

CATCHING UP WITH...JOHN FOUGHT

Before Becoming A Successful Golf Course Architect, He Won The 1977 U.S. Amateur

By Ken Klavon, USGA

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After winning the 1977 U.S. Amateur title, John Fought (left) competed on the PGA Tour against the likes of 1980 U.S. Amateur champion Hal Sutton (center) and two-time Masters winner Ben Crenshaw, who like Fought, has enjoyed a successful career as a golf course architect. (Courtesy John Fought)

If not for 1976, there might never have been a 1977 U.S. Amateur Championship victory for John Fought. At the Bel-Air Country Club in '76, Fought faced off against James T. Mason in the quarterfinal round of the U.S. Amateur and had him on the ropes, 2 up with three holes to play. Then the bottom fell out.

"That was painful," said Fought, now 58, and 35 years removed from that USGA championship victory. "I felt so empty. What was I thinking? I made a couple of mistakes, made a couple of three-putts. And I got to the last hole of that match and drove it straight into the fairway and I had mud on my ball and I fretted over it. I was like, 'Oh my gosh, what am I going to do? I ended up making a bad shot, making bogey and losing the match.'"

The loss inspired Fought to come back the next year, needing one class to complete his degree at Brigham Young University. He opted to remain an amateur; he finished school and decided to see if he was ready to move on to the professional level. He reeled off 22 straight match-play victories, won the Trans-Mississippi and was chosen to play on the USA Walker Cup Team, which came before the U.S. Amateur. He went 4-0 in his matches to help the USA defeat Great Britain and Ireland.

The next week he was on his way to Aronimink Golf Club in Newtown Square, Pa., for the U.S. Amateur.

“When I got to the Amateur, I’ll never forget, I was so tired,” said Fought, who grew up in Portland, Ore.

In 1977, the Amateur had 200 on-site entrants and was contested entirely at match play, which meant more than 50 players received first-round byes. Fought was fortunate to get a bye.

“Had I not gotten that first-round bye,” said Fought, “I don’t know, it would have been tough.”

The extra day off allowed him to recharge his batteries. Fought defeated, in order, Bill Manor, of Garland, Texas; Michael Peck, of Prairie Village, Kan.; Douglas Clarke, of La Jolla, Calif.; Michael Kelley, a member of the Great Britain and Ireland Walker Cup Team; Vinny Giles, the 1972 Amateur champion; and in the semi-final round, Aronimink member Jay Sigel, Fought’s teammate on the 1977 Walker Cup Team who would go on to win two U.S. Amateur titles and play in a USA Team-record nine Walker Cups.



John Fought beat Doug Fischesser to win the 1977 U.S. Amateur. (USGA Museum)

Fought played the last nine holes against Sigel in even par to win, 2 up. Fought recalled stepping on the tee and seeing four people deep lining the ropes. “And nobody, of course, was pulling for me. My wife [Mary] was in the crowd, we were newly married, and she was pulling for me. Man, that was scary. I was like, ‘I hope they have security out here. I’ll get beat up if I’m not careful.’”

When they got to the last hole, with Fought 1 up, he encountered a sense of déjà vu. Fought hit his tee shot in the middle of the fairway, only to find the ball covered with mud, just like the 1976 quarterfinal. Fought told himself he wasn’t going to do what he did the previous year. He hunkered down and struck a 6-iron to within 3 feet of the flagstick. Sigel put his approach shot in the front bunker. Sigel blasted out but not close enough, and he conceded the match.

“I went to the Walker Cup reunion when it was held in Philadelphia,” said Fought, “and [Sigel] was like, ‘You wouldn’t have beaten me that day, on and on and I was like, ‘Jay, get over it. It was 30-something years ago.’ Jay is a fabulous player and I was fortunate to beat him.”

In the 36-hole final, Fought defeated Doug Fischesser, of Connersville, Ind., 9 and 8. It was the largest margin of victory since 1955, when Harvie Ward defeated Bill Hyndman by the same score. At the 18-hole break, Fought was 6 up and recalled that he was leading the Oregon Junior Championship by that same margin at lunch. He became overconfident that day and lost the match. He was determined not to let that happen again.

Mike Reid, 57, a longtime PGA Tour and Champions Tour player who played with Fought at BYU and remains a close friend, wasn’t surprised to see Fought win the Amateur.

“I would describe John’s game as well-balanced,” Reid said. “He could really drive the ball consistently, but he was a streaky putter. In practice, we’d play together and John would help me understand how to pick good targets on every shot.”

While at BYU, Fought helped the Cougars win four Western Athletic Conference Championships and 29 tournament titles, along with a runner-up finish to Oklahoma State in the 1976 NCAA Championship. But it is winning the Amateur and the thrill of getting advice from Ben Hogan on several occasions that he counts as his most precious golf memories.

After the Amateur, Fought earned his PGA Tour card on his third attempt, and tried to make a go of it on Tour. He had a breakthrough rookie season in 1979, winning the Buick Goodwrench Open and Anheuser-Busch Golf Classic in consecutive weeks.

Family obligations eventually took over. Fought and his wife began raising a family, which includes two daughters and a son, but he began to battle injuries and became disillusioned. By age 33, he was off the PGA Tour.

“If you weren’t in the top 10, you weren’t making much money at all,” said Fought, the PGA Tour’s rookie of the year in 1979.

In 1985, Fought suffered a spine injury, and later a hand injury that derailed his career.

“When I hurt myself in the summer of 1985, I ended up having a spine injury that took me a long time to get fixed. It wasn’t as though you had these millions of dollars in savings. Back then you didn’t make any money. One bad year could kill you.”

While beating balls in Memphis, Tenn., Fought hurt the C-5 and C-6 vertebrae in his neck. When he got to the locker room, he couldn’t look down to see his feet. In the early 1990s, he underwent surgery, which took him three years to recover from.

At BYU, Reid picked up on another one of Fought’s loves.

“He was very intense,” said Reid. “I went to the room after practicing because I couldn’t find John anywhere, and when I walked in, I saw John with all these architectural drawings.”

While Fought was playing on the Tour, Jack Nicklaus introduced him to his senior designer, Bob Cupp. Fought and Cupp would work together about seven years on a number of projects. Worried that Cupp was closing in on retirement, Fought ended up forming his own company: John Fought Design.

Notable John Fought Golf Course Designs

- *-Pumpkin Ridge (Witch Hollow & Ghost Creek courses)
- *-Sunriver Golf Resort (Crosswater)
- Sunriver Golf Resort (Meadows Course)
- The Gallery (North and South courses)
- The Reserve Vineyards & G.C. (South Course)
- Rush Creek Golf Course
- Raven Golf Club
- Washington National Golf Club
- *-*With Bob Cupp*

He is an aficionado of golf's Golden Age of architecture. The library in his Scottsdale, Ariz., office boasts some of the most impressive books from that age. "I have a special affinity for [Donald] Ross because I won the Amateur on one of his courses. I love [A.W.] Tillinghast and all those guys. I've read a lot about them. ... They had such a feel for golf. They understood the game. I still believe that's something that is important. I know we went through an era where we turned out landscape architects and they did all the golf course design, but they didn't understand the game. It's not just a decorating exercise."

Fought admitted that he had no idea he'd be doing golf course design while getting an accounting degree at BYU. But it's not hard to see his passion when discussing golf course design.

"Landscape architecture is only part of what you do. What we do is engineering. ... I always felt to be good at design you needed three ingredients:

"One, you need to have the technical knowledge. How to prepare plans. How drainage works. The different elements like grassing. Nobody's an expert at grassing. That's why we have agronomists who are schooled at that. You need to be able to plan a golf course from start to finish and build it and understand it.

"Two, I think you have to have imagination. It's critical you have an imagination to be able to see it before it is developed.

"Last thing and one of the most important things is you need to be able to have a great understanding of golf, its history and all those things. Where would we be if you didn't have any historical perspective in the game of golf?"

He has strong opinions on green courses.

"Perfectly green is not the best," he said. "The USGA has pushed very hard for that. Some people call it firm and fast. ... Golf courses are overwatered. It's so funny, people go over to Scotland and Ireland and they love it. That's about as far from perfectly green as you can get."

Fought's first major foray into golf course design came when he worked with Cupp on the design of the two courses at Pumpkin Ridge in North Plains, Ore., which hosted the 1996 U.S. Amateur, 1997 and 2003 U.S. Women's Opens and 2000 U.S. Junior Championships. He went on to complete a restoration of Pine Needles, a Ross course in Southern Pines, N.C., that has hosted three U.S. Women's Opens (1996, 2001 and 2007) as well as the 1989 U.S. Girls' Junior. His designs also include the South course at The Reserve Vineyards & Golf Club in Aloha, Ore., The Gallery North and South courses in Tucson, Ariz.; Raven Golf Club at Verrado, Buckeye, Ariz.; Crosswater at Sunriver Resort and The Meadows at Sunriver Resort in Ore. (2002 U.S. Women's Amateur Public Links); Washington National Golf Club in Auburn, Wash.; and Rush Creek Golf Club in Maple Grove, Minn. (2004 U.S. Amateur Public Links)

Asked whether he's proudest of one design, Fought said it's like asking which of his children he likes best.

"Windsong Farm Golf Club [in Independence, Minn.] was a fun project," he said. "Great piece of land. Pumpkin Ridge was special to me because it was my hometown and I was working with Bob Cupp at the time.

"The Gallery at Tucson was probably as enjoyable as any project I worked on because I worked with people I really liked."

These days Fought stays active designing, spending time with his grandchildren and playing in the occasional Champions Tour event. He doesn't play more often simply because he'd rather devote time to design. He's not fully exempt, but even if he was, he wouldn't give up his design business.

"I just love design," he said. "I love everything about it. I love golf course design more than anything I've ever done. Ever! Including playing. I loved playing. It was a great high, but I love the process of golf architecture. I like being able to meet other people who are passionate about it. I like the opportunity of taking just a piece of land and turning it into something incredible. To me, that's the most fun."

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