

A man in a dark polo shirt and a green and blue kilt is walking on a grassy area of a golf course. He is holding a golf club. In the background, there is a large, light-colored sandstone cliff face with a sand trap in front of it. The sky is clear and blue.

# COMEBACK KIDD

*Fifteen years ago, David McLay Kidd designed his very first golf course—  
and changed the game forever. Now he's doing it again.*

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*By LARRY OLMSTED  
Photography by LAURA DART*



*PITCH PERFECT Kidd walks Tetherow Golf Club, one of his designs, in Bend, Oregon*



LINKED IN

*The Old Course at St. Andrews, where Bobby Locke (pictured) won his fourth British Open in 1957, is the most famous of the first-generation linksland courses*



BOB THOMAS/GETTY IMAGES

“DO YOU see any crazy slopes?” David McLay Kidd shouts over the roar of a Caterpillar bulldozer as it scours the seaside sand into a future putting green. “My days of crazy slopes are over.”

It may be December, but it’s always golf weather here in the Portugal beach region of Comporta. Located along the country’s western coast, about an hour’s drive from Lisbon, this cluster of seven hamlets has lately risen in popularity among the jet set—drawing comparisons to Ibiza, Montauk and Tarifa. Soon to be one of its crown jewels is the golf resort Comporta Dunes, opening in 2015 and featuring a 40-suite Aman Hotel overlooking one of the fairways designed by the amateur triathlete with a salt-and-pepper goatee traipsing alongside me in beat-up work boots.

“Rolling dunes, perfectly spaced, as far as the eye can see,” Kidd says with a faint Scottish brogue. Eight years after he first laid eyes on them, he’s still stunned by the monstrous dunes, some of them soaring ten stories and obscuring the ocean view. “If I saw this piece of land in the U.S., I’d be falling over myself.”

Understandably, the setting gives the 46-year-old a feeling of déjà vu, with its obvious similarities to the first course he ever designed, Oregon’s Bandon Dunes, back in 1999. That course changed golf forever, and to understand how you first must understand the origins of the game.

In the Scotland of the Middle Ages, the narrow strip linking the beach and mainland—sand that had become covered with topsoil—had little agricultural value, and oceanfront vacation homes were not yet in vogue. This “linksland” was well suited to little more than grazing sheep, and legend has it that as shepherds used wooden sticks to idly strike rocks across the dune-covered landscape, golf was born. All first-generation courses were “links,” built on linksland at places like Dornoch, Prestwick and, most famously, St. Andrews, whose Old Course has frequently hosted the British Open since 1873.

It wasn’t until more than a century later that America got its first true links, i.e., a coastal course with sandy soil and dunes. While there remains some debate about this, the general consensus within the golf community is that none of the many revered courses resembling linksland are the genuine article, including Pebble Beach and Long Island’s famous triumvirate of Maidstone, Shinnecock Hills and Long Island National. In fact, the most definitive source, *True Links*—a 2010 book co-written by longtime *Golf Magazine* editor-in-chief George Peper—concludes that only four 18-hole courses in the entire U.S. meet the definition, and three of those are at Bandon Dunes Golf Resort.

So scarce is linksland in the U.S. that it took Bandon Dunes developer Mike Keiser (who made his fortune as the co-founder of Recycled Paper Greetings, Inc.) more than five years of searching to discover the site. Keiser’s choice of designer for the resort’s namesake course was just as obscure. >

“I was a 27-year-old unknown son of a golf course superintendent,” says Kidd, who as a youth spent his summers at one of the world’s oldest and most legendary links, Machrihanish, on Scotland’s remote Kintyre peninsula. “And Mike had all these successful high-powered golf friends advising him. I had to fight them every step of the way to disabuse their American notions of what golf should be. I said a real links course would not have a clubhouse on the ocean, or carts, and would be walking only, even in bad weather, with grasses that would turn brown in summer. They laughed and said nobody would play such a course.”

They were wrong.

Shortly after opening, Bandon Dunes rose to third on *Golf Magazine’s* influential Top 100 list, sending developers scrambling around the world for sandy coastal sites evocative of Scotland and Ireland. The alpha course of the modern era, Bandon Dunes was like an errant approach shot into a water hazard, its ripples still spreading 15 years later, from Florida phosphate mines to remote dunes in Tasmania to the rugged shores of Newfoundland and even back to Scotland. What Kidd did with that rugged sliver of Oregon coast singlehandedly ushered in the neoclassic design style seen in the majority of highly touted new courses over the past decade.

Kidd parlayed his success into a series of projects for billionaire clients. For the likes of Charles Schwab, former Utah governor Jon Huntsman Jr., KKR co-founder George

Roberts and Red Bull founder Dietrich Mateschitz, he devised personal dream courses on a South Pacific island, a tropical rain forest, the high desert and even a volcano.

“One thing about these people is that they could be anywhere in the world, but for some reason they have fallen in love with this one place,” Kidd says. “But then they call a Jack Nicklaus, and someone from his team flies in, looks around and tells them what they are going to do. Suddenly the owner realizes his special little corner of the world is not going to get the bespoke treatment it deserves. I’ve gotten these jobs because I take the time to understand the uniqueness of the site and why they love it.”

It was the legendary Nicklaus who, at the behest of real estate developers marketing masochism to the golfing public in the mid-1980s, helped jumpstart the trend of purposefully designing grueling courses, like *The Bear* at Grand Traverse, in Michigan. As that course’s head pro, Scott Hebert, once contended, “You can’t play defensive or *The Bear* will kill you. It claws back.” Designers embraced difficulty even more so in the 1990s, thanks to technological advances in equipment (Big Bertha, anyone?) and the arrival of a new generation of

long-driving, weight-training PGA Tour players like Tiger Woods. Colloquially called “Tiger-proofing,” this philosophy manifested itself in longer courses and maniacally undulating greens. “Putting a little spice in the greens is the only way we can defend the golf course anymore,” Nicklaus once



DECLAWED Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods (above) influenced Kidd’s shift in philosophy (below)

## KIDD’S BILLIONAIRE COURSES



### LAUCALA FIJI

Commissioned by Red Bull founder Dietrich Mateschitz—who is estimated to be worth in excess of \$5 billion—the course at this 3,500-acre private island resort is set against the breathtaking backdrop of volcanic mountains.



### NANEA BIG ISLAND, HAWAII

Billionaire golf buddies Charles Schwab and KKR co-founder George Roberts hired Kidd to design their ultraprivate club high on volcanic slopes overlooking the Kona Coast, with Pacific views from all 18 holes.

told me at the opening of his course for the Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita, “because the guys hit it so far.”

The flaw in this logic is twofold: Only a tiny minority of courses actually host high-level tournaments, and most golfers are not PGA Tour players.

“Everyone, including golf magazines, stressed resistance to scoring,” says Kidd, “and I got sucked in.”

This was especially evident in Kidd’s highest-profile—and most controversial—job: the Castle Course at St. Andrews. Opening in 2008, the Castle was the seventh course in St. Andrews’ storied 600-year history and the first built since 1914. Like an annex to the Sistine Chapel ceiling, there simply was no higher honor for a course designer.

While St. Andrews’ other courses are flattish and understated, Kidd reshaped the land to create a tumultuous and difficult layout, with severely undulating greens. Many reviews were vicious. Australia’s *Planet Golf* described it as “one of the most disappointing courses in modern times.” Other critics used the language of war, suggesting play required “laying siege to” or “assaulting” the course. Kidd ultimately made extensive renovations to soften the severity of the greens.

“Doing St. Andrews was like drinking from the poisoned chalice,” he says. “I knew that no matter what I did, half the people would love it and half would hate it. I could have gone plain vanilla and on my deathbed said, ‘Well, at least I didn’t upset anyone.’ Instead, I decided to blow things up.”

With Comporta Dunes, Kidd is once again blowing things up—albeit in a more pleasant way.

“I’m on a mission to make golf fun again,” he says as we walk the first hole. “All this stuff about building courses longer makes no sense. We’ve been building courses for the wrong people, not the people who actually play them.”

For more than a year, Kidd has flown from Bend, Oregon, where he now makes his home, to Comporta every three

to five weeks—far more time than most designers spend in the field. (His lead design associate, Casey Krahenbuhl, is there full time.) Each visit, Kidd strives to make the course more lovable.

Suddenly inspired, he rushes me down the first fairway to the still-bare green site, where the new Kidd touch is evident. He designed the green as a bowl to feed approach shots toward the middle, a helpful nudge toward an encouraging start to one’s round. Other greens on the course are large and flat. Fairways are generous, many of them situated between dunes whose upslopes help contain off-target shots.

“Now I want to make courses you can play with one ball,” Kidd says. “I asked a bunch of veteran caddies at Bandon Dunes what percentage of golfers are hoping to break 100. These are people spending close to \$1,000 on a round of golf between greens fees, hotel, meals and getting there. The answer: 70 to 80 percent. Not hoping to break par, or 80, or even 90, but 100. And virtually no one uses the back tees.”

While Comporta Dunes won’t debut until next year, Kidd’s newest course, Gamble Sands in north central Washington, opens this summer and is likewise an expression of his revamped design style, featuring generous landing areas, receptive greens and no “crazy slopes.”

“Throughout the design process,” Kidd says, “I stand on every tee and ask, ‘Am I confident or intimidated?’”

Then, with the sound of bulldozers grinding in the near distance, he takes a long look around this half-built gem strung amid the towering Portuguese dunes and adds, “You can forget all about that Tiger-proofing crap.” ☹

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### MUKUL NICARAGUA

Don Carlos Pellas, one of Nicaragua’s wealthiest businessmen, transformed Guacalito de la Isla’s coastline into the luxurious Mukul Resort. Its course boasts one of the world’s most unique holes: the par-3 18th, whose green is on the beach.



### HUNTSMAN SPRINGS DRIGGS, IDAHO

Though this rugged Teton Valley course for Jon Huntsman Jr.—former Utah governor and U.S. presidential hopeful—is part of a private residential community, guests at top area hotels, such as the Four Seasons Jackson Hole, can secure tee times.