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ROBERT VON HAGGE THE ATYPICAL GENIUS

The French golf heritage owes much to an architect who created some of his finest masterpieces in France. Portrait of the original Robert von Hagge

Robert von Hagge is undoubtedly one of the most influential golf architects in the history of golf, and some of you may already know his name, since he is the architect of some of the most remarkable course in France, most of which are part of the Top 50 best 18 holes in France in the Best Golfs 2026 rankings : Golf International les Bordes, Golf de Seignosse, Golf de Courson, Golf Le Kempferhof and Royal Mougins Golf Club.

Robert von Hagge was born and raised on a golf course. In the 1920's, his father worked with Donald Ross, the famous Scottish golf architect, carrying out the landscape work for some of his projects in the United States. His father later became a country club director in the Chicago area.

Before he was 17 years old, he had worked as a caddie, caddy-master, assistant greenkeeper, assistant golf pro and commercial illustrator for sports magazines. After completing his high school studies, he enrolled at Purdue University, where he specialized in landscape architecture.

After briefly playing as a professional on the PGA Tour in the early 1950's, the ambitious young man decided to head to Hollywood in search of fame and fortune. Standing over 2 meters tall with a handsome appearance, he quickly caught attention and soon worked as "the Marlboro man" in advertising campaigns in print and television and played "Joe Poluca" in a television series.

But in 1955, he turned to Dick Wilson, one of the greatest American golf architects and rival of Robert Trent Jones Sr., to become his apprentice. By 1959, Robert was already recognized in the industry as a talented, colorful and charismatic figure. In 1962, Dick Wilson's alcohol problems led to a break and Robert founded his own company with Bruce Devlin, a leading Australian professional golfer at the time. von Hagge & Devlin Inc. thus became the first design team uniting a golf architect and a professional player. This partnership lasted 25 years. In 1987, he created von Hagge Design Associates, training Mike Smelek and Rick Baril, who became his associated in 1995 within von Hagge, Smelek & Baril.

The importance of a site's aesthetics

Robert's affinity for terrain modeling deeply influenced his creations. He viewed golf course design as a form of sculpture and took pleasure in shaping the terrain to capture shadows. His use of the almost ethereal qualities of light in his designs was truly innovative. A proponent of the concept of "shadow and light", he advocated studying their evolution at different times of day to understand their artistic impact on the player. He would say "great golf courses are beautiful courses. When you see a photo of a course, it is usually taken early in the morning or late in the afternoon, when the sun is low and creates spectacular effects of light and shadows. Our job is to bring these moments of light closer together and extend this effect throughout the day. This is achieved by the way the course is laid out and shaped."

He believed that golfers sought the beauty and aesthetic appeal of a site as much as they sought to hit the ball. He was convinced that the player wanted a genuine visual experience and strived to create unique courses through terrain movements, water obstacles and distinctive elements. According to him, a golfer actually plays for only about eleven minutes during a four-hour round. "It is the designer's responsibility to make these four hours enjoyable. The golfer should be able to look around and say "How fortunate I am to be able to play here." "

Robert believed that a course should satisfy four types of players: professionals, good players, average players and beginners. He felt that each hole should challenge each of these categories and asserted that golf is played in the air, giving great importance to aerial play. He believed that putting was less important and required less skill.

He described the "obstacles" on courses as descriptive signals. These elements are part of the "signage" used by the architect to communicate the challenge to the golfer. "They are not designed as penalties, but as indications. If the golfer decides to face them, or if he misinterprets the challenge or makes a poor shot, they then become obstacles." He favored placing these "descriptive signals" beyond the reach of the average golfer.

His courses and particularly Golf International Les Bordes, offer one of the most demanding golf tests one can imagine and were neither inexpensive to build nor to maintain.

Baron Bic once told Robert about the cost of building Golf International Les Bordes: " Robert, you had an unlimited budget and somehow you managed to exceed it". ■

