

By John Maginnes

# A Conversation with Kris Spence

## KRIS SPENCE IS KNOWN AS A

"Donald Ross Restoration Specialist," a title to which he smiles and is eager to point out that there are "a few of us." And that is just how Kris is, ready to deflect attention away from himself. His efforts in that regard have been in vain. He has been praised and awarded for his work on some of Donald Ross' great golf courses. Kris has been at the helm of the renovations and restorations at Greensboro CC, Forsyth CC, Cape Fear CC in Wilmington, and Sedgfield CC, host of the Wyndham Championship, to name a few.

When you meet with Kris at his office in a nondescript office park near the airport in Greensboro, you may be in for a bit of a surprise. "We've been here for a couple of years. Maybe we ought to hang some pictures," Kris says to me as we are walking out the door for lunch.

There are two things interesting about that statement. The first is that Kris can be forgiven for his lack of interior decorating talents. His exterior decorating more than makes up for it. And second, Kris begins every story with the word "we," even though when we left the office there wasn't another soul there.

Kris is a natural born storyteller and his story is unique at least in the context of the present day. He didn't study landscape engineering in college like so many of his colleagues; he came from the golf course superintendent side

of things. He started in the early 80s at Atlantic Athletic Club before he was hired by the owners of Forest Oaks CC, which was then host to the GGO (now the Wyndham Championship). "We hosted a PGA Tour event when I was only 23, which was cool. Later on we needed to rebuild some bunkers and a couple of greens and we kept it in-house and it turned out okay," Kris says of his start in golf course architecture.

That is when Kris says he "got the bug" for golf course design and construction and went to work with Jack Nicklaus's group building and opening the Governor's Club outside of Raleigh. From there he was hired by Greensboro CC, which at the time had 36 holes in need of renovation. At the Irving Park Course, a Donald Ross design, Kris said, "We started dabbling, moving a bunker here, taking out a bunker there that they didn't like, and it just snowballed into a full-blown renovation."

From there, Kris left Greensboro CC and embarked on a career as a builder, designer, and golf course architect. His company can do everything from the master plan to the simplest renovation, and he says that is what has sustained them. It has also given him the opportunity to work with some of the biggest names in the business.

When the subject of Sedgfield comes up, Kris gets a gleam in his eye. "Originally, we had two sets of plans that

contradicted each other," he says. He recalls a meeting at which the general manager just happened to mention that they had come across some old papers. Kris asked the manager to retrieve them. These documents turned out to be the final and definitive plans that Ross used to design Sedgfield.

"Sedgfield was going to be a 36-hole facility with an equestrian area. Later they decided to scrap the second 18 and make it a neighborhood. For example the 11th hole was originally routed on top of the hill to the right where the houses are. When Ross moved the fairway down on the side of the hill, he created a fairway that leans one way and a shot that has to go the other way."

Kris recently finished a renovation of the Dogwood Course at Country Club of North Carolina in Pinehurst, and he continues to work throughout the country. When you look at the work that Kris Spence and his team have done over the past two decades, you have to be impressed. Not bad for a greenskeeper who started dabbling. Then again, Donald Ross got his start as a greenskeeper — and so did Old Tom Morris. That puts Kris in pretty good company — and maybe that's the "we" he's referring to.

*John Maginnes is a former PGA player and hosts the popular Katrek & Maginnes on Tap on broadcast on the PGA Tour Satellite Radio Network.*

