

## The World's Most Dangerous Profession

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By Mark Leslie

Snipers in the trees, machete-wielding natives on the attack, deadly poisonous mombas and cobras lurking in the bush, tanks in the streets outside the window, assassins' bullets blazing, and helicopter rides from hell. Sounds like the latest Schwarzeneger or Stallone war movie? Not quite. The scenes are excerpts from the lives of survivors of the world's most dangerous profession: Golf Course Architect.

Sure, NASCAR drivers face the possibility of fatal accidents and paratroopers risk their chutes not opening. But, for the golf course architect, the dangers are often unexpected and startling and sometimes terrifying. And, besides, they get no extra hazard-duty pay — even when working in places like Colombia, South America, where they must be accompanied by bodyguards and ride in bullet-proof automobiles.

You could make a scary animal movie out of this group and the stars would include crazed baboons, angry hippos, snakes whose venom would kill you before your body hit the ground, and alligators anxious to rumble.

But they might have to take second seat to frightening people, like Filipino farmers who were so outraged that land was taken from them that they armed themselves with rifles and fired shots at architect Gene Bates and the military guard protecting him; machete-swinging Mexicans, also so angry at confiscated land that they charged architect David Whelchel and a half-dozen others, who leaped aboard a helicopter to barely escape their wrath; Cambodian anarchists trading bullets with troops of the ruling regime in street battles; and "giants" from Irian Jaya [Indonesia] hired as thugs to scare off locals from working on a project in Jakarta [Indonesia].

Indeed, movie scripts could follow plots along the lines of Wild, Wild West, or Natural-born Enemies, or Hazardous Duty.

Told the notion that theirs is the most dangerous profession, golf course architects chuckle. But it is never a chortle and never laughter. Rather a nervous chuckle, and a short one at that, one that almost ends before it begins, one hinting hidden memories that are less than comforting.

### Wild, Wild West

Remember, golf course architects travel the world over, and many of these developing countries resemble America 150 years ago.

Mark Hollinger of California was in Cambodia in 1995 working on a golf course near the airport in Phnom Penh.

"You'd go into a restaurant or public place and people were checking their guns with their coats. It was like the Wild West," Hollinger said. "We went to a seafood restaurant outside the city, and my client's bodyguards were two Ninjas dressed in black, with M-16 rifle attachments on their motorcycles."

It was before the current leader, Hun Sen, consolidated his power. Hun Sen and the son of Prince Sihanouk, their royalty figurehead, were sharing the operation of the government. The last night Hollinger was in the country, there was an attempted coup against Sihanouk's son.

"Tanks were in the street, M-16s were being fired all night long. I was in my hotel room looking out the window. Once I saw them nail an innocent bystander, I hit the floor between the two beds, hoping a stray bullet wouldn't come through my window. The fighting lasted most of the night.

"I got out of there as quickly as I could the next morning, and the army troops and people were going about business like it was just another day."

It was not the only revolutionary flare-up Hollinger has witnessed. He was in Jakarta a week before Suharto relinquished power, and "they were burning in the streets and setting fires to shopping centers and things. But there were no M-16s firing all night long."

The late Robert Trent Jones Sr. might have wished the bullets were as far away as the street when he got frighteningly close to an assassination attempt on Morocco's King Hassan in the early 1970s.

As son Robert Trent Jones Jr. retells the story, his father was at a birthday party for the king at his castle when a certain general attempted a coup. The general had told his troops that some of the guests were attempting an assassination. In the ensuing melee, the elder Jones and the other guests were lined up face-down on the floor, and the Belgian ambassador and a couple of others were shot dead.

"Thankfully, the troops discovered the general was actually attempting the coup, and it was thwarted," Jones said.

Gary Linn of Knott•Brooks•Linn in Mountain View, Calif., tells of building a course outside Bogota, Colombia, where drug and kidnapping gangs rule many areas outside the cities.

"In Bogota," he said, "when events were going on, the army would be in the street in a show of force, with sentries on street corners. None looked like they were more than 18 years old and they were armed with M-16s. I'm wondering, 'If something happens, how calm and collected are these kids going to be?'"

Among those who have needed bodyguard details assigned to them or their projects is widely traveled Californian Ron Fream, who says he has been assigned protection visiting golf sites in India, the Philippines and Myanmar (formerly Burma).

Danger of another fashion came perilously close to David Whelchel, a lead architect with Hurdzan/Fry Design Group in Columbus, Ohio, when he was on the site of a future project in Mexico. He was walking a 5,000-acre property with a handful of people from the development company, which legally owned the land but had supplanted a number of

squatters. The squatters, Whelchel said, apparently did not know that the developer was providing them all with modern housing and a school, so they showed up en masse — and armed with machetes and an occasional hoe or shovel.

"They looked like the guys from American Gothic," cracked Whelchel. But it was not funny at the time.

"We heard a noise, looked, and about 200 people, some on horseback, were advancing over the hill after us and screaming. At first, they were about 400 to 500 yards away, but then we realized we had to get out of there. Literally, when we got off the ground on the helicopter, some of them had to duck out of the way of the chopper blades."

Did Whelchel fear for his life? "No, but you never know."

When bullets fly, you do know — as Gene Bates can attest.

"I was never in combat before and if this was a taste of it, I didn't want to be there," recalled Bates of his brush with an afternoon-long volley of bullets while on the site of Porto Azul Resort, which was being built for the Philippine government south of Manila, The Philippines, in 1978.

In the style of the Philippine government then, any land it wanted, it took away from farmers, landowners and squatters. Contractors were grading and clearing land, and Bates, working for Ron Kirby and Gary Player, was in an adjacent valley doing centerline survey work.

"I heard this 'pop-zing' sound," Bates said. "I thought, 'What in the heavens? What sound like 'pop-zing'?' It happened about four or five times — pop-zing, pop-zing — and one of the military guards rushes over, grabs me and pushes me down. 'Mr. Bates,' he says, 'we're getting fired on by snipers!' "

Every few seconds for about 15 minutes, bullets hailed down on the valley.

"Finally, we were able to get out," Bates said. "The next day President Marcos' troops came out, arrested some and chased others off. They came back later on. This time they didn't shoot at us; they threatened us with machetes."

### **Close Encounters of a Deadly Kind**

"A lot of people want to shoot Gene Bates," laughed golf course architect Jay Morrish of Flower Mound, Texas.

Perhaps the whole gang of golf course architects could take a page out of the Operating Manual According to Jay Morrish. Call him the pistol-packing Texan.

Morrish and Bob Cupp both tell hair-curling stories about building Shoal Creek in Birmingham, Ala., when they worked for Nicklaus Design. But first things first.

A long-time big-game hunter, Morrish is used to hefting cannon-sized rifles on his shoulder. But at Shoal Creek, he packed a little Derringer loaded with rat shot.

Crew members might have been brought up short when they heard the first gunshot ring out. But 10 dead water moccasins later, they were used to it.

Then, one day, Morrish said, "I almost stepped on a rattlesnake. I took a couple of fast steps, pulled out that Derringer and drilled him."

Snake tales are legend among golf course architects, but Morrish must boast the closest call. Caught in a rainstorm while staking a course in Tucson, Ariz., Morrish ran off the site and drove to his hotel room. It wasn't until he took off his boots that he realized how close he had flirted with death.

"I stuck my hand into one of the boots to oil it," he said, "and pricked my finger. I looked, and there were two fangs. A rattler had gotten through my boot and even reached my sock, but because I was running, it snapped his fangs off.

"Somewhere there is a snake out there gumming rabbits."

Rattlers, though, are among the least worrisome snakes these intrepid architects must fret about. (Well, as Fream said, "I usually walk three or four people back in the line," and others agree, like Arnold Palmer's design partner, Ed Seay, who recalled walking through a fish hatchery outside Bangkok, Thailand: "In front of us about 30 guys are beating on straw baskets with sticks. I ask what they're doing and I'm told, 'They're just scaring the cobra out of the way.'")

Nevertheless, as J. Michael Poellot, who has worked many years in Southeast Asia, said, if you get bitten by a krait: "You just drop to your knees and count your blessings before you die."

Robert Trent Jones Jr., another who has journeyed long in Asia, said a Malaysian guide told him if bitten by a krait: "Light a cigarette, smoke it and say good-bye."

But mombas are nearly as poisonous, and cobras, with their hoods fully extended, are scarier than Stallone in full Rambo regalia.

Talking about cobras, architect Bob Moore of Chapel Hill, N.C., recalled walking through a field on a site in Indonesia when he looked down and saw a cobra with hood up and ready to strike.

"David Thompson would have been proud of me the way I jumped," Moore said. "I landed 6 feet away. And he was gone in a heartbeat."

Cobras, though, would play second fiddle to water moccasins and ferdelance.

Cupp, who lives in Atlanta, Ga., and says he has had "a lifelong thing with water moccasins," fortunately wears hard-plastic shin guards as well as steel-tipped leather boots when on properties harboring dangerous snakes. It might have saved his life one day on the Carolina coast. "Rattlers usually give you fair warning," he said, "but water moccasins give no warning and are very aggressive. This one moccasin struck me on the shin guard. You could hear it and it would have been a significant blow. But he reeled and took off.

"There are stories about water moccasins slithering right into boats."

The ferdelance, according to Fream who encountered them in Trinidad in the mid-1970s, is a small green snake that hangs from trees, "and is very aggressive. It will drop down on you and you are dead almost before you hit the ground."

How scary is that?

About as scary as outraged wild boars, baboons and hungry elephants.

Cupp said that when building a golf course near Tampa, Fla., "a herd of wild boars chased the owner into his pickup truck."

Bates, who should perhaps invest in some Air Jordans when on a work site, had a chilling experience while working on a Gary Player course at Sun City Resort in South Africa.

Staking the 15th hole along a totally undisturbed area, Bates was bending down hammering a stake into the ground and heard a ruckus like something was running towards him.

"I look up and there was a male baboon. He was huge — as big as I am. But the frightening thing was that he had a big grin (like a growl) on his face, and he had fangs sticking out of his mouth that were two, three inches long and he was coming right at me. I looked at him for a second. He was about 15 yards away from jumping on me. That's when I threw my hammer at him, and ran.

"He ran a few more feet and stopped. I stopped, too, and wondered what would happen. Some of our Zulu workers came running up and said, 'As long as you stay out of his territory, he won't bother you.' But if I had gone another 15 or 20 yards further, he would have been on my back biting my neck. And that would be deadly."

Put it in your memory bank: Male baboons are extremely territorial, and when their mates have young they are very, very aggressive protecting their brood.

Saying "it is literally a jungle out there," Jones recalls working outside Singapore where he encountered krait snakes when opening up the fairways, "monkeys screaming at us from trees, the tracks of tigers who would lick salt off the rocks next to the ocean during the night, and wild elephants that pushed over and crushed the construction shack one night."

Saying he had encountered "the big four" domestically (water moccasins, rattlesnakes, cottonmouths and coral snakes) and "the big four" abroad (boa constrictors, pythons, pit vipers and spitting cobras), Jeffrey D. Brauer of Arlington, Texas, told about golf course shaper Jim Rascoe's brush with death.

While working on Brauer's Palm Spring Golf & Country Club in Indonesia, Rascoe bumped a tree with his dozer and a wasp nest dropped in his lap.

"He got stung about 300 times and we had to rush him to the hospital," Brauer said. "He barely survived. But the big question in these developing countries is, what is more deadly, the wild animal or the hospital you have to go to for treatment?"

Yet, from the annals of golf course architects, the most insidious incident involved some sort of insect. Frank Duane was an architect who worked for Robert Trent Jones Sr. from 1945 to 1963 and then with Arnold Palmer. While on a job in Central America in 1965, Duane was bitten by an insect and stricken with guillame-barre syndrome, a debilitating disease that paralyzed him from the neck down for the rest of his life.

### **Russian Roulette**

Of course, the airplane crash that claimed the lives of Payne Stewart and a half dozen others, including architect Bruce Borland, is as sobering an accident as the world of golf has sustained in recent memory.

As infamous as the Stewart crash was, few have heard about a project in Korea where three lives were lost.

While building Asiana Country Club there, Fream needed to move about 4 million cubic yards of rock.

"It involved 11 drilling rigs and an extensive amount of blasting and dynamite," Fream said. "I was not injured, but we lost three of the 'powder monkeys' — guys who set the charges — because of unexpected explosions."

An explosion of another sort threatened Morrish, his son Jay, and a pilot in Japan.

"We were building a course on a site that had been an ammunition dump and where some cannons had been set up," Morrish said. "A 500-pound bomb had been defused, but four that had not been defused were encountered when doing centerlines. We flew in there on a copter one time and the pilot got out and picked up this pipe about two feet from where I was standing. He said, 'I wonder what this is.' Another guy said, 'It is a phosphorous bomb and I would suggest you lay it down very carefully.' "

Other incidents pale when compared to those. However, bulldozers, helicopters, undetonated bombs and even cab rides have grayed the hairs of these brave souls who make their living designing golf courses in the far-flung countries of the world.

While being threatened by all sorts of poisonous snakes during construction of Shoal Creek, Cupp and Morrish nevertheless claim another event as the deadliest, an event that nearly claimed both their lives.

The golf course superintendent was driving a rental car on the property, with both architects aboard.

"At the 2nd hole, we came to a stop at a crossing where a mammoth 988 Caterpillar loader drove past and the superintendent, Jimmy, put it in gear and began to move forward," Cupp recalled. "Just at that time the 988 driver mindlessly threw it in reverse and started to back up. Jay yelled, 'Get out of here!' Jimmy panicked and thought he put it in reverse; unfortunately, it slipped into park and zoomed to 10,000 rpms before the 988 ran right over the hood. It was horrendous. Nobody got hurt but there was a lot of emotional aftermath.

"Being around that big equipment is an occupational hazard."

Topping Poellot's danger list was The Helicopter Ride from Hell and its sequel: Ride from Hell, Part II.

"In the late '80s we were doing a lot of mountaintop projects in Japan and this was September, typhoon season. We got picked up at a golf course in Chiba Prefecture, started our flight to Tochigi Prefecture and ran into a huge series of thunderheads. The prudent thing would have been to land, but the owner was so determined to see the site that day that he told the pilot to go over the storm. Needless to say, we got stuck above the storm. We spent two hours trying to find holes in the storm in order to get down. Occasionally I would catch a glimpse of treetops or mountaintops beside us or below us. Then the helicopter would swerve up. Then fuel became an issue and we had to go down. The pilot started picking his way, and we'd see big puffy clouds and go around them and get blocked in by this massive pack of clouds. Finally, through the grace of God, we got down and landed on a little country road."

Part II regards Poellot taking off from the top of a high-rise office building in downtown Manila, The Philippines, to reach his **Mt. Arayat** project.

"Unfortunately," Poellot said, "the owner's son was a student pilot, and with rather lax regulations the owner would let his son fly us to the site about 40 minutes by helicopter."

Also unfortunately, this particular day was kite-flying day in the Philippines.

"They fly kites up to 1,000 feet in the air," Poellot said, "and because of the strong winds, they use wire instead of string. Get those wires caught in the blade or rotors of a helicopter and it would bring you down in a minute. We had a beautiful day and all of a sudden the copter would lurch to the left or to the right and the kid would say, 'Oh, we missed that one.' We had to look at the kite above us and guess where its wire was."

The Philippines are not the only place where young people control the air. Linn said once, in Malaysia, he boarded "a puddle-jumper airplane and none of the crew or pilots looked older than 22. They were wearing blue jeans. They got us in the plane and tossed the luggage in behind us. When we came in for the landing, the airstrip started right on the beach. The plane came in really low off the ocean waves and the wind was howling..."

But rides on the ground can be as frightening as those in the air.  
Brian Costello of JMP Design even calls taking a cab ride in China "Russian roulette."

"The language is always an issue, especially trying to learn how to say, 'Slow down,' or 'Wake up!' I've had cab drivers fall asleep barreling down a roadway," Costello said.

"Cabbies must work long hours over there because they seem to always fall asleep at the wheel. Mike [Poellot] and I were off somewhere and the guy had just had lunch and thought it was nap time. We were going 150 kilometers per hour and Mike and I were looking at each other and saying, 'Is that 80 miles per hour or 100 miles per hour?'"

"In Japan over mountainous roads without guardrails and on Brazilian freeways, I've had taxi drivers fall asleep. I get in position to see the guy's eyes in the rearview mirror to make sure he's awake and not nodding off."

## The Elements

Natural elements, meanwhile, can pose a higher danger than any other.

In fact, an earthquake could have claimed the lives of three of the greatest golfers of all-time — Jack Nicklaus, Tom Weiskopf and Ben Crenshaw — had they not been in a Japanese hotel made to withstand huge tremors.

"Nicklaus, Weiskopf, Crenshaw and I had the top floor of the Okura Hotel," Morrish recalled. "All of a sudden, about 6 in the morning, everything broke loose and I watched my furniture do the Funky Chicken across the room. I thought, 'I need to do something.' But then I was on the top floor and nothing would fall on me. I got in the bed. It lasted about 15 seconds, although it felt like 10 minutes. When it was over, I stuck my head out the door and there were three white faces looking out their doors at me."

Cupp laughs at an appropriately timed quake that struck while he was putting a ball as he played The New Course at St. Andrews in Japan, along with Morrish and John Silp, a St. Andrews native who had played in the British Open.

"It was amazing. The hole literally moved back and forth and the ball moved backwards and forwards. It never went in," Cupp said. "There were huge rocks on the edge of the green and they were clicking against each other like a bunch of giant pool balls."

"I look at that as that I had four chances on one stroke, and I missed all four of them. I thought I was going to carry off Jay — not from fright but from laughter."

Fream tells tales of escaping a flood (while on site at Yonz Tyonz Resort in Korea) and needing to take extraordinary steps to beat heat stroke (in Tozer in the south of Tunisia in the Sahara Desert) and frost bite (in Finland, where he has built six courses, including Oulu Golf Course in the city of Oulu, the farthest north 27 holes in the world, 50 miles from the Arctic Circle, where the temperature would reach 36 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, a record for that day in Helsinki.)

Linn may have spoken for many colleagues when he said: "I've got a wife and three kids and here I am in Colombia. They have all watched *Miami Vice* and *Clear and Present Danger*, too. And I'm wondering, 'What in the world am I doing here?'"

"You learn to trust in God out there."

— END —