

# THE REACT

Mike DeVries, fresh off one of the year's biggest course openings, embraces randomness and celebrates Mother Nature in his work

By Martin Kaufmann // Kingsley, Mich.

Guests visiting the Kingsley Club arrive via a dirt road and sketchy signage that will leave first-timers guessing until they finally see the club's logo on Niblick Trail, shortly before pulling into the parking lot.

"I tell people, 'When you start to hear the banjos, you're almost there,' " architect Mike DeVries, who designed the course and lives nearby in Traverse City, said jokingly.

The unpretentious entryway is apropos for a club with a simple mission: It's a golf club. There's no swimming pool, no fitness room. The clubhouse is little more than a double-wide trailer. Yet the

club boasts a national membership stretching from Portland, Ore., to Palm Beach, Fla.

The Kingsley Club, which opened in 2001 and was DeVries' first solo effort, is a favorite of architecture geeks, as illustrated by the fact that it is No. 21 on Golfweek's Best Modern Courses list. The same could be said of a much different, but similarly revered DeVries design on Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Greywalls at Marquette Golf Club. Greywalls, routed across far more extreme topography near Lake Superior, is ranked No. 77 on the Modern list.

Those courses helped lay the groundwork for DeVries' newest and most-hyped design, Cape





# IONARY



Wickham Links in King Island, Australia. With Cape Wickham opening earlier this year to international acclaim, *Golfweek* decided to spend a day with DeVries at his home course, Kingsley Club, learning more about his approach to course design.

There's a temptation to use adjectives such as *quirky* or *idiosyncratic* to describe the Kingsley Club. More accurately, it is an expression of DeVries' minimalist design philosophy, which he explained while walking the course.

"If you overwork the land, you take away the opportunity to make something really unique," he said. "As humans, we inevitably try to fix things. That's not always a good thing. Mother Nature has a randomness to her."

After hitting his wedge into the par-5 first, DeVries turned around and looked back on the hole. "You've already passed half of the earth-moving we did here," he said.

About 15,000 cubic yards had been excavated to create a shelf from which players would hit their second shots. That was loosely intended as an homage to the 17th hole at nearby Crystal Downs, the great Alister MacKenzie-Perry Maxwell collaboration where Art Preston, a Kingsley Club co-founder, is a member. It's also where DeVries learned the game from his grandfather. By age 14, DeVries was working in the »



Cape Wickham Links has drawn international acclaim for architect Mike DeVries (above) and his brand of 'reactionary architecture.'

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pro shop for longtime pro Fred Muller, and three years later began working on superintendent Tom Mead's crew.

"That's why I do what I do," DeVries said when asked about the impact of Crystal Downs on his life.

In fact, it was Muller who encouraged Preston and Ed Walker, Kingsley Club's other co-founder, to take a flyer on DeVries when they were looking for an architect.

DeVries is a near-constant presence onsite when his courses are being built. For Cape Wickham, DeVries estimated that he spent nine months onsite, including a six-month stint with his family. He doesn't downplay expectations.

"It's the most amazing site I've ever seen," he said. "It has more coastline, and more diverse coastline, than Pebble Beach and Cypress Point combined."

DeVries' time onsite allows for what he calls "reactionary architecture" – that is, "reacting to what

the land gives me." As an example, Kingsley's third green is 10,500 square feet, but initially was intended to be about half that size. Over time, though, DeVries saw the virtues of expanding the surface to create more hole locations and strategic options.

Looking back from the third green, DeVries said, "Give me 200 acres of this and you've got a great golf course – just rolling, heaving land."

It was surprising when DeVries expressed his admiration for Pete Dye, who never set foot on a piece of dirt he didn't want to plow and sculpt into angular shapes. But DeVries identifies with Dye's philosophy, if not his style. "He does incredible things with terrible sites," DeVries said.

One of the subtleties of DeVries' Kingsley Club routing is the confluence of the second and fourth greens and the third and fifth tees. It's not the sort of thing that would work at a busy public course, but at a low-traffic private club, it creates opportunities

No. 1 at The Kingsley Club



for members to interact. “Subliminally, that stuff seeps in,” DeVries said.

One of Kingsley’s most fascinating stretches begins midway through the back nine, at the short par-4 13th. It’s perhaps the part of the course that best reveals DeVries’ design philosophy.

There are good scoring chances at the drivable 13th – it’s 267 yards from the regular tees, with the largest green on the course – and the downhill, reachable par-5 14th. The par-4 15th, in contrast, is the most difficult hole on the course – long, uphill, to a tiny, elevated surface that rejects most approaches.

“Better players complain about it the most,” DeVries said on the way to the 16th tee. But he reasons that, having just given players good birdie opportunities, he doesn’t owe them any favors. “Everybody has to figure out a way to play the hole,” he said. “A chip

and a putt works, right?”

The Redan 16th green is “the most manufactured green on the course,” though ironically, a member once complimented him for creating such a natural green setting.

For an architect, that’s what matters: creating a place that the members enjoy. During the round, DeVries shared the story of a member, a low-handicapper, who was used to target golf. Early on at Kingsley, his handicap started to edge up, and he shared with DeVries some of his frustration with the course’s random bounces. Over time, however, DeVries said the man “started to appreciate the variety and variability of shots you have to hit.”

“That just tells me people are enjoying the game, seeing new things, trying new shots. That’s what golf should be about.” **Gwk**

