

- *GolfObserver editors*

Black Mesa: An Instant Classic and an Enduring Masterpiece

September 15, 2007

By Jay Flemma

Two extreme personalities dominate golf course developers: those who know that great golf course architecture is what makes an enduring, world class golf course and those who think money and a brand name designer can buy a major championship venue. The folly of the latter cannot be overstated. Using their riches like a hammer, think money can bludgeon aside opposition, criticism and common sense with a wave of their wad. Such men have built gaudy monstrosities for decades.



Photo: © Jay Flemma

The long second green is designed for a running approach.

Eventually, the economics and facts betray them as peddlers and purveyors of bombast. No amount of French cologne, Italian leather or reflections in a double cognac can insulate them from the public perception that they perpetrate a fraud upon golf. Conversely, men like Mike Keiser (who built Bandon Dunes) show how genius creates a legend and show how great golf course architecture draws from poets the literature of the age.

I can't say for sure how far along the "legend" road Eddie Peck, owner of Black Mesa Golf Club will go, but his

life is serene right now - good enough to even justify wearing his trademark rose colored glasses. He has his three loyal dogs, Augie, Roscoe and Yardley scampering around him as he plays golf at his home - his own golf vision - Black Mesa near Sante Fe, New Mexico. He smiles warmly as he takes a puff on an Arturo Fuente Hemingway Signature cigar. He takes quiet, dignified pride in the high desert masterpiece architect Baxter Spann's hard work fashioned.

Make no mistake, the opening of Black Mesa is a watershed moment in the battle for mainstream acceptance of the neoclassical, strategic courses blossoming around the country. It up-ends the homogenized, flavorless "waterfalls and real estate," "harder is better" penal designs that blighted the landscape from 1960-1990. We now can clearly see the high water mark of the golf design craft. Even hardcore, well-heeled travelers giddily squeal over the course like teenage girls over a new Dave Matthews Band CD.

Indeed, Peck and architect Baxter Spann might also be inclined to joke that it's "Tobacco Road West" for it was an impromptu visit by Spann to Strantz's Carolina sandhills masterpiece that inspired Spann to go for broke, design outside the box, and ultimately

build one of the three most critically important golf courses to open in our generation (the others are Bandon Dunes and Tobacco Road). Spann wrote in an interview with Ran Morrisett:

"Just before getting into [planning] 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 or 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."

Thankfully, for the game, Peck understood and embraced the same concepts. He allowed Spann a free hand to incorporate just a few blind or semi-blind shots and to incorporate heaving, contour-filled greens as the course meandered through around and sometimes over the dramatic bleak jagged black hills that tower over the desert floor and loom on all sides of you as you play. Astonishingly, on a site with this rugged, heaving topography, they moved only between 100,000 and 200,000 cubic yards of earth to build the course.

Spann accomplished three astounding feats while moving so little earth. First, each hole is completely distinct in layout from every other hole. Moreover, no two consecutive holes run in the same direction and all four par threes play to different points of the compass. Next, except for the twelfth hole, the bunkers are completely organic, with shapes following the existing grade of the terrain and designed as though there were blown out by the wind. Finally, remarkably lucky in that the site stands on silty sand, an extreme rarity away from the coasts, Spann designed open



Photo: © Jay Flemma

The skyline green of number 17.

coasts, Spann designed open routes to the greens and allowed the fast and firm conditions fostered by sandy soil to promote the ground game as well as the aerial game, benefiting all calibers of golfer. In that respect, even though it's in the high desert of New Mexico, Black mesa has a distinctly Irish flavor. Instead of grassy dunes, the corridors of play are jagged, knife-edged rocks. If Mordor had a golf course, it would be Black Mesa.

The course is inspired by Strantz's work at Tobacco Road, but first hole is eerily reminiscent of number one at a different Strantz masterpiece, Royal New Kent. Like RNK, the first at Black Mesa wakes you up with a thunderclap.

A great first hole sets the tone for the round by showing the player the course's identity; some call this a "statement of place." Black Mesa does that as admirably as any course in the country. A V-shaped fairway is set blindly behind the shoulder of a long ridge, then turns 90 degrees left to a skyline green. The direct route from the tee box is no good as a huge rocky dunescape wasteland runs the entire length of the hole on the left.

Spann knew that some might criticize his wisdom in making the first shot of the day semi-blind and a forced carry to a diagonally placed fairway, but it adds to the flavor of pure adventure and has its basis firmly in the great architecture of Alistair Mackenzie. Moreover, it serves a functional purpose as cutting through this gap in the 1,600 yard long sandstone ridge was the only way to access a corner of the property which contained the best terrain from the front side. Another nearby gap in ridge lines would return the golfer to the clubhouse for the 8th and 9th holes.

Once again, Ran Morrisett, who has written about many generations of great golf courses, summarizes Black Mesa's avante garde, yet neo-classic genius in one wise and bold decision of design by Spann and highlights how the first shot of the day is a microcosm of the appeal of the course:

"Now the question is what should he do about the 1st tee ball? Destroy the hillside with the heavy machinery at his disposal and provide the golfer with a perfect view of the fairway? Yet why destroy a natural feature? The shot wouldn't change; only the view. In the end, Spann leaves the hillside. Such a show of restraint [author's note: and courage, in today's climate] is a welcome return to the core values held by the finest architects of the first half of the 20th century who built courses reflective of their environment."

Moreover, it turns the first from ordinary to a clarion call that the day will be dominated by one concept - adventure. Spann overturns conventional design shortcuts on their ear and shows how high we can reach when we question concepts we once blindly adhered to through repetition on television and in magazines.



Photo: © Jay Flemma

The 16th fairway is intimidating...with good reason!

The rest of the front nine unfolds in the same adventurous vein. The back of the green at the par-4 second hole is set like a picture window, opening so that the view to the third fairway beyond and the Sangre de Cristo (Blood of Christ) Mountains in the background is revealed. The fairway rumbles along with the base of the hills along the entire right side of the hole. A false front will filter balls from the front of the green to a swale twelve yards short, punishing a careless approach.

At the third, a short par-5, Spann once again deftly blends his dual roles as

golf course architect - scientist and artist - by deftly employing a dry wash that runs in front of the green, then curves back around creating a de facto hundred yard carry for player on the right side of the fairway. It's brilliant: even though Spann could not touch the wash due to environmental restrictions, he angled the fairway so that it has a strategic impact on play. Such is the hallmark of the most skilled designers.

Like Strantz's idols, Mackenzie and Max Behr, Spann also incorporated many lines of charm - tiger lines that challenge the golfer to take the longer, more dangerous route. At the tee of the long par-4 5th, the golfer faces a 270 carry to the direct line to the flag, otherwise he must play the long way around a deep sandy chasm. Similarly at the short, reachable par-4 7th, long hitters go over the bunker and kick off its downslope toward the putting surface. Challenge the hazard directly. If you execute, you get a big reward. Miss by a hair and angles are quite severe. Note also that such options do not exist on tree lined, penal architecture courses where the center line is the only option. This includes many courses the PGA frequents.

Back nine greens get downright topsy-turvy at times. These are the wildest wild undulations I have ever seen. Fairways are severely canted sidehill as well. For example, fifteen slopes severely left to right, sixteen slopes right to left, then seventeen slopes back to left to right.

On ten, the fairway rumbles through the notch between two ridges. The hole ends with a green set in a clean backdrop overlooking the prairie beyond nestled cozily at the feet of the Jemez Mountains. Ten is also where Eddie Peck's impish sense of humor shone brightest. "I have this one friend who never stops complaining about the course setup" Eddie chuckles puckishly. "So I made sure that the next time I played with him that they cut the pin on ten three feet off the green. He was furious!"

At the par-3 11th, the green is set at the base of a towering rock outcropping where the wind will swirl and then die as the ball enters the sheltered section near the green, a la the fabled 12th at Augusta. Twelve is the only place where the bunkering feels cookie cutter and forced. Rather than the seemingly "random" bunkering, where the land accepts them, a series of cloverleafs lines the whole left side of the hole. Yes, the angles of attack are good, but this is the hole in all the course marketing photos and the bunkers look more unnatural here than anywhere else. Supporters of twelve believe the excellent angles of play and the skillful use of the doctrine of deception off the tee mitigate the cloverleaf bunkering. Anyway, the Mona Lisa hasn't got any eyebrows, so we can overlook one set of bunkers.

It's a freewheeling, visually arresting finish from 14-18. All of the final greens feature severe and intricate slopes and contours, but it never feels forced or tacky, well except for 16 green, but hey, every architect is entitled to one joke or two and we should be happy Spann took some chances and did some daring things. It's what sets BM apart and gives it its personality. 14 is a drivable par-4 with a green set between the edges of two sandstone canyons. There are two ways to play the hole. You can try to drive the green, but the green is not angled to be receptive to a driver. Like every world-class architect knows and as Jim Engh once said, "I'll give a guy a chance to reach in less than regulation, but I sure won't help him do it." The approach angle opens up when a lay-up is played off the tee

into the right of the fairway.

The adventure really begins upon reaching the green. Like seven at Crystal Downs, (which is kidney-shaped instead of the hourglass shape here), and six at Riviera (with its bunker in the middle of the green) the contours built into the green allow for a putt played wisely and with the correct spin to ride the contours around the rough cut of the green to reach tucked hole locations without chipping and taking a divot out of the green. Both Spann and Peck nominate it as one of their favorite holes. Spann said, "I am partial to short drivable par-4s. Number fourteen is maybe my favorite hole I have ever designed."

Like Tobacco Road, the only water hazard appears on a par-3 on the back - at Black Mesa it's at 15, and to further cement the similarity, on both courses this sole water hazard serves as irrigation for the golf course.

The uphill par-5 16th is called "stairway to seven" but it's more like "stairway to eleven." From an elevated tee, the drive must carry a desert wasteland to a distant will-o-the-wisp fairway heavily canted towards a penal arroyo which guards the entire left side. The hole looks like 17 at Crystal Downs in Michigan, just substitute canyons and barren desert for the trees. It also has the same cloak and dagger claustrophobia as between the arroyos and the desert the hazards are numerous, hideous and uniformly cataclysmic. One mistake and it's a double bogey. Two mistakes and your card is wrecked.



Photo: © Jay Flemma

The 15th green. Just like at tobacco road, a par-3 features the only water hazard on the course.

The hole also plays like 17 at Crystal Downs as there are level spots where the player is supposed to land his ball to safely march his way up the fairway. Also like 16 at Crystal, these spots appear hidden from the tee because visual deception, intimidation and temptation are the main strategic defenses to the hole, but upon reaching the green and looking back, the flat areas reveal themselves. Players who are greedy and try to force the issue will find uneven lies and strange angles at best, the penal desert at worst.

Grassing over this narrow neck of fairway and routing back through this knife edge was inspired. There is no hole like it in the world, although Wolf creek and Bully Pulpit have subsequently tried to achieve the same effect. Moreover, it sets the table for a fantastic finish.



Photo: © Jay Flemma

The alien's face in the 16th green.

Nevertheless, 16 green may have one contour too many. It is all but physically impossible to two-putt this green from front to back or vice versa. Its two tiered with a narrow spine, but it's also features two hollows as though someone took out a giant rounded scoop out of the face of the main headwall so putts can careen any which way if they are not struck with pinpoint speed just to get close. It's a murderous green. Your approach or chip must find the correct tier or a three putt will result, maybe worse. "I watched one player try to putt from the top down to a

bottom hole location and his ball rolled all the way off the green into some tall grass and we never found it" Spann explains in between chuckles. "You know a hole is tough when you lose a ball putting!"

Now, here is the other joke someone is playing on us - either Eddie or Baxter Spann or both - the 16th green is shaped like the face of an alien. You know those grey ones that have the round shallow eyes and the long thin nose? Look at the picture, it will come into focus with razor sharp clarity. The brow is along the right hand side, the hollows are the eyes and the ridge is the long thin nose.

Now think about this; we're in New Mexico and both Eddie and Baxter want to not only unload the kitchen sink, the piano, the dresser and a couple armoires into the course, but both have a robust sense of humor. "Yes, it does look like that!" laughs Eddie Peck as I mention the resemblance to him. He cackled non-stop for a good two minutes, looking sheepishly like a man discovered. Oh well, I'm glad they find it funny, because most scorecards are not amusing. Stairway to seven? Why not Stairway to Roswell? "Yeah, I guess there's a little bit of Roswell in Espanada" Spann chirps jovially.

Anyway, seventeen is a textbook example of a skyline green. A gorgeous sea of bunkers is built to look like waves crashing into the surf guards this unforgettable uphill approach. Despite being hard pressed for depth perception by the lack of a back drop, even the most jaded player will be moved by the stunning flow of the hole and the lonely, sentinel, silhouette of the flag against the open sky. It's golf at its most primal and elemental. In fact, a review of the green settings of the entire back nine reveals wondrous variety:

10: Slightly uphill shot to a clean backdrop, looking out into a panoramic view of entire prairie extending for miles to the Jemez Mountains. The new course will be situated on this parcel.

11 Level shot to a green set sheltered at foot of rocky grotto. Swirling winds will affect the ball unpredictably from shot to shot.

12 Uphill to a green perched on right edge of ridge with a backdrop of the edge of another ridge.

13 Downhill to a clean backdrop with an open view of open prairie and foot of the

mountains.

14 Severely uphill shot to green set at base of rocky grotto surrounding two sides.

15 Slightly uphill to green at the base of a sandstone formation.

16 Green set in pocket between where two knife-edged ridges converge. Two hollows appear taken from the green by a gigantic ice cream scoop.

17 Towering skyline green with nothing but a clear blue sky. Undulating contours just in front of the green.

18 Level shot to green set at base of clubhouse with rustic windmill and ridge framing the back.

In short, it all adds up to a course that would fit just as well on the seaside of the UK or Ireland as well as the rugged mountains of the American Southwest. There is room off the tee, but approaches are much tighter, even though often open in front. Uneven lies all day are reflective of "olde time golfe" across the pond. Greens share top building with the inspired routing. As Ran Morrisett said, "The architect could have easily had eighteen mundane putting surfaces, figuring that the golfer would hardly notice given the stunning scenery. Yet, given that greens are the ultimate target, to do so undermines the lasting appeal of any course."

Luckily for golfers, Spann's visit to Tobacco Road inspired him to throw away the rule book. The course is as un-Jones/Fazio as can be. All the hackneyed tricks slick marketers and conventional designers use are absent and all the strategic elements and sharp natural features and severe greens they are afraid to embrace inspired Spann and he rose to the occasion. Its fantastic greens solidify its colossal power, but its serpentine, naturally occurring routing makes it impregnable. The course is Spann's magnum opus. From here on out, watch everything Baxter Spann does carefully, he has a lot left to say.

If Black Mesa was a rock album, it would be The White Album, explorative and enduring, both an instant classic and forever a classic. Just like The White Album, Black Mesa is one of the defining moments of its craft. Along with Bandon Dunes and Tobacco Road, it is the quintessential facilities of this generation, just as Sawgrass before and Pebble Beach were the defining course's of their eras. And like The White Album, Black Mesa re-sets the bar for expectations as to what excellent work can achieve.

Like both The White Album and Tobacco Road, it appears avante garde and progressive at first blush, but open-minded exploration reveals exactly how classic, natural and true Black Mesa is to the roots of its craft; quintessentially neo-classic. With such elusive twisting corridors of fairway set amidst stark, barren confines as a backdrop, and with such intricate golf puzzles to decipher to score well, both Tobacco Road and Black Mesa take the player on a Jungian journey into the stygian recesses of his psyche using golf as a metaphor. There is no escaping the dark and mysterious atmosphere they exude. (That's "dark" in the new sense of the word meaning "brooding and mysterious," not "dark" in the old sense of the word meaning "dimly lit"). If there is a drawback, with the course being built on sandy soil and showcasing strong fickle winds, the bunkers could look a bit more windblown or "blown out." In some instances, most notably 12, the bunkers look more like the cloverleaves of Joe Finger than natural wind erosion. But hey, just like a beautiful woman, if the course were perfect, then that would be her flaw.

The same reverent and awestruck multitudes who so love Bandon Dunes are slowly coming to discover Black Mesa and now they are coming in brigades and divisions. With nearby Paa-ko Ridge less than an hour away, New Mexico has a potent rejoinder to Scottsdale's We-ko-pa and Talking Stick. Once more lodging comes on line, this will easily rival the best resorts of Scottsdale. With the ever changing wind and weather you can see sun, snow and hail all in one day during shoulder seasons. Many people actually ski and golf in the same day. It's a rugged paradise in high summer and with its central location is easily accessible to Taos, Canyonlands, Mesa Verde and any other outdoor activity one can imagine. We played on a day that exhibited the furthest extremes of weather; at one moment the sun warmed us and the next it snowed bricks and bats. Then the freeze settled in and penetrated the four layers of fleece. Despite all that, the course is easily walkable.

Most importantly, it's rare to find a developer like Eddie Peck who understands that strategy not gimmicks are the soul of a great golf course. Any other developer who heard he was getting a course inspired by Tobacco Road and starting with a blind drive with a forced carry might have recoiled in horror. The game needs more savvy developers like Peck who understand the soul of the game and strive to protect the natural features of the land...and who jovially share the course with dogs while smoking Hemingway cigars.