

Golf World®

John Fought abandoned life on the PGA Tour to become a golf course architect—and he has never looked back

By Lorne Rubenstein



Second Career, First Love

THE SEVENTH HOLE AT THE GALLERY'S SOUTH COURSE, 20 miles northwest of Tucson, is a 349-yard par 4 with a deep bunker in the middle of the fairway. John Fought, the 1977 U.S. Amateur champion, a two-time winner on the PGA Tour and the course's designer, finds himself there one gleaming winter morning. The 51-year-old Fought (pronounced "Foat") has flown the red-eye from Hawaii, where he finished T-49 in the Turtle Bay Championship on the Champions Tour. He is doing double duty at The Gallery: as an architect who analyzes features with the eyes of a tour player, and as a golfer who views them through the lens of an architect. But which identity dominates?

The fairway to the right of the deep bunker provides the best angle into the green, while it is possible to drive the green if one takes an angle along the far left side of the fairway. Fought has

done it. But desert scrub and a bunker astride that corner of the green threaten an errant drive. The tee shot requires thought and provides options—a Fought trademark he learned from

immersing himself in the designs of Donald Ross in particular. Some people, though, think the bunker in the middle is unfair.

"Everybody wanted me to take this bunker out," Fought says. "I said we should leave it. I like this strategic part of the game. It's fun."

Fought loves his work as an architect. He also has recovered enough from injuries that forced him off the tour when he was 33 to play again. He retains limited eligibility on the Champions Tour because of his wins on the PGA Tour. He turned 50 in January 2004, but played only three Champions Tour events, his best finish a T-70 in the MasterCard Classic. Fought doesn't like playing poorly, but he knows it is difficult if not impossible to serve the twin masters of architecture and tour golf properly.

"When I go to a tournament I see [Hale]



John Fought

Irwin and I say to myself, 'Hey, I'm gonna kick his butt,'" Fought says. "But of course that's not the case. You have to choose what you are. I can't hand off my design work to someone else. I'd love to play well when I do play, but it's not everything to me."

An Oregonian who lives in Paradise Valley near Phoenix, Fought was the PGA Tour Rookie of the Year in 1979 after winning the Buick-Goodwrench Open and Anheuser-Busch Golf Classic in consecutive weeks. *Golf Digest* also named him its rookie of the year. Tired of the grind and worn down by a series of injuries, he was off the tour after the 1987 season. He turned to architecture, an interest that developed while he played competitively.

Fought recently restored Pine Needles in Southern Pines, N.C., which hosted the 1996 and 2001 U.S. Women's Opens (and will again in 2007). The Ross course opened in 1928 but had become compromised over the years. Fairway contours and green sizes had changed. Trees had grown where Ross didn't mean them to intrude, and the course was too short for modern golf. Ross designed a number of holes asking players to drive to the tops of plateaus and ridges, then hit long to mid-irons into the greens. Today's golfer was driving beyond those areas.

Golf, Tom Kite once said, is the "onliest" game. Tour golf requires plenty of ego, and play-

ers learn to be selfish. But restoring a classic course requires an architect to resist imposing his own views. "I was there to make everything play in scale again," Fought says. "Sometimes I had to move a bunker to a new position to restore the shot values. My job was trying to figure out exactly what Mr. Ross was trying to do. That was fun for me and intellectually stimulating. I love his work so much, and I studied it so closely, that it wasn't a problem for me to try to think what he would have wanted today."

While playing the restored layout last fall,

**"When you win,
you're on a drug.
... But this,
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I can come back,
and I never get
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JOHN FOUGHT

Fought said he had been there so often "I felt like the ghost of Mr. Ross was with me. That's powerful. I thought I knew so much about Ross. But I knew so little until I got here and felt what he was doing. I told my shapers I wanted

the course to look like they did their work with horses and drag pans, not machines. We feel really good about what we've accomplished. I think Ross would be pleased."

Fought began to play at Portland's Tualatin CC, a narrow, tree-lined course designed by H. Chandler Egan, the 1904 and '05 U.S. Amateur champion, when he was 12 and his parents joined the club. Fought often played it backward and across. The 17th and 18th holes at Tualatin played in opposite directions, with no trees between them. Fought played from a position near 18 green back to 17 so a bunker intervened. "I thought that was cool, because I could use that long bunker as a cross-bunker," Fought recalls. "Or I'd play a downhill hole the other way so it was uphill. I realized that was no fun, playing uphill and blind."

A natural golfer who could hit the ball far and who had a deft feel for the clubface, Fought also had an artistic bent. When he was 12, his piano teacher told him she thought he had more talent than any pupil she had seen. But he didn't like to practice. She asked him what he planned to do. He told her he might become a professional athlete.

Fought's father, John Sr., an accountant, was a fine athlete. Like his son, he still uses a Bulls Eye putter—for purists only. He was deeply involved in his son's golf, which wasn't easy on

Fought: A man with a plan

YOU could scratch every reference to John Fought's brief career on the PGA Tour and it wouldn't make a bit of difference to his present stature as a golf course architect. He paid his design dues not on practice ranges or in press rooms, but at drafting tables and construction sites.

Fought wasn't one of those tour players steered by an agent into design projects just for the money. He was a rare one, a player who developed a genuine passion for architecture and converted that passion into a successful second career.

The passion was evident early. In late 1987 Fought entered *Golf Digest*'s original Armchair Architect contest, submitting several entries, all variations on a finishing hole for an imaginary U.S. Open course. One Fought entry (right) was a finalist in the competition, demonstrating his artistic talent—a graphic rendering worthy of any practitioner—and his creativity. His was a 464-yard par 4 featuring a double fairway, random bunkering, an enormous multi-level green edged by water and even a windmill.

He didn't win, but soon put his skills to use in the office of architect Bob Cupp, not as a fee-splitting tour-pro consultant but as a salaried employee eager to learn the many facets of design that only grunt work can truly provide.

Like any serious student, Fought spent his spare time study-

ing. In 1993 Fought made a trip east to explore the nuances of Winged Foot, Quaker Ridge, Garden City, Shinnecock Hills and National GL, and it has since been reflected in his work, with one Fought design sporting a Tillinghast theme, another more akin to the principles of C.B. Macdonald.

Fought learned much when Cupp put him in charge of revisions to his old home course, Tualatin CC in Oregon, where he had to deal not just with technical issues like drainage, but emotional ones like members resistant to all change. Fought's years with Cupp were misrepresented, too often trumpeting him as a design equal instead of an employee. But that wasn't Fought's fault. The blame lies with course owners and golf writers (including this one) who were only too eager to latch onto the former tour-pro-turned-architect storyline as a surefire way of attracting attention.

From a marquee standpoint, Fought never will approach the level of Jack Nicklaus or Arnold Palmer, legendary golfers whose recognizable names, even among nongolfers, help sell homesites along fairways. But the artistry of his work, the strategies and flexibility of his golf holes, places him amid Ben Crenshaw and Tom Weiskopf among that small cadre of players more interested in architecture than applause.

—Ron Whitten

either. "I banned my dad from watching me for 10 years when I was an amateur," Fought, the eldest of six children, says. "He wanted to tell me what to do. I couldn't take that. He's independent, and so am I. But I've always had tremendous respect for my dad and modeled a lot of my life after him."

The younger Fought's game caught Johnny Miller's eye. Fought, like Miller, is a Mormon. He went to Brigham Young University, Miller's alma mater, and studied accounting. His teammates on the Cougar golf team included Pat McGowan, Mike Reid and Jim Nelford.

"Not everybody liked John in college," Nelford says of his single-minded teammate. "He related to a very few select people." Karl Tucker, then the golf coach at BYU, remembers Fought as "having that little swagger around him. John always told me to give him the toughest guy to play against. He had a way of putting his game out there."

Fought reached the quarterfinals of the 1976 U.S. Amateur and later that year played for the U.S. in the World Amateur Team Championships in Portugal. In the summer of 1977, Fought was on a U.S. Walker Cup team including Scott Simpson, Jay Sigel and Fred Ridley that defeated Great Britain & Ireland 16-8 at Shinnecock Hills. At the U.S. Amateur the next week, Fought was 1 up against Sigel playing the 18th hole in their semi-

OF COURSES

John Fought was asked to pick his top five architects and their work he liked best.

1. **DONALD ROSS** Pinehurst No. 2
"Patriarch of course architecture in U.S. I never tire of studying or playing his courses."
2. **HARRY COLT** Royal Portrush GC
"Colt's courses were very well-routed and fit into the land naturally."
3. **ALISTER MACKENZIE** Cypress Point Club
"A master of building wonderfully natural courses that were beautiful and interesting."
4. **A.W. TILLINGHAST** San Francisco GC
"Tillinghast courses are great tests of golf. His bunkering has a flair that others often copy."
5. **BEN CRENSHAW/BILL COORE** Sand Hills GC
"Passionate guys who develop striking, even rugged courses that demand a wide variety of shots."

final match at Aronimink, a Ross course near Philadelphia where Sigel was a member. Fought recalls one of Sigel's fellow members, "a nice little lady," screamed, "Beat the s--- out of him, Jay." Fought hit his approach shot three feet from the

hole and won the match. Then he annihilated Doug Fischesser 9 and 8 in the final.

Fought, by then married, was the No. 1 amateur in the country in 1977. In addition to his U.S. Amateur win, he took the Trans-Mississippi in Midland, Texas. A fellow who worked for Ben Hogan asked Fought if he would like to drive to Fort Worth to meet him. "Who wouldn't want to meet Hogan?" asks Fought, who had played Hogan clubs since he was 16, and still does. At Shady Oaks, he watched Hogan hit balls, and then Hogan trained his eyes on Fought.

"I took a few practice swings first," Fought remembers, "and he came in within about three feet of me. He was checking my address position, my grip, analyzing everything. He was so nice to me."

More visits to Hogan followed, with the legend offering two pieces of advice to Fought: 1) not to hit driver off every tee because he was so long, and 2) to work on his short game. Fought used that advice. He won his PGA Tour card on his third try, when he was co-medalist with Jim Thorpe, and captured those two tournaments in a row. "Winning those two events, it wore me out," he says.

Already Fought was feeling the self-imposed pressure of defining himself by his golf, and he didn't like it. But he had reached the show and won early. You don't just walk away from the PGA Tour, do you? Hogan had advised him how to play, but said nothing about how to find an outlet to replace competitive golf.

Still, something was stirring in Fought, perhaps sitting there since he played those holes every which way at Tualatin. He studied courses, and made a decision of sorts during the 1982 Players Championship at the then-new Stadium Course at the Tournament Players Club at Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla. The PGA Tour's signature event was being held at the Pete Dye course for the first time. "I hit a solid iron into 18 and it bounced into the water," Fought says. "I thought, either I don't know what's going on, or they don't know, but I'll find out."

Finishing fifth in the 1983 PGA Championship at Riviera, four shots behind winner Hal Sutton, Fought was impressed with designer George Thomas' greens, which, he felt, were the appropriate shapes and sizes for the shots played into them. Riviera wasn't just a bomber's course. The golfer had to think and shape shots.

Fought had chatted with Jack Nicklaus, who also wasn't enamored with the TPC. "You have more than a passing interest in design," Nicklaus told him. He suggested Fought speak with his senior designer, Bob Cupp. Fought was soon making some plans for Cupp, while still





The par-5 14th hole at Pine Needles was restored to a 454-yard par 4 by Fought.

playing the tour.

By the middle of 1985 Fought was having serious back problems brought on by an injury suffered while practicing. He kept playing and, with McGowan, lost a playoff for the PGA Tour's team championship that year. But by then hand, thumb and neck problems, some of which required surgery, were proving major hindrances. He played only four tournaments in 1986, missing the cut in each. He missed the cut in 10 of the 11 tournaments he played in 1987 and withdrew from the other. His PGA Tour career essentially was over at 33.

"When the stress of the injuries came along, with my expanding family, I had to change something," says Fought, who with wife Mary has three children, Tiffany, Jay and Natalie. "So I called it a day and moved on with my life."

Fought apprenticed for Cupp, who had gone out on his own, for two and a half years. He read Thomas's *Golf Architecture in America*, Alistair Mackenzie's *Golf Architecture*, Robert Hunter's *The Links* and other books on design. He thought about why courses such as Augusta National, Shinnecock Hills and Pinehurst No. 2 had endured and concluded that greens were the heart of a course.

"They're some of the most fascinating greens in the world," Fought says of Pinehurst No. 2. "I like to see how the contours are molded into the putting surfaces, like at the second green. It's gently elevated three or four feet, and it falls away into long stretches." He has walked No. 2 perhaps 100 times without playing to study the greens and their surrounds—typical of Fought's devotion to his second career.

"John learned well," Cupp says. "He wanted to do everything, even drawings. He became

consumed. He chased jobs. John was intent on succeeding because he loved golf. The next thing I knew he was dragging me all over the place, and we ended up opening an office in Portland." Fought ran that office, and his contacts helped land the job for two courses at Pumpkin Ridge in Cornelius, Ore. Cupp designed the courses but credits Fought for

his involvement.

Pumpkin Ridge, where Tiger Woods won the 1996 U.S. Amateur, was a huge success. Fought's journey as a designer eventually took him to OB Sports, a Scottsdale-based company that develops and manages courses. Orrin Vincent, the company's CEO, brought Fought in to design Langdon Farms in Aurora, Ore., along with Cupp. Fought became OB's house designer and later formed a partnership with Tom Lehman. The Gallery was their first joint effort. Lehman was the lead designer on the North course at The Gallery, while Fought designed the South course on his own. He and Lehman were partners from 2000 until the middle of 2003, after which Fought, following a discussion with Lehman, decided to set off on his own.

"Tom's an awesome person, and I have great respect for him," Fought says. "But he wanted to design courses more as a hobby, while I saw it as full time."

Having found his calling, Fought is designing courses in Oregon, California and elsewhere. He continues to study the classic architects and with O.D. Vincent, UCLA's golf coach and Orrin Vincent's son, hopes to start a tournament involving the top 10 college teams to support the Tufts Archives in Pinehurst, which houses many of Ross' design plans. Fought, who spent hours there poring over Ross' plans for Pine Needles, donated a scanner to the repository when he found out it didn't have one to back up the documents. "A lot of people have ideas and say things," says Tufts curator Audrey Moriarty, "but John follows through. I consider him one of the good guys."

The good guy does plan to compete a little. He has worked with putting wizard Stan Utley on his short game—"I finally understand putting after all these years," he says—and practices hard when he can find the time. He uses Hogan muscle-back irons. Fought likes clean lines in his equipment and his courses, where restraint is his operative principle.

Playing his South course at The Gallery, in the clear, refreshing air of the high Sonoran Desert, Fought says, "When you win, you're on a drug. You're so high. It doesn't last long. But this, designing courses, I can come back and I never get tired of it. The high you get is nothing quite like winning a national championship, it's true. That's an incredible feeling. A lot of guys last week asked me, 'Don't you want to play?' I said no, not really. They ask how I can feel that way. My answer is that I'm an architect. That's what I was meant to be." **GW**

A SAMPLING OF JOHN FOUGHT DESIGNS

1995 LANGDON FARMS GC, AURORA, ORE.

Done with Bob Cupp, who allowed Fought to handle most of the work, so it's often considered Fought's first design.

1996 RUSH CREEK GC, MAPLE GROVE, MINN.

His last collaboration with Cupp. Site of 2004 U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship.

1997 THE RESERVE VINEYARDS & GC (FOUGHT COURSE), ALOHA, ORE.

Fought and Cupp each did one 18. A combination of the two (mostly Fought) now hosts the Champions Tour's JELD-WEN Tradition.

2000 WASHINGTON NATIONAL GC, AUBURN, WASH.

With vast areas of exposed sand in waste areas, it's unique in the Pacific Northwest.

2003 WINDSONG FARM GC, INDEPENDENCE, MINN.

Co-designed with Tom Lehman, it ranked fourth in *Golf Digest's* Best New Private Courses of 2004.

2004 RAVEN GC AT VERRADO, BUCKEYE, ARIZ.

Another with Lehman, this west-of-Phoenix daily-fee has a front nine in rolling desert and a back nine through rocky foothills.

John Fought: A Glance At His Architectural Résumé

With several award winning and highly acclaimed designs, restorations and revisions, John Fought's portfolio of work clearly states that he is one of the foremost architects working today. Here is a closer look at John's design résumé:

Arizona

- DC Ranch (Revisions with Tom Lehman)
- The Gallery -36 Holes (North Course with Lehman)
- Phoenix C.C. (Revisions with Lehman)
- Verrado (with Lehman)

California

- Cimmaron (36 holes)
- The Farms (Revisions with Lehman)
- Ironwood C.C. (36 holes, revisions)
- The Resort at Indian Wells (West Course)
- Ridge Creek Golf Club

Minnesota

- Rush Creek (with Bob Cupp)
- Somerby Golf Club (with Lehman)
- Wayzata C.C. (Revisions)
- Windsong Farm (with Lehman)
- Woodhill C.C. (Restoration of Donald Ross course)

Mississippi

- The C.C. of Jackson (27 holes, revisions)

Nevada

- Angel Park (revisions)
- The Legacy (revisions)

North Carolina

- Pine Needles (Restoration of Donald Ross course)

Oregon

- Centennial
- Crosswater (with Cupp)
- Langdon Farms (with Cupp)
- The Meadows at Sunriver
- Pumpkin Ridge (36 holes with Cupp)
- The Reserve (Fought Course)
- Tualatin C.C. (Revisions with Cupp)

Washington

- Sundoon
- Trophy Lake
- Washington National

Wyoming

- Teton Pines (Revisions)

'Traditional and Classic': Major Tournaments played on John Fought courses

When you stamp the John Fought pedigree on a course, one thing is for sure — they'll be traditional and they'll be classic. More than likely, too, they'll grab the rapt attention of those who are selecting championship sites. Here's a look at Fought-designed courses that have hosted championships:

1996	U.S. Amateur Championship; Champion – Tiger Woods (Pumpkin Ridge)
1997	U.S. Women's Open; Champion – Alison Nicholas (Pumpkin Ridge)
1999	Samsung World Championship of Women's Golf; Champion – Se Ri Pak (Rush Creek)
2000	Tucson Open; Champion – Garrett Willis (The Gallery North)
2001	PGA Club Professional Championship; Champion – Wayne DeFrancesco (Crosswater)
2002	U.S. Women's Amateur Public Links; Champion – Annie Thurman (The Meadows)
2003	U.S. Women's Open Championship; Champion – Hilary Lunke (Pumpkin Ridge)
2003	Jeld Wen Tradition; Champion – Tom Watson (The Reserve)
2004	Amateur Public Links Championship; Champion – Ryan Moore (Rush Creek)
2005	NCAA Division I Women's Championship; Champion – Anna Grzebien, Duke (The Meadows)
2006	NCAA Division I Men's Championship; Crosswater
2007	U.S. Women's Open Championship; Pine Needles



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