

an american in scotland

kingsbarns developer mark parsinen tries to recapture some of that magic with his newest course, castle stuart



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AT THE BOSTON CONSULTING GROUP in the 1970s and '80s, Mark Parsinen's job was to guide companies through new business ventures. Among his projects: helping Coors Brewing establish Coors Lite and Killian's Red. ¶ Nowadays, Parsinen is the one undertaking something new. After making a bundle

Now on deck:
Parsinen outside
a guest room.



Castle Stuart's 15th green overlooks the Moray Firth.

on a Silicon Valley start-up, Parsinen, 58, has turned his attention to building golf courses. His most notable is Kingsbarns, near St. Andrews. Parsinen built Kingsbarns with Art Dunkley in the late 1990s and sold his half share in 2005.

Parsinen, who has a 6.9 Index at Granite Bay Golf Club, which he co-founded in Sacramento, is building a new Scottish course called Castle Stuart, set on the Moray Firth near Inverness. When we caught up with him, he was selecting furnishings for the airy three-story clubhouse overlooking the Firth, scheduled to open, along with the course, in July 2009.

—Interviewed by Raphael Tennenbaum



THE BEGINNING

A lot of us who were involved in Kingsbarns believed we did a really good job, but now that we've learned a lot more, it would be a shame not to do another course.

So I started looking at sites. I looked at Donald Trump's site, actually, but rejected it for a few reasons, including the regulatory issues. [Trump hopes to build a course in Aberdeen but has run into local opposition.] When I found Castle Stuart, I was there for about 20 minutes and said, "This is it." Because I saw what the soils were, I saw the view and the topography.

Being near Inverness was part of the attraction. To me, it's important to be near a center, a place that is getting traffic already. And Royal Dornoch draws about 12,000 visitors a year.

If you have a shopping mall and there's an anchor store everybody goes to, you don't have to beat that anchor store. All you have to do is beat all the other shops, and you'll do just fine. With Kingsbarns, we didn't have to worry about how it compared with the Old Course, we just had to be the next-best course in St. Andrews.



GETTING APPROVAL

Starting a project like this, you just have to appreciate there are going to be issues that you might not agree with as being important, but they exist. Whether it's badgers or birds or archeology or pesticides, they're real issues: If you don't deal with them, you won't finish your project.

Before I made any proposal, I started living in a farmhouse on the property and became a member of the community. My wife and I would have the neighbors come to visit, and we'd talk to them about what we were going to do. We let the people we met influence the ultimate texture of the project.



THE DESIGN

I knew architect Gil Hanse had kind of followed in Tom Doak's footsteps and had worked with Tom. In my years of hiring people, I've always found I have a

preference for people who haven't done their best work yet—they probably have something in their résumé that's not allowing the best jobs to come to them, might not have gotten the best degree, might not have gone to the best school, or there's something funky there. But as you meet them and you hear their story and you find out what they're all about, you realize they have the capability, and they also have something to prove.

Gil struck me as a guy who'd been living in Tom's shadow. I liked that about him.

The first couple of months we had some ding-dong fights. I like to move dirt, and Gil doesn't always.

I do a lot of research that other people don't. For example, I got all the data for all the holes on the PGA Tour to see what the mean average score is on each hole, and what the distribution is—that is, pars compared to birdies, eagles, bogeys and doubles. Then I asked pros and hard-core golf fans what their favorite finishing holes were.

I found a correlation between their favorite finishing holes and a wide distribution—which means competitively speaking, stuff is going to happen. Short par 5s, short par 4s, tricky par 3s. The worst finishing holes are the ones where the distribution of scores is unimodal, and everybody makes 4. Like a long par 4, where everyone can hit the green but nobody can get close enough to make a birdie, and they've got the pin behind the bunker so that the guy who makes birdie probably mis-hit his shot to get it close to the hole. So I keep that in mind when designing finishing holes. The important thing is to keep the golfer, no matter what his or her handicap, engaged. ♣