

GOLF'S BIG DREAMER

*An incredible story behind the man who founded
Bandon Dunes Resort 20 years ago.*

By Mark Pazdur, Publisher

BANDON, OREGON: Mike Keiser is a name you may not be familiar with, but most certainly you have heard of his golf resorts in North America. Over the past two decades, his hard work established destination golf as a viable business opportunity. In addition to Bandon Dunes Resort in Oregon, he is responsible for creating Sand Valley Resort in Wisconsin and Cabot Cliffs in Nova Scotia.

"I don't consider myself a gambler, but I am a calculated risk-taker willing to attempt new ideas that I can afford," revealed Keiser. "I've been successful by taking chances, though not by jumping off cliffs."



BANDON DUNES COURSE, designed by David McLay Kidd

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The Publisher's Page

"WHAT CAN I SAY. Mike is a true visionary. He employed the most unlikely person, me, to design his first course at Bandon Dunes. It was a perfect recipe for failure. Most were betting against our success. In some ways, it was the ultimate long shot. Both of us felt many of America's courses, built in the past 50 years, featured heavy-handed engineering. Since I was born and raised in Scotland, I was somewhat insulated from American architectural trends. I consider Bandon Dunes 'ground zero' for the rebirth of American golf post WWII. It represents simplicity at its best." – DAVID McLAY KIDD

GROWING UP IN FIVE MONTHS

Mike readily admits he's been fortunate in life. "I like to say I was born on second base," teased Keiser. "I had great parents who always placed my needs and education first."

With solid grades, Mike attended Amherst College in Massachusetts. "I've had my fair share of mistakes growing up," winced Keiser. "As an underclassman, I took an ornament off the town's Christmas trees, got caught, and was placed on probation. Shortly afterward, I participated in a snowball fight and was expelled!

"I can still picture the look of disappointment on my dad's face. With my future now uncertain, I consulted our local minister for advice," recalled Keiser. "Clearly, I was at a crossroads in life. The end result was my dad dropping me off on the New York State Thruway with \$600 in my pocket and a round trip airplane ticket to Frankfurt, Germany. Orders were to 'go find myself.'

"When I landed in Germany, I didn't know a soul, nor speak the language. After five months of holding down odd jobs, I

"MIKE IS AN INVOLVED OWNER, but understands the need to let an architect do his thing. He's pretty up front about his likes and dislikes." – TOM DOAK



PACIFIC DUNES COURSE, designed by Tom Doak

"BANDON DUNES IS AN AMAZING American success story. Mike has taken old-world values and applied them in our new-world and proven they still work. It's not like Mike has reinvented the wheel. He's astute enough to know what works and where it will work. It's amazing to be around him, to see how he thinks, and how he goes about his decision-making process." – BILL COORE

"MIKE IS A FIERCE ADVOCATE for golf. He is a pioneer and scouts the world for land that is inspired from the British Isles. Finding sandy land by the seashore is a part of his passion. He simply wants people to enjoy golf in varied settings, although remote. Yes, it's a trek. But, he builds golf for everyone." – BEN CRENSHAW

returned to the U.S. and begged Amherst to let me back in. Fortunately, they did. I have never been more grateful and I quickly learned the importance of earning a college diploma."

In the 1970s, when giants like American Greetings and Hallmark were publishing greeting cards on glossy stock, Mike and his business partner, Philip Friedman, introduced humorous, enviro-friendly special occasion cards that appealed to baby boomer sensibilities.

"The businesses of greeting cards and golf have similarities," said Keiser. "Both are extremely visual. If you look at the greeting card selection at Target, you have hundreds of choices. Typically, one resonates and becomes a best seller while dozens of others might not receive a single purchase. Golf is no different. You have thousands of courses, yet the ability to crack the 'Top 100' in America is remote."

CHICAGO'S VERSION OF THE HAMPTONS

Mike's foray into golf began in the 1980s with the founding of The Dunes Club, a highly regarded private facility in New Buffalo, Michigan.

"In my opinion, Pine Valley in New Jersey is the finest private golf experience in the world," lauded Keiser. "I wanted to build my own golf club that emulated Pine

Valley's design and maximized use of surrounding sand dunes. In my book, sand equals great golf. With my greeting card company's success, I had money in my pocket to pursue my passion of developing a private club.

"After finding the right land [about 90 minutes from Chicago], I hired Dick Nugent to design the nine-hole course. With few speed bumps or delays, The Dunes Club opened in 1988 and, today, has a waiting list and is fiscally sound. I consider it Chicago's version of The Hamptons. It's that pretty, and is a popular draw for The Windy City's elite," said Keiser.

Coming off his sugar high of success at The Dunes Club, Mike scoured the East Coast for a location that had big sand dunes to work with. "I was coming up empty," lamented Keiser. "So, I turned my attention to the West. A real estate broker cold calls me with a 1,200-acre parcel of beachfront land that was covered in Scotch broom and gorse [non-native invasive plants brought over by an Irishman a century ago].

"Although the location was remote and the weather often is less than desirable, it had massive sand dunes, my key ingredient to success," said a pleased Keiser. "I negotiated the cost from \$4,000 per acre down to \$2,000 per acre with an all-cash offer and within 30 days, I owned the land."



BANDON TRAILS COURSE, designed by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw

"BANDON TRAILS takes its rightful place on the short list of pilgrimages all golfers must make before they die — because odds are golf in heaven can't compare." – GOLF MAGAZINE



OLD MACDONALD COURSE, designed by Tom Doak

“WITH SEVEN USGA CHAMPIONSHIPS HOSTED AT BANDON DUNES in 15 years, it’s clear the USGA has a long-standing love of Bandon Dunes. To have four different superb golf courses worthy of hosting the best players in golf makes it a venue truly without comparison. Mike is a visionary and a dear friend of the USGA and to the game. He’s been steadfast in his support of amateur golf. On a personal level, I’ve had the great privilege of watching Bandon Dunes from the start. Not only did Mike have the fortitude to create one of the world’s best golf experiences when some said it would never work, but he’s been such a wonderful caretaker over these last 20 years. He, in some ways, has authored important change for our game.” – MIKE DAVIS, CEO, USGA

Now for the heavy lifting. Mike battled for three and one-half years to obtain the necessary permits and entitlements to build Bandon Dunes.

“You would think a remote, economically depressed region would welcome me with open arms,” critiqued Keiser. “That was not the case. I felt my chances of being able to move forward were only 30 percent. What turned the tide was my offer to remove most of the on-site gorse and to work hand-in-hand with environmentalists to preserve its natural setting. It worked. I guess you could say golf trumped gorse.”

COMING TO AMERICA

With permits approved, Mike’s attention turned to selecting a management company and golf course architect.

“I partnered with Steve Lesnick and KemperSports for advice,” explained Keiser. “On Steve’s first site visit, it was so windy, he couldn’t open his rental car door. I vividly remember him turning to me and yelling over the sound of the gusts, ‘You think anyone would travel here? You’ve got to be out of your freaking mind!’ Undeterred, I continued planning, reminding myself of how many golfers travel to the ends of the world for a pure golf experience.”

After interviewing several high profile golf course architects, Mike chose David McLay Kidd, a newcomer to the business. “To know David and his father Jimmy is to love them,” smiled Keiser. “They are from Gleneagles, Scotland, and understood my ambitions.”

During initial routing, Mike and David quickly real-

ized they had a problem. The land allowed for 15 great holes, not 18. “Just as we faced this conundrum, luck struck again,” continued Keiser. “My ‘neighbor’ with an adjacent 400 acres of land went bankrupt and needed to sell quickly. Those 400 acres are now partly covered by holes 5-8 of the Bandon Dunes course.”

Construction progressed smoothly, with one big hiccup along the way. “Of our original 1,600 acres, we had one wetland that was no larger than the size of a basketball court that was off limits from development. On the one day an EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] representative visited to check our progress, we had a bulldozer get stuck in the mud next to the wetlands. After an apology, we were let off the hook with only a warning.”

On May 2, 1999, Bandon Dunes opened. “It was a rainy day and the tee sheet was full,” rejoiced Keiser. “Since day one, we were strong out of the gate and have only grown stronger. Looking back, it’s hard to believe a ragtag group of newbies developed to this day what is the only true links resort course in America. In the first year, our hope was for 10,000 rounds, we did 24,000 rounds, laying the foundation for expansion.”

A HOBBY TURNS INTO A BUSINESS

Months after opening Bandon Dunes, Mike started plans for a second course. “I discussed adding an on-site flagged hotel, but none seemed like a fit. Bandon Dunes has been profitable since day one and I think bringing in a Ritz-Carlton or Westin brand would detract from our one-of-



BALLY BANDON SHEEP RANCH COURSE, designed by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw

a-kind offering,” said Keiser. “I admire Tom Doak’s work, so I hired him for our next course—Pacific Dunes.”

The two courses were now booking 70,000 rounds with only 64 on-site hotel rooms. “Pretty impressive if I do say so,” commented Keiser. “Looking back, a mistake was made early on. We didn’t build a big enough kitchen to feed the throngs of golfers after a day on the links. It was a true happy problem to have.”

The third course, Bandon Trails, opened in 2005. “Demand warranted it,” said Keiser. “Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw had been on my short list from the beginning, but they had a full schedule of projects already in the pipeline. When the duo toured the land, skepticism abound. They were wary that most of the holes would be in a forest. After numerous conversations, we reached a new routing. Now, Bandon Trails plays through three ecosystems of dunes, forest, and meadow.”

In 2015, Old MacDonald, designed by Tom Doak, made its grand debut at Bandon Dunes. “The course pays homage to C.B. MacDonald,” revealed Keiser. “I often wondered what he would have created if the Oregon Coast had been his canvas. I originally planned to name the course MacDonald, but worried our caddies would refer to it as ‘Big Mac.’ I didn’t want to have the moniker referring to a hamburger. So, I chose Old MacDonald, which also happens to be the name of a popular nursery rhyme. I am considering integrating a red rooster into the logo!”

THE BIG NEWS

More than 15 years in the making, Bally Bandon Sheep Ranch will become the next course at the resort (opening for public play next year). Co-founded by Phil Friedmann (Mike’s partner at Recycled Paper Greetings) and Mike Keiser, the Bally Bandon Sheep Ranch had remained a mysterious golf landscape just north of Bandon Dunes Golf Resort. Originally designed 2001, the property featured 13 greens without a set routing, allowing golfers to choose the next green after each hole.

“It’s been wonderful to have this special golf experience for so many years, but now’s the time to share it with avid Bandonistas,” stated Friedmann.

Hired to design the 18-hole layout was the trusted team of Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw.

“We are incredibly honored to have been chosen for this project,” said Bill Coore. “The property has some of the most magnificent natural contours for golf that I have ever seen. The movement of the coastline as it bends its way toward the point will tease golfers with panoramic views of the Pacific Ocean, dramatic sea stacks to the west, and the challenge of choosing your line of flight.”

“With one mile of ocean frontage, nine green sites right alongside the edge of the continent, and stunning Pacific Ocean views on every hole, Bally Bandon Sheep Ranch will continue our legacy of ‘golf as it was meant to be’ on the Pacific Coast,” concluded Keiser. ■

IN ADDITION TO ITS FOUR championship courses (soon to be five), guests have access to The Punchbowl, a 100,000 square-foot putting course; the 60-acre Practice Center, overseen by Grant “The Wizard” Rogers; Shorty’s Practice Course, a 9-hole, par-3 David McLay Kidd design; and Bandon Preserve, a 13-hole, par-3 Coore/Crenshaw course wherein all net guest fee proceeds (about \$850,000 per year) go directly to Wild Rivers Coast Alliance.