've been to some great places. There's no repetition and no predictability. Cupp did such a good job putting the holes where he did with the winds and the topography and elevation. You're not going to get the same shots day to day.

JILLSON: You know, we gave Bob 550 acres and told him, build the best golf

course you can, the rest we'll develop. A lot of developers take the best property for the (homes) and build the golf course on the remainder. That was not our thinking process.

» *Hawks Ridge offers about 80 home sites, most undeveloped, though they were parceled after the course was constructed.*

JILLSON: We were blessed to have Bob Cupp. He was a great guy to work with, and he was out here all the time. Most architects don't make that many trips to the golf course, but Bob, being local, spent a lot of time at Hawks Ridge. Much more than anyone else would have.

CUPP [TO LINKS]: I'd have to say it's my consummate effort.

» *Throughout construction, Jillson and Nixon provided input into the design, including suggesting lengthening the course's famous 15th, a beguiling short par-4 where an iron or fairway wood off the tee sets up a 90-degree pitch shot across an attractive stone-walled pond into a narrow green sloped dangerously toward the water. Many a club championship has been won and lost here.*

» *One recurring gremlin, however, was the par-5 18th, a hole that plays from an elevated tee complex and wraps around the edge of Dean Lake. Cupp realized a week before opening the green was pitched too severely toward the water.*

JILLSON: We were hitting flop shots into 18 and couldn't get the balls to hold. So we ripped [it] up a week before opening and Bob redesigned it with a different configuration (that) wasn't sloped quite so much.



NO. 18, PAR 5, 528 YARDS

» *That helped, but the hole still was not perfect.*

NIXON: We've probably rebuilt 18 at least five times. But I'm at peace with it now.

» *As the club began to receive play, conversations about it centered on its exclusivity and lavish maintenance program. It also garnered a reputation as a player's club, a place with an above average number of low handicap members, where one never has to look long for a game. The course is indeed a brute, with a 150 slope and 76.1 rating at only 7,209 yards. Big numbers lurk everywhere.*

JOYCE: Everybody that comes out here for the first time sees 6 (a 319-yard downhill hole with a small green fronted by bunkers and a creek) as a potentially drivable par-4, and they have to give it a try. You know, if you never try, you'll never know. But half the people who do can't find their golf ball after they hit it.

» *Joyce also says the 10th green is one of the most deceptive and difficult greens on the course to hit due to its bunkering, elevation above the fairway and swirling winds.*

JOYCE: You get beat up on 10 and then you've got to go try and hit that drive on 11. There's a little two-and-a-half to three-foot wide creek on the right side and you're thinking, there's no way I can hit it in there, but it gobbles up more balls than you can imagine. There's no telling what your mind will do when you're standing on that tee.

» *Specifically impressive to guests and raters is the collection of speedy bentgrass putting surfaces that keep you off balance with a diverse assortment of sizes, slopes and orientations. Dusch keeps them at 11 to 12 feet on the Stimpmeter on an average day and can get them up to 13 or 14 for special events.*

JILLSON: We're always advocates of good green conditions. We believe that's the lasting impression. We always kept that in mind and the greens at Hawks Ridge have always been in very, very good shape.

DUSCH: Mike and Joe's expectations are very high. We probably double-cut, roll and tinker with them more than the average course. Basically, if Joe and Mike think the greens are good, I know the members and other golfers will think they're good.

» *Lifted by lovely, diverse holes, a pristine environment and impeccable conditions, Hawks Ridge cracked Golf Digest's 100 Greatest Courses list in 2005, coming in at No. 81, two spots behind East Lake Golf Club (Hawks Ridge made the 2007–2008 list as well before dropping off in 2009).*

DUSCH: I believe it's the only course in Georgia that's ever made *Golf Digest's* Top 100 in its first year of eligibility.

» *When the course opened in late 1999, golf was experiencing an unsustainable boom, with hundreds of courses being developed each year. Over 360 opened in 2001 alone, roughly one a day. Golf's future — along with Hawks Ridge's — seemed unlimited.*

Few foresaw how the coming decline in numbers of players and rounds, the crash of the real estate market and the economic recession would reshape the fate of virtually every golf course in the country.

NIXON: [When] we opened we were pretty fussy about being invitation only. We wanted to maintain the "aura" that we spent (so much) money to produce. It was a totally different time. We weren't envisioning an eight-year recession or the impact that [it] would have on the country and on golf...It's too bad we ran into

that because without it I think we would have had a chance to do more of what we wanted to do with memberships. That's not a regret, but it's an obstacle we ran into that I didn't expect.

JILLSON: The enthusiasm for golf has not come back yet to where it was. (We're) doing a great job getting members, but I think there's a generation now that just doesn't want to spend that much time playing golf. There are so many things people can do now, and we're competing in an arena that we didn't have to 20 years ago.

NIXON: We never set out to make money with Hawks Ridge — we'd thought to break even would be an admirable goal, and to try to make it the best place we could for people to come and play golf and enjoy it. I still think that's our attitude.

» *Nevertheless, renewed excitement abounds at Hawks Ridge about where the club is positioned, about its first-class facilities and what the future holds. Ryan Joyce points out good news in the surge in construction in the north market from Cumming to Canton and the expansion of major roads connecting the nearby communities.*

JOYCE: Joe and Mike picked a wonderful spot, and at one point we're going to be right in the middle of it all. We like to keep ourselves kind of quiet — we're a little club up here in Ball Ground that people whisper about — but I hope people read this and realize Hawks Ridge is a place they need to come see somehow, whether through an event or through a friend. Because what we try to do is take care of members like no place they've ever seen. **GG**

Derek Duncan is a freelance writer based in Atlanta and a frequent contributor to Golf Georgia.