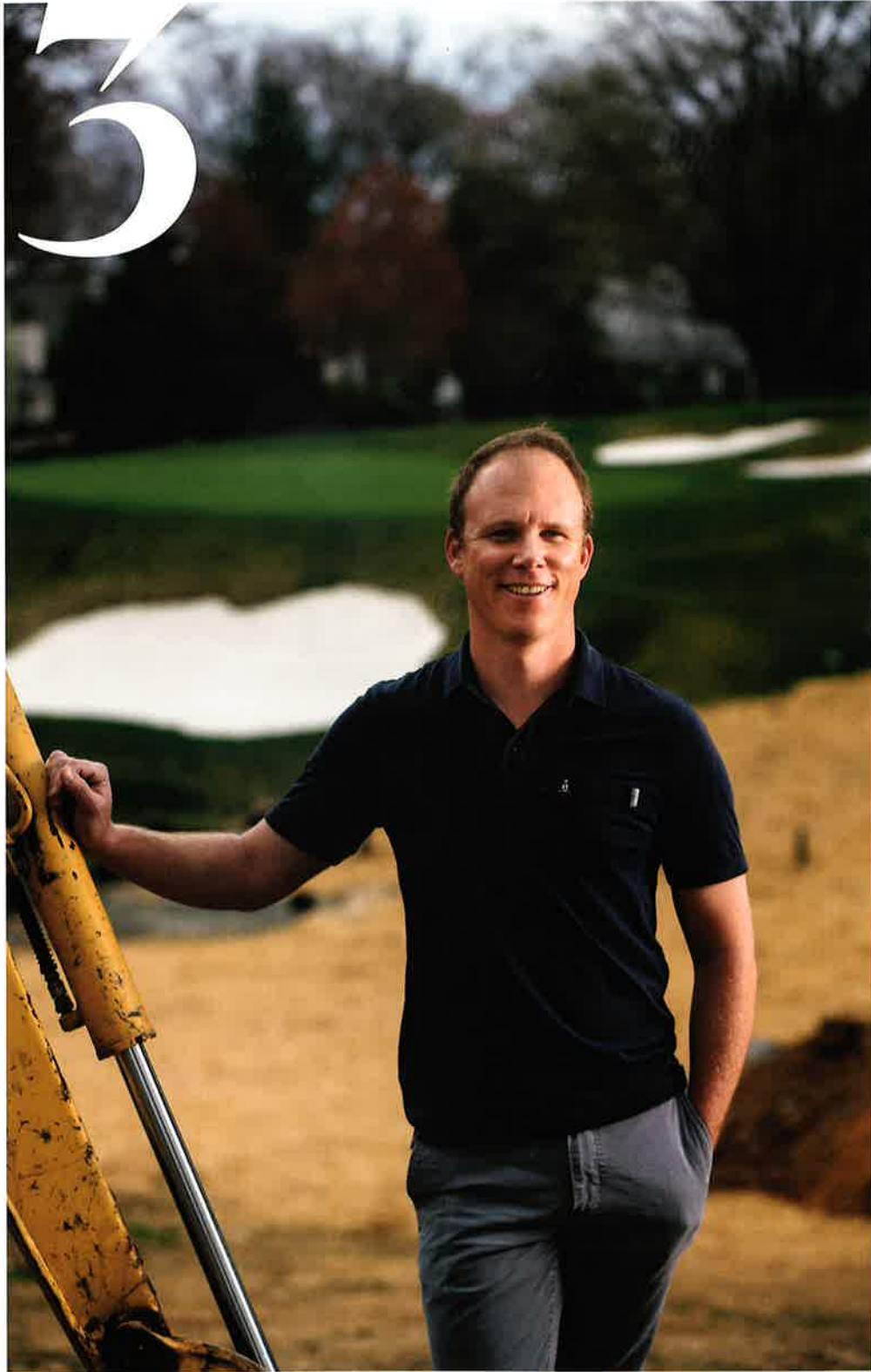


**S**hape: noun and verb. By fortune of the weird alchemy that is the English language, we find ourselves with many words that perform this double duty, and they often find their way into the nomenclature of a particular craft. Even with that knowledge, the term “shaper” seems a curious one when we consider the ease with which the bulldozer and excavator churn our earth, move our rocks, cut our land. To shape would seem to impart delicacy—hands that carefully sweep wet sand into a turret or clay into a vase. There is nothing gentle about the bucket or blade as it gashes the earth, and yet those lush, almost placid fields of play on which we golfers alight have been manipulated by the overpowering strength of one person in a machine.

The following four shapers are behind many aesthetic features of familiar courses that decorate Top 100 lists. Their bosses are the names you know: Coore & Crenshaw, Doak, Hanse. At its heart, shaping is a kind of child’s play in the sandbox on a grand scale. A peek into their work reveals that, despite the heavy machinery, it’s more art than science and requires as much trial and error as working out your driver swing with hundreds of balls on the range. They share a common ethos and similar methodologies; the end goal is to create something unique and beautiful that holds, engages the eye and challenges with strategy. Or, as Michael McCartin put it, “You want to build something cool.”





Michael McCartin grew up playing Washington Golf and Country Club in Arlington, Virginia (*pictured throughout the story*), and now he's manning the bulldozers, meeting with club members and working on the permitting as part of Tom Doak's Renaissance Golf Design's renovation of the facility.

Michael McCartin's 4-year-old son provided the background noises during an off day at home. The scene is an embodiment of what McCartin has sought to do with his career. Though his passion to eventually run his own shop led him to knowing more about golf-course architecture at 17 than some golfers will learn in a lifetime, he never wanted that to come at the sacrifice of having a family. His most recent project, a renovation of Washington Golf and Country Club in Arlington, Virginia, is a career trifecta: close to home and family, shaping duties on the course and a few extra business-side responsibilities.

"I've gone from an intern at Ballyneal on a rake all the way through to Streamsong, where I built greens and was there from day one until the end and played a much bigger role in the project," he says. That breadth of experience gave him enough confidence to make the leap to take on projects personally, but McCartin wasn't willing to run to the ends of the Earth to chase down work. "I wanted to have a family," he says. So McCartin now has two jobs: working for a startup in healthcare, plus his moonlighting gig as a shaper and golf-course architect. By balancing the two, he's been able to take on projects that satisfy his unique demands, but he knows some high-profile international opportunities have been missed. These are the kinds of sacrifices McCartin has made in order to maintain a semblance of normal family life and to be there to help raise his kids instead of living out of airports and hotels. "That's not to say I wouldn't take some great project on a great piece of land," he admits. But the reality is that the plum jobs are not going to lesser-known architects like him. Famous

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architects, unlike great athletes, don't age out of greatness. If anything, they get better over time.

McCartin's lone solo project to this point is the fantastically fun and highly regarded Schoolhouse Nine in Sperryville, Virginia. The par-3 course sits in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains and features a great complement of design features, including knobs fronting greens to mess with depth perception, open aprons and just-enough-contoured greens. McCartin built the course almost entirely by himself, as well as taking on less-sexy tasks like meeting with local officials to approve construction permits. He assumed similar responsibilities in the fall of 2018 at Washington Golf and Country Club, where he is working with Doak's Renaissance Golf Design. The club was founded in the 1910s and later remade by William Flynn. Most of that Flynn work has been lost over the years—and can't be recovered—but the bones of the course were enticing enough that Doak's firm took on the job with some encouragement from McCartin, who played the course growing up. McCartin's payment for this project, in part, has been clerical responsibility away from the course, which has meant less time in the dozer. He's been meeting with club membership and handling zoning permits with government officials because he wants to have the experience of running every part of a job. But he knows where he'd rather be. "My background is in shaping and it killed me to not be more involved in that," he admits.

When asked to explain the lure of shaping, he has a characteristically thoughtful

reply: "First of all, you're building something that's functional. You're building a field of play and it needs to do whatever it is intended to do, because it will be used. The second problem—and the part that attracts me—is you're trying to be artistic and build something that is fun and interesting to play, but also nice to look at."

He goes on to explain that the functionality of a golf hole or course is an "engineering problem" at the outset, but it requires a creative solution that will engage the golfer. Common sense, sure, but most things need to be laid out flatly to be clearly understood. What piques a shaper like McCartin is that the engineering component is often easy to solve—e.g., a green must be 16 inches deep, per USGA guidelines—but there are no rules on how that green looks, and that's when McCartin brightens. He immediately brings up the first green at Washington G&CC and the creative freedom of working with Doak's team. "I always assumed I'd be building a big bunker short left of the green and the green would tilt left to right and be pretty narrow and long," he says. But as he built the bunker, a mound came together on the left and there was a steep drop-off on the right. This contrasted with what he had envisioned; as he studied the land, he saw there was an option to go up and over the mound. Exhilarated by the discovery, he ended up shaping a completely reimagined hole with no bunkers when initially he thought it would have three: "I saw you could create an entirely different hole, depending on where the flag was, instead of what I first saw, which would have required everyone to play the hole the same way every day."

ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

