



McLay Kidd on site at Comporta.

‘It reminded me of Bandon Dunes’

In an essay full of insight and detail, architect David McLay Kidd takes us inside the creation of Europe’s new superstar, Comporta (Dunas)

The first time I went to the peninsula, I remember having lunch at a cafe right on the beach then wandering around the sand dunes and thinking, “Holy crap, this could be the best site I’ve seen in continental Europe by far.” White sugar sand, umbrella pine trees, scrub on the floor

and looking out at the Atlantic Ocean – it doesn’t get better than that. It reminded me of my first visit to Bandon Dunes. It was a great site and it rolled around; heaved and rolled. It wasn’t like little rumbly dunes. It was all so big. I thought, “This is amazing. I’m going to get to do this on the coast of

continental Europe.” What I didn’t realise was that it was going to be another 15 years before it opened.

The owners at that point were the Espirito Santo family and it was kind of stop-start. We cleared the layout then nothing happened for a while. Then we did the earthworks, then nothing happened for a while. Then we came back and we started to build the course. This was already about six years after my first visit. And we got almost finished. We were literally six weeks from finishing, in 2014. We’d worked for a year and were six weeks from finishing. The front nine was totally dialled in. Perfect. We were mowing the greens, playing golf in the evenings. Perfect. We had the back nine ready to grass, ready to do like the next day. And then the Espirito Santo bank went bust, and the house of cards collapsed.

In the space of 24 hours, I flew everyone out of there, left the equipment behind. The course was six weeks from being finished, but six years passed with no-one doing anything, so it just sat there and rotted.

There was a very messy bankruptcy, but eventually Vanguard bought it, three years ago. They called me and asked if I could come and finish it. I flew over. Some of the original employees were still there.

The only thing that changed with the course between 2014 and now was that we were thinking of doing fescue greens and I decided, for various reasons, that it might be better to use bent grass, mainly because Gamble Sands had fescue and Mammoth Dunes had bent and golfers seem to have a

better experience with it. The greens were a little more spicy in their movement because we were going to use fescue. Once we knew we were going to bent grass, we dialled it back from a 9/10 to a 7/10. We’ve got bent grass and we’re on the coast, so it’s a little bit windy. So you can’t build wild greens with bent grass in a place that has a prevailing wind – the ball would just move.

I sold the original owner on the idea that we had a site perfectly suited to links golf, so it would be a crying shame if we covered it in Bermuda grass, which would have negated the ground game. We’re so close to the ocean, only a kilometre back, and we had the best chance of growing fescue in southern Europe.

There’s no reason it shouldn’t play like a links. We’ve got a sea breeze, we’ve got sand, we’ve got fescue. You usually simply can’t grow fescue in southern Europe. This is such a rare opportunity, because of our proximity to the giant air conditioner called the Atlantic. Aerial golf, which is 99% of golf unfortunately, is binary, two-dimensional, paint-by-numbers. The minute you add the ground game, it’s like the bloody Matrix. It turns the game into this amazing, dynamic, creative, imaginative experience.

The stars aligned to give us this rare opportunity. And I, as the creative leader of our little troop, didn’t want to miss that opportunity. And we had a client that allowed us to ‘go for it’. With tens of thousands of courses in continental Europe, the UK and Ireland, you need something that’s unique. Mike Keiser (the Bandon Dunes owner) said something a few years

‘AERIAL GOLF IS BINARY, TWO-DIMENSIONAL. THE MINUTE YOU ADD THE GROUND GAME IN, IT’S LIKE THE BLOODY MATRIX’

'WHEN YOU'VE GOT A COMPELLING LANDSCAPE, RESTRAINT IS THE HARDEST THING. HOW DO YOU NOT DO TOO MUCH?'

ago and it stuck with me. He said, "Going through a compelling landscape can't help but be successful."

When you start with a compelling landscape, you know it's yours to lose. But in my 35 years of doing this, the thing I've learned most is restraint. We know how to move dirt, shape things and do all sorts of fancy trickery. But actually, when you've got a compelling landscape, restraint is the hardest thing. How do you not do too much? You've got all this equipment and all this money to spend. A lot of it is restraint, not overworking and not over making it.

So it's golf through a compelling landscape, but that has nothing to do with us. The landscape had been there for thousands of years before we arrived. But I think what we have layered on top is trying to engender a fair degree of confidence in the player. I don't want you to be tense and intimidated. I want you to feel aggressive and feel like you could go for it, feel like you could score. And the holes are set up in such a way that, if you take those aggressive lines and don't quite pull it off, you're not going to lose the ball and make an immediate double. There's a pretty good chance that even if you don't pull off the Tiger line, you're still going to have an opportunity to rescue par or bogey out of it. You're not out of the game yet, especially in matchplay. So I really want the players to feel like it's within their ability to actually play golf, to actually have an opportunity for success and where they feel the failure is not fatal. There are choices an average golfer will have the ability to make. Whereas, you know what, a lot of courses,

even those in Scotland that are viewed as extremely strategic, are only really strategic for low handicappers. Average guys are just trying to keep in play. So at Comporta we're trying to bring that thrill of strategy to the average guy. Because the fairways are big enough to do it.

THE KEY INGREDIENTS

The original route was Donald Steel's. I couldn't change a thing (for government planning reasons). I think it was fairly solid. Could it be better? Maybe. Could it be worse? Oh, absolutely. Some things I might have liked to have different, but I couldn't change them and those were the challenges that Conor Walsh and I had to overcome. Because we finished it during Covid, and it was hard for me to travel from the States, I was incredibly reliant on Conor – but we have worked together for years. He gets it.

Hopefully, because we were trying to overcome something that might not have been perfect, you come up with interesting solutions to fix it. It's almost like *Ready, Steady, Cook*. You don't know the ingredients you're going to be given and if you're a really, really good chef, you use your skill and creativity to come up with an amazing meal. The older I get, the more I realise what we are doing is fundamentally some kind of performance art; it's this interactive art piece that golfers get to play on. These art pieces are really important to me. And I take on projects that I think will be good in that portfolio, not projects that just earn the most money.

The front nine goes through some giant rolling sections and plays up, over and



At Comporta, the punishment for an errant shot is always fair – it will not wreck your round.

through them. So you can be teeing off on, say, the 7th hole and your tee shot must be 50 feet downhill, then another 30 or 40 feet down to the green front. So that hole might fall 100 feet. The back nine doesn't have anything like that. The biggest difference is probably the 13th tee, which is 30 or 40 feet down. So the front nine has way more aggressive topography than the back, but

the back nine becomes a little more strategic because we weren't being dictated to by the topography; we could start to open up more sand and create more diagonals than you could on the front nine. The front nine has a more 'amped up' topography because of nature but the back probably has a little stronger strategy because we had softer terrain and we could open up more sand.

Golfers enjoy the game on numerous levels. One that is undeniable is just visual appeal. Golfers love to walk on to a tee and absorb the visuals. So when Conor and I are working, we're talking about strategy, playability and fun. It's a riddle that we're trying to get the golfer to solve, but once that is figured out, almost everything else after that is the composition.

Composition starts with framing, then it moves from backdrop to middle distance, then foreground to layering – all of the things any painter would understand. It doesn't have a hell of a lot to do with the playing of the game, it has to do with the visual enjoyment of it, such as leaving native vegetation in certain areas to accentuate a certain spot.

I've argued many times with my peers about what the measure is of a great course. Is it the rankings in a magazine? Is it the financial success of the real estate? Is it the price of the membership? I mean, all of those things are great to have and any designer worth their salt wants all of those things to happen. But fundamentally, the most important thing has to be the golfer's experience and whether they want to do it again. If I could only have one metric, that's the one I would want and have here.

When you build something new you hope it is really cool. The golf media come look at it and hype it up and say it's the best thing since Moses. Golfers can then have an unrealistic set of expectations – but I would always rather that they come with high expectations and then have them exceeded. So, even if you picked this up and plonked it in Oregon or Washington, next to other high-calibre courses, it would be a 'contender'.

There may be an element of snobbery, where people are thinking of Spain and Portugal and wondering, "Can it really be that good?" I think it is – but we're biased... we've spent 15 years working on it.



The view back down the 18th.