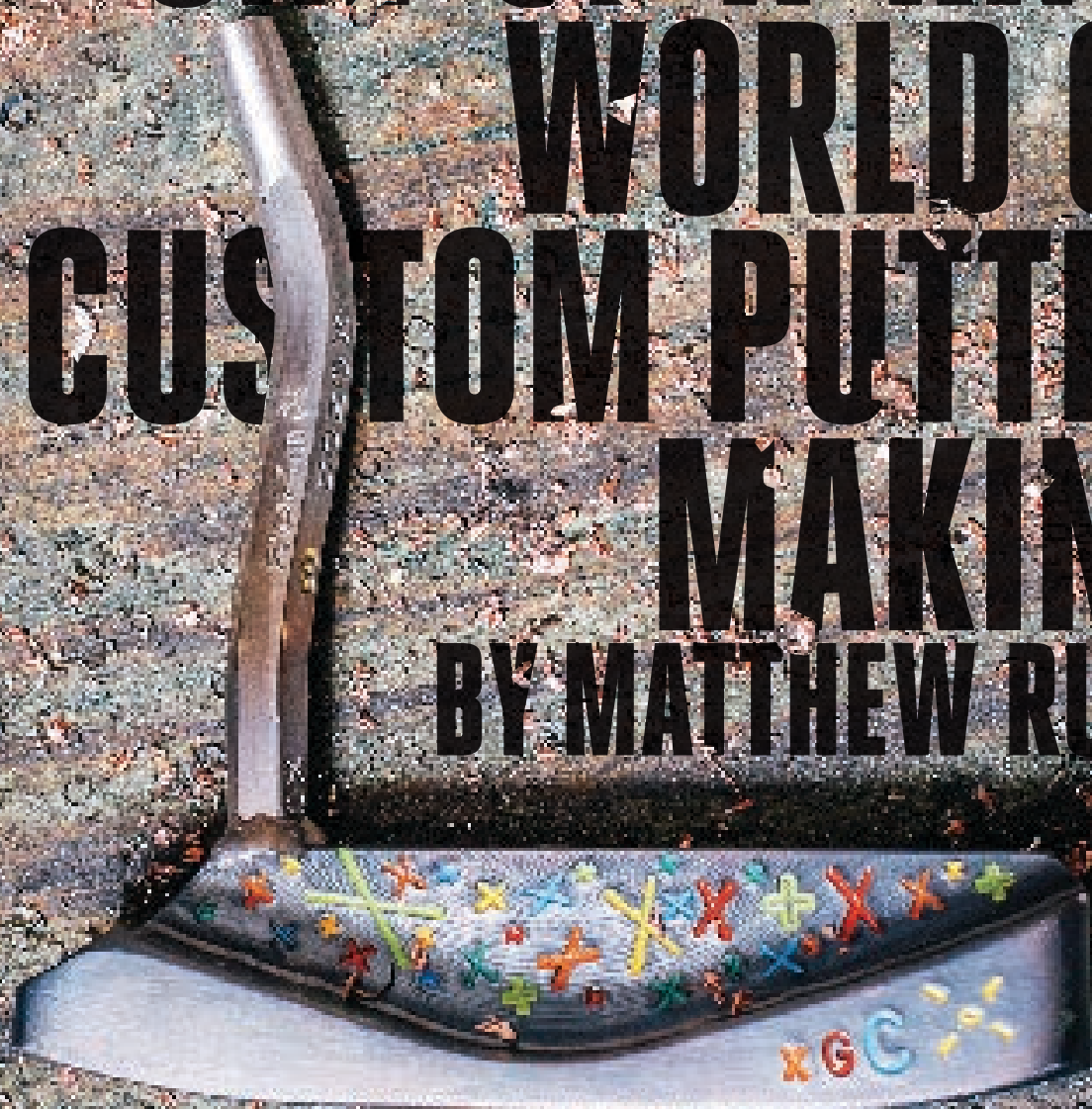




REAL STEEL

INSIDE THE ONE-OF-A-KIND WORLD OF CUSTOM PUTTER MAKING BY MATTHEW RUDY



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL FRIDBERG

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UMPY USELTON'S back-yard shed is about as far away from the glamorous new Scotty Cameron Putter Gallery as it is possible to be.

► For \$350, a team of Cameron employees in the sleek, wood-trimmed Encinitas, Calif., gallery will give you a two-hour, tour-caliber fitting with a battery of cameras and lasers. At the end, you can spend \$299 and up on a personalized version from one of Cameron's three lines of stock putters—or, if they aren't sold out, \$2,500 and up on

one of the tour prototypes lining the walls.

► In Nashville,

Uselton (given name: Kenneth) heads out into 100-degree heat to sweat for nine hours at the work bench in his 200-square-foot shed, stepping over his dog to hand-shape his one-of-a-kind Xenon Golf putters for a devoted band of Internet followers and word-of-mouth referrals. They spend \$260 and up and wait six weeks for one of the 150 or so pieces Uselton will make this year—often sight unseen until Uselton snaps pictures of them leaning against the oak tree in his yard.

Uselton's Xenon and a handful of similar one-man operations can flourish in the Cameron-dominated bespoke putter world thanks to enthusiast websites like PutterTalk.com and GolfWRX.com, which have menus of individual message boards devoted to puttermakers large and small. Instead of walking the floor of the PGA Merchandise Show in January with prototypes in hand and fighting to get distribution in a golf shop or big-box store, a new generation of craftsmen is selling uniqueness, design input and personal attention direct until it pays to quit the day job.

"Ten years ago, I started studying Ping putters, and I just got obsessed," says Uselton, 45, a former factory supervisor who started out refinishing Ping beryllium irons in his garage and eventually became one of the foremost authorities on vintage Ping putters and the moderator on PutterTalk's Ping message board. "But a lot of the stuff made in the last 20 years doesn't look any different than what Karsten [Solheim] was doing. I got tired of it and decided I wanted to make something different."

Uselton bought a second-hand milling machine for \$600 in 2008, ran electricity to his shed and started experimenting. "It took me two or three years to teach myself the right tooling to make the cleanest cuts and save the most time," says Uselton, who started making putters full-time in 2012, when the plastics plant where he worked



closed. “My dad is a retired pipe fitter, so I’d go over there and get a crash course in welding. Now, I can tell if a part isn’t exactly right just by looking at it.”

Xenon putters all share a similar baroque design thread, but they don’t look much like a traditional Anser-style blade. Uselton works with a variety of metals—from common stainless steel and copper-nickel alloy to the more exotic Damascus steel and layered steel laminate Mokume-gane historically used to make swords, depending on what a customer requests—and builds each putter with a hand-stamped identifying number. The designs vary from a hammered-copper, wide-flanged blade to a stainless-steel P-40 fighter-plane-shape model built in tribute to World War II aviators.

Ask Uselton to replicate something he has made for another client or to make a knockoff of another manufacturer’s design—or stamp something profane—and he’ll politely decline. “I want to make functional putters that perform as well as anything else but look completely different—something for the average guy to get personalized for not a lot of money,” he says. “I couldn’t sleep at night if I was putting copies out on a CNC machine, stamping them different and selling them.”

✕ ✕ ✕ **L**ike Uselton, **LAMONT MANN** got his start working on other manufacturers’ clubs. Before the Web made everyone aware what vintage putters were worth, Mann trolled swap meets and garage sales for cheap Pings, Camerons and T.P. Mills in rough condition. Then he’d refinish them in his garage.

“I’d take an old T.P. Mills and sandblast it to take the black finish off, then I’d take the dings down with a de-burring wheel. After a while, I bought my own little mill for my garage, and then I could

Lumpy Uselton uses a Spartan setup in his 200-square-foot back-yard shed—including a 30-year-old mill he bought on eBay for \$600—to produce his multimetal masterpieces.



✕ **THE ORDER FORM LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING AN INTERIOR DESIGNER USES TO MAP A QUOTE FOR A NEW BATHROOM. IT HAS TWO LARGE BOXES FOR CUSTOMERS TO SKETCH IDEAS.**

start to refinish faces,” says Mann, 48, who now runs his Manncrafted custom-putter operation out of a bay at the Hot Stix clubfitting studio in Scottsdale. “I didn’t know exactly what I was doing,” Mann says, “but I could make necks, and I could take broken putters and put new necks on them. All of a sudden, I had a custom putter, and I could put it up on GolfWRX, and somebody would give me \$50 for it.”

Mann graduated from customizing other peoples’ putters to making his own in 2010, when he gave up his job as a framing carpenter. His designs often have an industrial, hot-rod flavor, with visible welds, finned bumpers and torched finishes. “I have a basic picture in my head of what I want from the first time I cut it, and I feel blessed that nine times out of 10 there’s very little adjustment that needs to be made,” he says. “My stuff might be rough around the edges compared to an OEM [original equipment maker], but the bottom line is, no matter what they look like, they have to perform. If a putter suits a player’s eye, the weight matches the shape of his stroke, and it produces the feel he’s looking for, I’ve done my job. Putters are a combination of art and science.”

Mann says his customers are an equal mix of those who come with very specific ideas of what they want and those who are looking for some guidance. The majority come to him through word-of-mouth recommendations on one of the message boards—where Mann and Uselton have two of the most passionate (and overlapping) fan bases. “Some people come because they see in their head exactly what they want. They’ve been to the big boys, but they couldn’t get accommodated,” Mann says. “Other guys have certain shapes they like, and you use it as inspiration to come up with something different. Either way, you’re building a one-of-a-kind putter.”

Jamison Fisher has accumulated 20 to 25 custom putters in the past two years—a mix of models he has commissioned and others he “impulse purchased” after seeing photos on a message board or trading with other members. “I’ve always loved putters, and I’d go to the PGA Tour Superstore near me and try all the models from the regular manufacturers,” says Fisher, 39, a pharmacist from Tucson. “But what fit my eye was something that wasn’t so common: a wide blade. I discovered the guys on PutterTalk, and I could get whatever I wanted, and even design it myself.”

Fisher commissioned the first of his 11 Xenon putters from Uselton—a wide blade in 303 stainless steel with a flow neck, torched finish and custom stampings. “You see it come together, and you become so much more attached to the piece,” says Fisher, who rotates all the putters in his collection in and out of play. “It makes it very hard to sell them.”

Richard Park’s particular combination of demographics makes him the perfect custom-putter customer. He’s a left-handed retired advertising-agency owner, and he has a lot of free time during winters in Mississauga, Ontario, to surf the message boards. “For me, it’s like buying a suit or a car,” says Park, who owns 22 putters worth nearly \$25,000. “I can have my desired head weight, length, grip and finish. Custom makes it yours.”

Uselton’s two-page order form looks like something an interior designer uses to map a quote for a new bathroom. It has two large boxes for customers to sketch ideas, and a blizzard of options for dimension, materials, finish, alignments, necks, face milling, shafts and grips. Want a 400-gram mallet head made out of copper-nickel alloy with a brass face insert, extra-long shaft, fat cork grip and a Damascus steel-shaft band? You can have it. The options tally like high-end fixtures for a sink and shower.

Getting the look just right is important, but for PutterTalk forum member John Kendall, the ability to finely tune fit and feel is just as big. “The results from a putter-lab fitting might recommend something that can only be accommodated in a custom design,” says Ken-



✗ 'IF YOU PUTT BEST WITH A FULL HOSEL OFFSET BUT PREFER AN 8802-STYLE HEAD, YOU'RE ONLY GOING TO BE ABLE TO GET THAT IN A CUSTOM PUTTER.'



dall, a retired food-industry consultant from Texas who has seven customs he commissioned among a collection of more than 150 custom and tour-use putters. "If you putt best with a full hosel offset but prefer an 8802-style head, you're only going to be able to get that in a custom putter. And maybe there's an alignment aid you like that is only built into the design of one putter? A custom maker can combine concepts from different putters and make them work together." Mann made a heavy flanged blade for Kendall's son that incorporated those specific design features, then paired it with a softer fluted shaft from a 30-year-old Bulls Eye to dial in more feel.

Even though most of the putters are built to very specific tastes, a vibrant aftermarket thrives online for selling and trading. Fisher visits PutterTalk.com's Swap Shop message board daily to look for deals and regularly switches out putters with other members. "You spend so much time on the board that you really get to know the people there," he says. "Some of us Xenon guys will send putters back and forth to borrow for a little while and ship them back."

The small makers almost never have inventory for customers to try before they buy, so the close-knit member groups also operate as an outside product-development team. "One of the other guys will let you try his, or he'll give you a basis for comparing how the different kinds of metals or head shapes feel," Fisher says. "It's a learning process. I compare the ones I have side by side, and maybe the face is thin on this one and less thin on the other. But now Lumpy knows what I like, too, so the new ones are right on."

A big part of the allure is the interaction—between the makers and customers, and within the groups. Park says he spends up to two hours a day on PutterTalk, and if he travels to a city where another member of the board lives, they'll get together and play golf. The makers post pictures of in-progress pieces and group members weigh in on what they like—and don't like. "You develop a relationship with these guys that you can't get somewhere else, and you see how much pride and craftsmanship goes into each one," Fisher says. "You're rooting for them to make it big because they're such good guys—but not too big that they don't return your messages."

That really defines the next frontier for makers like Ussel-

ton and Mann: translating sweat, craft and personal attention into a sustainable business while keeping their fingerprints on each individual piece. "I bet there are 30 golf shops around the country that would take my stuff, but I don't know how I would do it. I'm chunking them out as fast as I can, but it ain't that fast," Usselton says. "It's seven days a week out in that shed. It has to be, because I wouldn't trust anybody else to do it. But there are definitely weeks when I'm waiting for a PayPal payment to clear before I can buy groceries."

Mann's production pace has quickened with the move to the state-of-the-art Hot Stix facility, where he makes his putters and can use data from Hot Stix's professional fitters to help tour players and top amateurs make adjustments to their equipment. One of Mann's 6266 blades ended up in the hands of Mark Hubbard, who used it for six Web.com top-10s in 2014, graduating to the PGA Tour. Since then, Mann has been starting work on four or five new putters a week, and he just introduced a line of CNC-milled heads that can be mass-produced and hand-finished to a customer's specifications.

"The people coming into Hot Stix see a whole different value than if they were coming into my garage," Mann says. "But my biggest weakness is that I still haven't sat down and figured out exactly how to make this work as a business yet." More prominent boutique makers like Bob Bettinardi and David Edel have production facilities, employees and reps placing clubs in golf shops around the country—and sales in the thousands. Mann and Usselton combined to sell fewer than 500 in 2014.

"How much do I charge, and how many do I need to sell so I can get paid?" Mann says. "I don't need to be Scotty Cameron, but I like watching TV and seeing my putter on there. I like people knowing my hands were on it." **G**



To produce his torched finish, LaMont Mann heats a putterhead to 630 degrees and submerges it in oil. Different heating times produce a variety of colors.