



Feature Interview with Baxter Spann
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Baxter Spann is Vice-President of Finger Dye Spann, Inc. He holds a Bachelor of Landscape Architecture degree from Louisiana State University and is a Registered Landscape Architect in the States of Texas and Louisiana. Mr. Spann is a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects and has been a member of the Finger Dye Spann, Inc. design team since 1979. The 2003 annual GolfClubAtlas.com gathering took place in New Mexico, with the highlight being Spann's recently opened Black Mesa Golf Course thirty minutes north of Santa Fe. A course profile of Black Mesa including numerous photographs can be found by clicking [here](#).

1. Please provide a brief overview of your 25-year career in golf architecture.

I had wanted to be a golf course architect since I was in 7th or 8th grade, I think. A Sports Illustrated article about Hazeltine prior to the Open there in 1970 had focused on Trent Jones describing his design of the course along with lots of his sketches of various greens. This really fascinated me, and I must have spent hundreds of hours routing imaginary courses on paper and building clay models of golf holes. I even built a couple of contour models of Augusta National while I was in high school (ala Bert Yancey). Fortunately, my parents did not have me committed to the asylum – they were actually supportive of my interest.

After my second year in the Landscape Architecture program at LSU, I spent the summer working in Joe Finger's office in Houston. I didn't really have many skills at that point, other than a strong desire to learn. I was very fortunate to have that opportunity so early. After my third year at LSU I worked at Preston Trail in Dallas on a remodeling project that Mr. Finger was doing with Byron Nelson there. That was the first of several chances that I had to work with Mr. Nelson, and those obviously have always been high points of my career. A third summer in Mr. Finger's office preceded another field stint at Deerfield CC, a project near Jackson, Mississippi, that also involved Mr. Nelson. I'm sorry – you said a BRIEF overview didn't you? Anyway, Ken Dye had joined Mr. Finger full time in 1976 and was made a partner in 1983, and I was added as a partner in 1987 after Jim Shirley left the company. Ken and I began to assume more and more day to day responsibility for the firm's projects and Mr. Finger sort of phased into retirement from 1987 to 1990. Since that time, Ken and I have run the company. We have stayed small with only 4 or 5 people in the office, and we both enjoy being very 'hands on' with all aspects of our projects. We each pretty much handle our own

projects separately now. We have worked mostly in the U.S. with a job in Canada or Mexico here and there.

I must say that after laboring for twenty-five years or so in this business on relatively low-key projects, it was a dream come true to have the opportunity of working with a site such as we had at Black Mesa. A site like that has a way of making everyone look good. But I can say this, in hindsight, I would not have wanted to touch that property without having had that 25 years under my belt already! I think it really is true that you have to ‘pay your dues’ in this profession- at least it is for me. You have to make a lot of mistakes to learn this art, but your mistakes are not on a canvas that you can wad up and throw away if it doesn’t come out right! And this land was too precious to make any blunders with – hopefully we did right by it! It at least has been nice to see folks having some fun out there, and that is really what it’s all about in the end.

2. Has the profession changed much in that time?

Oh yes, quite a bit. At the time I came into the business, looking back on it, golf course architecture was in a time of major transition. Pete Dye had just really become established, and his ‘revolutionary’ design style was really shaking things up. Also at that time, Nicklaus and Palmer were becoming established as the first mega-star pros to open their own design operations. All of this brought a lot of new attention to both the art and the business of golf course design. When I was in school and in my early years in the profession, there were very few books written on the subject. Now, you practically need a room addition to hold all the books and magazines that are available out there on the topic.

The general technology revolution that has affected everything else certainly has had an impact on golf course architecture. I came along before there was any computer aided design taught in college, and really no work with PC’s at all. We have been rather slow to integrate extensive computer graphics into our work, though we are doing a lot more of it now. Somehow, the feel of the pencil, pen and ink is hard to abandon after so much time. But interacting with other design team members is really where it becomes critical to have these digital abilities in your office.

Of course, one of the major changes has been the massive increase in environmental, cultural, and other permitting issues that affect the cost & feasibility of development. While making the design process more cumbersome, I think this has actually resulted in much more creative and interesting golf courses where natural landforms and vegetation are preserved rather than bulldozed and turned into manicured turf areas.

I sense that we are entering into another transition phase in the business at this time. There are a number of designers who are really getting back to incorporating more strategic and natural elements in their designs. There is definitely a much higher awareness of classical and historic architecture thanks in large part to the aforementioned books, and to sites such as this, which are certainly very educational for me. For so many years, tragically, course renovations were done with little (or more often zero) regard to the preservation of classical design features. New construction had become just an exercise in getting through bureaucratic tangles and hopefully ending up with a photo or two in Golf Digest. I think that as both architects and the golfing public become more educated and appreciative of the merits of studying the past masters and their courses, and that is knit together with updated technology and shot values for today’s equipment, I can’t help but feel that that combination will lead to a lot of very exciting new work in the years to come.

3. Has your view on architecture evolved over time? If so, how?

There is just so much out there to learn, it takes time to do that. And as you learn, and are exposed to great courses that you haven’t before experienced, your taste and appreciation of various styles changes. It is not that unusual for the process of designing, building, and growing in a golf course to take three or four years or longer, with all the permitting and financing delays that are now common. So your views on architecture more

often than not, change from the time you first sign a contract to the time the course is open for play, if you're continuing to study and learn and experience other things. I can't think of a project that by the time it was ready to play, that I didn't have five or six or twelve things that I wish we could do over a little differently. So I would say that yes, it is a constant process of evolution

4. What were your impressions when you first walked the property that became Black Mesa Golf Course?

Well, actually we had looked at another piece of property just south of this land that I was pretty excited about. It was owned by the State, and possessed many of the same features that we eventually had to work with at Black Mesa. The idea there was to use gray water from the town of Espanola, about five miles to the north. A pipeline would have to be constructed to carry the water to the golf course from the treatment plant, requiring an easement across Santa Clara Pueblo land. When the project developer Eddie Peck met with the Santa Clara officials to discuss this easement, they said that they had been hoping to build a golf course on that land for years, and they asked him to come out to the site for a look-see. Needless to say he was quite impressed, as the property was much more expansive than the previous site and would involve much less bureaucratic red tape than would the other site on Public land. He brought me out to the property on my next trip to the area (I was involved with the construction of the Marty Sanchez Links course in Santa Fe at that time), and we walked quite a bit of the property to get a feel for what was there. I was bowled over by the huge sandstone formations and also by the softer folds and undulations in the topography in between the large ridges. It really struck me immediately that I was looking at an inland Irish Links setting with the waving native grasses and treeless land forms that were all around us. Two of the holes jumped out almost at once – the current 10th and 18th holes were in all my routings from day one. Others, such as Nos. 2, 7, 16, 17, were apparent early, but in slightly different forms than they ended up. Many of the initially apparent holes however, were eliminated because of conflicts with archeological sites that were later identified.

5. What restrictions were placed on you by the owners at the start of the project?

We had far fewer restrictions than we normally do on new projects. First of all we had over 1000 acres of land to work with. Eddie wanted returning nines, which was not difficult at all. He also wanted to allow for a future additional 18 holes. The Pueblo wanted to have some of the course visible from the highway for marketing purposes, and they wanted an archeological survey done to identify any artifact-rich areas that we would need to avoid. As you can imagine, the possibilities when we started with a 1000-acre blank canvas were almost overwhelming. The few requirements that were posed to us, actually helped narrow down some of the options to a more manageable level.

6. With so many acres from which to choose, what were several keys that led to the final routing?

After walking the property a few times with Eddie, Pat Brockwell and Paul Ortiz, we all began to agree on several parts of the site that we wanted to get golfers into. The routing of this course to me was as much about people getting to experience these magnificent land forms and the great offsite views as it was about any particular golf shots or preconceived shot strategies. I've always said that it's worth the price of the green fee just to see this property, even if there weren't a golf course there!

Normally, logistics and cost factors would dictate a clubhouse site near the main road that gets people to the site. However, the land along this road was rather low and offered limited views of the mountains to the east and west. Also, one of the great experiences in arriving at this property to me was always the sequence of driving into the gate, through the Cottonwoods along the old irrigation ditch and up the rolling slopes to the high ground at the windmill where we always parked our vehicles. This route covered about a mile from the

point where you left the paved road until you reached the windmill. In that distance, you are absorbed into the site, and totally leave behind thoughts of the day-to-day world. I think it is a very important part of the overall experience at Black Mesa that this arrival sequence was preserved.

From there, we knew the tee shot through the notch toward the Black Mesa (No. 10) was a must. I actually intended for this to play as number one initially because it was such a classic ‘statement of place’. But the dramatic holes in the southwest part of the property that developed later in the design process really dictated that this play as the back nine. We initially had some interesting holes to the north of where No. 8 green is now, but that turned out to be a huge archeological site that we had to avoid. We needed to get over to the east side of a long sandstone ridge to accommodate the Pueblo’s request for some visibility from the highway, and there were only two breaks in this formation which we could play through (Nos. 1 and 8). Another area that we wanted to get to was the ‘badlands’ area where the par 3 fourth hole is now. This enabled us to use the high saddle for the 5th championship tee where the land falls into a broad sloping plain. Lastly, the area where Nos. 13 and 14 are were discovered by Eddie and Pat on one of their hikes when I wasn’t there. They later brought me out to this spot and we began to develop the general concept of those holes, and getting back to the clubhouse side of the ridge through a steeply rising canyon which is now the 16th hole.

7. How many maintainable acres of grass are in the final design?

We ended up with about 80 acres of irrigated turf, and with about 12 or 13 additional acres of native grasses that required irrigation to establish, but which will not be watered permanently.

8. The greens feature lots of interior contour/ pitch – what is the fastest you hope the greens will be maintained?

I believe Pat said that for the New Mexico Senior Open in September they were rolling about 8.5 to 9.0 as they were when we played them. I think that is just about right, as it keeps all of the potential pin setting areas usable. For a major tournament they could get them up a little faster possibly if they wanted to limit cupping areas to the larger more accessible portions of the greens. For everyday play, more toward the 8.5 end of the range would probably work well.



The heavily - and amazingly (!) - contoured 16th green.

9. At 5700 feet above sea level, how do you make the better player hit all kinds of shots including long iron approaches?

On this site, the wind will often take care of that. Seriously, I have been on this site when it is gusting 50 or 60mph, and I've played golf on it in 30- 40-mph conditions. Hazards that wouldn't normally come into play are suddenly introduced as elements that must be considered in planning a shot. Under calm conditions, the par three's are the best opportunity to get a mid to long iron approach into the mix such as on No. 8 which plays about 238 from the black tees. Also, the stronger player will frequently be hitting mid to long iron second shots into the par five 6th and 16th holes if they can execute the proper tee shot. I will say that even in the three years since the final construction drawings were completed, equipment has advanced to the point of making this course play somewhat shorter for the good player from the back tees than I had originally envisioned.

10. As the site is windy, did you make a special effort to have the par threes point in different directions?

Yes, generally I will always try to do that unless there is some particular reason not to. We not only have par 3's at Black Mesa that play in four directions (#4-NE, #8-SW, #11-SE, and #15-NW) but the par 5's have a good variation in direction as well (#3-S, #6-NNW, #13-SSE, and #16-NE). We do pay a lot of attention to this factor and it helps us finalize decisions in the routing plan, when other factors are more or less equal.

11. In designing a desert course, what are the keys to ensure that the owners are left with an affordable course to maintain for decades to come?

One of the issues that we feel must be controlled from the outset is the to limit the total acreage of turf. This must be balanced with playability, and that balance is difficult to achieve perfectly. It is most important that grasses that are compatible with the local environment are used as much as possible. While we can't use truly native grasses for the primary play areas, we can use them in outer areas of play, and we can use cultivars of cool season turf that are proven in this climate. Other than that, the bunkers are designed so that many of the banks are grassed with fescue that can be mowed much less frequently, (or left unmowed). Lastly, a course is affordable to maintain if it generates the revenue required to maintain it. The best way I know to do this is to build a course that is exciting and fun to play that will attract the number of golfers necessary for financial success.

12. Highlighted by C. B. Macdonald and the National Golf Links of America, architects from the beginning have sought open, expansive properties full of natural landforms where wind is a factor. Such describes Black Mesa – are there boundless similar opportunities in the state of New Mexico?

The answer to that is yes – and no. The land is no problem – as you saw on the drive from Albuquerque to Farmington, there are vast expanses of unbelievably beautiful terrain. The problem is water... surface and ground water are almost totally impractical except on Native American lands where water rights are often abundant. Otherwise, reuse water from treatment plants is a viable option where there is a large enough population to provide adequate amounts for golf course use. However, communities of sufficient size to provide this quantity of effluent are few and far between in this region. There undoubtedly will be other golf courses built in the coming years in New Mexico, but they will likely be slow in coming. When they do come, though, they ought to be worth seeing, because I have yet to see a bad golf course site in that state.

13. The 1st tee ball is a forced carry over the shoulder of a hill to a blind fairway – what was the decision process in becoming comfortable with this?

I guess my comfort level with this was initially established because the hole was originally to play as the 10th hole, not the 1st. I did have some occasions for second thoughts after we switched the nines, but thankfully, Eddie and Pat didn't seem too worried about it, so that encouraged me that it would work out OK. Actually, though, I have to go back to an earlier inspiration I received. Just before getting into the final routing of the course, I had played [Tobacco Road](#). I was blown away by the dramatic features there and by some of the chances Mike Strantz took on the design of that course. I also knew that many felt that TR was 'over the top' or overly severe in many places, but to me it was not any more severe than many of the great places in Ireland and Scotland that are revered by everyone. There just haven't been enough guys who are willing to risk working 'on the edge' to create something that breaks away from the routine, formulaic golf hole design patterns that have become so prevalent in America. Tobacco Road slapped me in the face and made me realize what wild and exciting golf holes can result when conventional wisdom and traditional limits are abandoned in favor of fresh creativity and vision. The other effect I noticed after finishing play at Tobacco Road, was the feeling that I had just finished a four and a half hour chess game -the strategic planning required for each shot was tremendous. I saw this site at Black Mesa as lending itself perfectly to that approach, and I tried to incorporate that random excitement into the final routing and the initial detailed grading design of each hole. On the first hole, we were able to give the golfer a wide area to play to, with only a moderate carry to achieve. The key is getting past the visual intimidation, and knowing the correct line to take over the native ridge. You're going to have to deal with that type visual intimidation all day at Black Mesa, so you might as well get used to it early. The sooner you learn that the course is actually easier than it looks if you can play within your limits, the better off you are.

14. The 2nd green is between a natural saddle with a sharp fall off in the front and behind. At what point did you know you wanted to create a false front and that the grass on the slope in front of the green would be maintained close at fairway height?

That feature, along with most of the courses features, was created in the final stage of routing the course. Again, after Tobacco Road I was putting a conscious effort into trying to use lots of creative effects in and around the greens particularly. I wanted each hole to have a strong individual memorability, and the greens were one of the primary areas where I could best achieve this. With many of the green sites, there are fairly dramatic slopes in the surrounds, where we could use closely mowed turf to bring many different visual and ground game effects into play. We certainly wanted to take maximum advantage of this asset.

15. The property is rugged and severe in spots and yet it is open to the public and needs to accommodate a range of play. What are a few examples of ways where you assist the less accomplished player make his way around?

Of course, playing the proper set of tees for your game is crucial to your enjoyment of Black Mesa. Usually, in addition to a shorter carry required from the forward tees to reach the fairway, the angle is more straight on for a more direct angle into the line of play. The back tees are usually situated to create more of an angle into the landing area, making the correct line as well as the correct distance required from the better player.

There were also several spots around the layout where we had intended originally to have natural arroyos and some smaller drainages cross the line of play, breaking the continuous fairway. We ended up putting in continuous turf in many of these, thus eliminating some forced carries that we otherwise would have had, i.e. the 2nd shot on #3, the tee shot on #12, the second shot on #13, and the second shot on #16.

16. Describe a particular hole and what you like about it.

I am partial to the short, driveable par fours. Number fourteen is maybe my favorite hole I have ever designed. There are just so many options here, it can make you dizzy. If the wind is with you, as it normally is, you are usually going to try to get on or near the green on your tee shot (again, from the proper tees for your game). To do so, you have to carry a native ridge that was left in the middle of the fairway and negotiate some rolls in the approach area. Into the wind, you are more likely to have to craft a long tee shot to the high right side of the fairway to the right of the central ridge where you have a commanding view of the green, or place a precise mid to long iron into the fairway short and left of the central ridge. To play safe to the middle of the 90-yard wide fairway leaves you in a hollow below the ridge, with a blind approach to the green. The short fairway bunkers that you don't even think about downwind become of intense concern into the wind when trying to place a tee shot into a favorable position on either side short of the middle ridge. Once you get near the green, the surrounds offer just about every variation of ground you will encounter at Black Mesa, from a closely mowed fairway hollow left of the green to rough-height slopes on the right, and deep bunkers on the low side to an elevated bunker above the putting surface (which slopes away quickly). Then, the crumpled putting surface adds further to the adventure of holing out here. I don't think you can really get away with a careless shot here, but I have seen many birdies and an eagle or two made to reward those who do execute!

17. Did other courses influence your thought process as you designed Black Mesa?

Certainly, as I have already mentioned, Tobacco Road had a major influence. Other courses and classic architecture always have an influence on my design to varying degrees. I felt that this site required a feature scale on the order of the bunkering at perhaps Royal Melbourne, with some of the native edge treatment which I have always loved there (unfortunately I have only experienced it from television and books up to this time.) I was able to visit the Old Course during the time we were constructing Black Mesa, and that probably influenced some of the bolder random green contours that we developed on the back nine.

18. How much dirt was moved? What was most of it in relation to?

Total earthwork was about 200,000 cubic yards, with about half of that excavated to create the irrigation reservoir. We had to pretty much create a couple of green sites in severe areas, such as the par 3 fourth hole, where we filled in a ravine between two rocky ridges to create the green and the approach area. The part of the course that we probably changed the most overall from the existing terrain, was the practice range. There was actually a very natural site for the landing area of the range, but difficulties in the teeing area had to be overcome. There was about a thirty or forty foot elevation change from right to left where the main teeing area had to be, and also, a rocky ridge obscured views of the target areas from the tees. We ended up with quite a bit of cut and fill in this area to solve this situation.

19. The green fee is \$65 (\$40 for local walkers) which means that construction costs must have been reasonable. What were keys in accomplishing that?

One of the primary ways that we control costs is to have a detailed planning process from start to finish which identifies early on how much acreage we will disturb, how much earth we will move, how much drainage pipe of various sizes will be required, the total square footage of bunkers, greens, tees, etc. As the planning process continues into more detailed levels of design, we constantly monitor quantities to make sure we are within our overall target budget. The lender on this project, First National, required very detailed construction documents from the beginning to assure them that the project would not go over budget.

20. What were your thoughts in the placement and styling of the bunkers at Black Mesa?

As far as placement goes, I didn't want to see any repetitive patterns, with bunkers only at certain distances off the tee or consistently flanking landing areas or approaches. A more random placement seemed more in

keeping with the site and in helping to enhance the wild look and feel of the property. I also wanted to have a wide variety of shapes, sizes, and depths that were as organic in appearance as possible, with the shapes being suggested by the existing terrain features where they were situated. This randomness and unpredictability, I felt, would help ensure the visual distinctiveness of each hole, which was one of my main goals for this design. I also wanted the styling of the bunkering to be sculptural and massive, in keeping with the scale of the site. The native soil here ranged from fine silt to a fine silty sand, and was very prone to erosion both by wind and water. While we had discussed building Sand Hills type 'blowout' bunkers, I was concerned that the sparse native grasses and fragile nature of the soil would not support the bunker shapes initially or over time. I also had concerns about the playability of using the native silty material that we had. At Sand Hills, in an area of higher natural rainfall, the native sands have a natural prairie thatch layer that has formed over hundreds or even thousands of years, which tends to stabilize the ground around the bunkers a great deal. Even with that, I understand that bunkers there need to be rebuilt frequently due to the effects of wind and water eroding and depositing material in and around them. So we ended up with a bit of a compromise at Black Mesa with some native edges to the bunkers where they felt most natural, particularly along arroyos, and some more formal edges along the green and fairway sides of the bunkers. We used a lot of fine fescues around even the formal edges that were just seeding out nicely when we were there this September. These fescues soften that hard green edge that the bunkers had early on when many of the photos were taken. Also, as wind blown sand and silt mixes with the imported bunker sand that we installed, the whiteness of the sand has lessened. I think the bunkers are now evolving very nicely into pretty much what I had wanted to see there. I do think if we do a second course at Black Mesa, we probably will try to create less formal bunkering and just let natural landforms define the holes to an even greater degree that we have done on this first course.



Spann flagging a green side bunker on the 12th.

21. Who were some other key members of the project team, and what role did they play in the finished product?

This whole project was the brainchild of Eddie Peck who is a Santa Fe native and a pretty well traveled golfer.

He has played quite a bit of golf in the British Isles and was very much in tune from the beginning with keeping the site wild and rugged. Pat Brockwell and Eddie had been friends since high school and they had long discussed owning their own golf course someday. Pat got a degree in turf management and had worked at some pretty high caliber golf courses, such as Southern Hills, Las Campanas in Santa Fe, and Cochiti – an RTJ II course near Santa Fe. They formed a partnership with the builder, Apollonio (Paul) Ortiz and the Santa Clara Pueblo to put the deal together. Eddie, Pat, and Paul spent a lot of time walking the site on their own, and with me when I was there. They had a lot of input into the routing of the course and we all had many discussions over the look we wanted to achieve with the course. Paul Ortiz is a northern New Mexico native and has a great crew, including his sons Tom and P.J. who are very key people. P.J. does most of the shaping, and Tommy handles most of the drainage, irrigation, and seeding. Paul does quite a bit of dozer and tractor work himself also. He is also an avid golfer, which means a lot when trying to communicate design intentions. Paul and I had already worked together on a few other projects, so we were very comfortable with each other's style.



From right to left: Baxter Spann, Eddie Peck (principal), Paul Ortiz (builder), and Pat Brockwell (Green Keeper) discussing grassing options for the short par 4 7th at Black Mesa.

Pat serves as the course superintendant and also pretty much laid out the irrigation system and oversaw its installation. Tom Velarde was brought in as the Director of Golf near the end of construction. He is a very fine player and has been a valuable asset to the project. Last but not least, Calvin Tofoya from the Santa Clara Pueblo was out on the site just about every day I think, and was always there to smooth over any difficulties with politics or whatever else arose. I know that this golf course is better because each of these guys was involved.

22. How much were you involved on the site once actual construction began?

On average, I would say that I was on site for about 3 days every two weeks during construction. The time was more concentrated toward the end of the project, when final shaping and grassing was occurring. My early site visits involved helping Paul flag out limits of work on each hole, because we wanted to make sure

we didn't disturb any more ground than absolutely necessary. The actual final detailed design of the holes didn't really occur until this time. We had completed the preliminary detailed plans in order to get the course financed, but we made lots of refinements to the design once we began moving dirt around. I completely redrew all the grading plans at 1' = 60' for the whole course, and green complexes were detailed at 1' = 30', keeping quantities in line with the original plans so as to keep the project within budget. This definitely allowed for a course that better fits with the existing terrain features than otherwise might have been the case.

I also worked with Paul and P.J. very closely on both the subgrade and the finished grade of all the greens. Those guys are the best I've seen at tying the internal green contours in with the surrounds and making all the shapes flow together naturally. Prior to grassing, I would flag all the grassing limits and all the preliminary bunker outlines. Then, when the turf had established on the bunker slopes, I would come back and paint the bunker outlines for final edging, clean out, and drainage. As you can imagine, all this takes a lot of time – I believe that together with the site visits during design, I probably spent in excess of 100 days on site working on this project.

The End