

FAMILY



Golf is always in fashion for Ken and Vera Wang

BY SHAUN TOLSON

In a sun-splashed afternoon in late August, Ken Wang stands on the back tee box of the 18th hole at Pound Ridge Golf Club—a public course he opened a decade ago—and remembers being in the same spot with course architect Pete Dye: “Pete said that he wanted to put the back tees here. I didn’t think that made sense because I couldn’t see the fairway; the tree on the right covered the entire view.” Wang points to a broad oak positioned about 200 yards away. “He said, ‘If you’re back here, either you hit the ball over the tree or you work it around from the left, and if you can’t do that then you have no business being back here.’ He just threw that out there as he was walking away from me,” Wang adds with a laugh, “so there was no opportunity for discussion.”

“Pete likes to challenge really good golfers. What he was really saying was, ‘If you think you’re that good, show me.’ Pete is very kind if you’re playing the more forward tees, but if you’re on the back, his demeanor changes.”

Vera and Ken Wang in the early 1980s, and at Ken’s son’s wedding in 2017.

STYLE



Vera Wang relaxing during a round at Liberty National. (Below) Pete Dye hits a tee shot at the opening of Pound Ridge, with Ken Wang looking on.

Three months later and 55 miles southwest of Pound Ridge, Vera Wang—Ken’s sister—sits in the morning room of her home overlooking Park Avenue, occasionally miming a golf swing takeaway or follow-through. “Given my lifestyle and the work that I have to do and the traveling that I have to do, golf is like a vacation,” she says. “It’s a break, a respite. It’s one of the few things where I can get outside and be outdoors, and it’s just such a luxury for somebody who lives in New York City.

“Golf is one of the few things that takes your mind totally away, and I think that’s why so many people love it. It takes my mind away from things that are torturous at work or worrisome or pressure. You can’t be out there [on the course] and not focused. There’s no way. Even if you’re playing like shit, [laughs], you keep trying to play better.”

Ken and Vera Wang share a passion for the pastime; golf infuses their lives with an element of joy. The sport has even brought them closer together as siblings, despite the fact that they rarely play a round together—and that’s something they both believe is likely for the best. (More on this later.)

During the Wangs’ childhood years in the late 1950s and ’60s, when they lived first in Peter Cooper Village and then on the Upper East Side, figure skating was the household sport. Although both Vera and Ken skated, the sport transfixed the elder sister more than it did the younger brother. During one visit to Michigan State University for a summer skating camp, Ken spent the majority of his free time outside in an expansive field next to the rink while Vera practiced indoors. This field had a putting green at its far end. “Somewhere, I picked up a 5-iron and I would go out there and I would just drop a ball and hit it through this giant field,” Ken says. “It would take forever,

but I’d eventually get onto the green and I just had fun.”

Ken and his father—and occasionally Vera—would take trips to Sportland, a recreation center in New Jersey with a driving range, batting cages, and a par-3 course on the land where the Meadowlands Sports Complex now sits. “My father is not really a golfer, but I guess you’re always striving to do something with your kids, so we’d go out and hit balls there,” Ken says. “Between those two things, I just liked golf.”

Despite these trips to the driving range as a child, Vera didn’t take up the game until decades later. After marrying Arthur Becker in 1989 (they have since separated), Wang and her husband bought a house in the Hamptons and Arthur joined the newly formed Atlantic Golf Club. “My husband was the weekend warrior type, so I was a golf widow. I would never see him. I joined the club to be with him, but then I fell so in love with the sport.”

Vera’s love affair began with an affinity for the landscape and the sweeping vistas Atlantic provides. “Visually, it’s a very relaxing course,” she says. “There’s fescue, and

you’re seeing so much sky and very few trees; it’s a real feeling of being by the ocean.

“I’ve lived in Manhattan my whole life. Physically, New York has changed a lot, like every other city. It’s developed more high-rises and it’s become more cavernous. Golf made me feel the outdoors.”

While the natural world was its come-on, golf won her over for good the day she hit her first pure shot. “When you really hit it well, it’s just a euphoric, out-of-body feeling,” she says, a broad smile stretching across her face. “It’s just extraordinary.”

When asked about his most memorable achievements on the course, Ken first recounts a story of how he missed a hole-in-one “by one dimple,” and then recalls a round played at Green Valley Country Club in Bangkok more than 30 years ago. “Back then I could play a bit,” he says. “I was never a long hitter, but I liked 2-irons, believe it or not. And I remember hitting this 2-iron over a trap onto the green from about 190 yards away.

“I’ll never forget that moment,” he adds, his chuckle and smile echoing his sister’s.

Ken’s path to the creation of Pound Ridge Golf Club started 40 years ago, when his family purchased 172 acres of land that included 9 and a half holes of a scruffy public golf course. His father loved the idea of owning land as an investment, and even though father and son were, as Ken acknowledges, “terrible golfers,” they wanted a place to go to hit balls whenever they felt like it. So they kept the course afloat and eventually, some 20 years later, father and son decided to build a new 18-hole layout on the site.

Ken began interviewing course architects, but he says that he really only wanted Pete Dye to design it. He had always loved the precision that Dye-designed courses required. He knew that other well-known



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architects could create beautiful signature holes, but believed their courses had a staccato-like feel during a round. “It’s almost like you have to stutter-step between holes sometimes,” he says. “But with Pete’s courses, they flow. There’s a rhythm to [them] that I really like, and I think you see it in all of his courses.”



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Ken believes that Pound Ridge being a public course is likely what convinced Dye to take on the project. And from Ken’s point of view, “If it hadn’t been Pete, I don’t think I would’ve done it. That’s how strongly I [felt] about it.” All told, it took about a decade to open the course – three years to design and build it and another seven along the way to acquire the necessary permits.

“He made everything about that land special,” Vera says of her brother’s creation. She’s quick to point out the difficulty of the course and the narrowness of its holes. Nonetheless, Vera recorded her best-ever score, an 89, during Pound Ridge’s grand

opening—and did it with Pete and Alice Dye watching. “I was so tense, knowing that they were in a cart right behind me,” she says. “I was like, ‘Are you kidding me? Seriously? I’m going back to work where there’s less stress.’”

The Wangs have a similar bucket list of famous courses that they’d love to play, like Pebble Beach and St. Andrews, but have very different stumbling blocks keeping them

from those rounds. Although Vera travels the world with regularity, her business trips never allow enough free time for a round of golf. In recent years, work and travel have limited her to just a few rounds a year at Atlantic and Liberty National, where she holds memberships. Ken has many opportunities to play world-renowned courses including some local ones like Winged Foot, but he politely declines his friends’ or business acquaintances’ invitations because of the state of his game. “I don’t want to ruin golf courses for myself,” he explains. “Because I’m not playing well, I would think that I was soiling something, like I was running a crayon across a Van Gogh.”

That’s an odd comparison, but the topic of art may best represent how golf has strengthened the siblings’ relationship. They rarely play together—Ken teases that Vera is too chatty on the course, while Vera says Ken is too impatient and too generous with unsolicited swing tips—yet golf has changed how they see each other as adults. “Within the family, I was [always] the artist and he was the businessman,” Vera explains. “[Today,] he thinks of me maybe as a bit of a businesswoman, and I think of him as a

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Bunkers abound on the short par-four fifth at Pound Ridge, a hole that rewards precision and punishes power that lacks it. (Inset) Pete Dye, with Perry Dye and Ken Wang, cuts the ribbon at Pound Ridge's opening.

very dedicated artist. When you start literally moving the earth around, creating and undulating and all those things, that's like being Louis XIV building those gardens. There has to be an artistic side of you to do that."

Ken does reveal his inner artist when discussing his favorite hole at Pound Ridge—the 216-yard slightly downhill par-3 sixth, which he describes as having "a peaceful beauty"—but he also acknowledges that some of the more dramatic landscaping features, like the rock walls that surround most of the tee boxes on the par-3 11th hole, were the result of simple pragmatism. "What I discovered was that the only thing more expensive than building a rock wall was breaking rocks into smaller rocks and hauling them away," he says. "So we now have these beautiful walls that I wish I could tell you were artistic expression, but they were a desperation move to avoid breaking all the rocks up and hauling them away."

Although Pound Ridge is a passion project and a side job for Ken—he works primarily as the owner of U.S. Summit Company, a distributor of industrial, medical, and consumer products throughout much of Asia—so much of his day-to-day enjoyment is rooted in golf. "It makes me happy," he says. "Just being around it makes me happy. There's nothing like the look of a golf course at 4:00 in the afternoon. It's just so beautiful."

Vera has considered uniting her love of golf with her business by designing clothing for the game, but she has yet to

pursue it, in part because the dress codes at private clubs run counter to the style that she would want to bring to the sport. "I'd love to see private golf clubs loosen up their dress codes," she says. "I could envision dressing very different for golf, more of what I would call fashion-forward and more technology-driven. I was one of those classic girls who loved Bermuda shorts and a real polo with a collar, but now there's this other side of me that would really love to wear more techno clothing, which has invaded the fashion space. I'm known for being very athleisure. I very much like to wear tight lycra and stretch tee shirts that button up, with a hoodie for changes in temperature."

"If it's going to happen," she adds about the prospect of designing golf apparel, "it's going to be sooner than 10 years [from now]."

For Vera, "Golf is a metaphor for life," she says. "You have a good round, and just when you think you've moved up a little bit you come back and any expectations that you've had that you've actually made progress... it's totally fictitious. My god, you could play forever and not master everything. It's always going to elude you at some point. It's that thing about life. Whenever you feel that perhaps you have something moving forward or in control you discover—particularly as you get old—that nothing is. You can never take anything for granted. It's humbling."

Lessons of humility abound for Ken, as well; however, those instances, as they relate to golf, are mostly entrepreneurial. "It's not highly profitable, I won't kid you," Ken says of his ownership of Pound Ridge. "I don't think any golf course is these days. But there's never been a day that I wasn't happy I owned it." ■

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