

# Kerrville Daily Times

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## Keeping up with Kite

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SAN ANTONIO — When Tom Kite walked through the media room door, I wasn't even sure it was him. So I kept my eyes down on my note pad, scribbling out questions, waiting to be introduced.

“Where were the trademark spectacles,” I thought, “the ones that looked like side-by-side magnifying glasses? Where was the poofy hair stuffed under the wide-brimmed hat?”

When I was introduced, I shook hands with a golfer who belied my childhood memories. His famously poor vision had been corrected by LASIK surgery. His buzz cut revealed graying hair, but the man in front of me looked as strong and as fit as ever. Kite had clearly reinvented his image, and I clearly should have been paying more attention to the Champions Tour.

I was afforded the opportunity to sit down with Kite before the start of the AT&T Championship, a Champions Tour event at Oak Hills Country Club this past weekend. In that time, I learned about a legendary golfer who had 19 PGA Tour wins before I had graduated from kindergarten. I learned about Tom Kite the course designer, Tom Kite the Hill Country resident, and Tom Kite the almost-60-year-old golfer with a love of the game as strong as ever.

### Kite on Comanche

Kite teamed with Roy Bechtol and Randy Russell in 2000 to bring Kerrville another gem of a golf course. The Club at Comanche Trace's first 18, which has since been expanded with a new 9-hole tract, was one of Kite's favorite designs because of the palette he was able to work from.

“We had a great piece of property there — Kerrville's really a neat area,” Kite said. “It's got some topography, but it's not too rugged. It's the Hill Country, but it's not super abrupt.”

The plentiful amount of dirt on the property made it a fun course to design, Kite said, whereas much of the Hill Country is too rocky to play golf on. While Kite said he hasn't been out to play Comanche in about a year and a half, he enjoyed “testing” the course often in its early stages.

### Kite on grinding (and not grinding)

While preparing for the interview, I asked a lot of area golfers what I should know about Kite before meeting him. Almost every person told me the same thing: “He's a grinder.”

For clarification purposes, the Austin native with a legendary work ethic noted that being a “grinder” is not exactly a label he enjoys.

“Anytime anyone puts the word ‘grinder’ on it, they have such a negative connotation to it, to where it's not an attractive term,” a slightly perturbed Kite said. “I don't mind being known as a

hard worker, that's what our country needs."

Instead, Kite put his "work" ethic into perspective, likening it to "play" ethic.

"I'm someone who loves the game," he said. "If you drop a 12-year-old kid at the golf course in the summer time, and he's out there from 7 o'clock until 5 o'clock at night, playing 36 holes and practicing and chipping and putting, people would say 'Boy, he really loves the game.' Well, so here I am, about to turn 60, doing the same thing. Why don't they just say I love the game?"

#### Kite on staying competitive

Between 1989 and 1994, Kite spent 175 consecutive weeks in the top 10 of the Official World Golf Rankings. He was the first in Tour history to reach \$6 million, \$7 million, \$8 million, and \$9 million in career earnings.

These days, a leaner Kite is focused on keeping his body, mind and game healthy enough to continue playing at a high level. But with his 60th birthday looming in a little more than a month, the 1973 Rookie of the Year knows the odds of beating time are not in his favor.

"What some of the guys are showing you now is that if you stay in shape and continue to have the passion for it, you can really play well into your 60s," he said. "But you look at the statistics, I think there's only been 16, 17, 18 tournaments won by guys in their 60s out of the 900 tournaments that have been played on the Champions Tour. So the numbers don't bode well."

Kite has ramped up his offseason training to keep up with the crop of 50-year-olds who enter the Tour each year. Though a left shoulder in need of surgery has led to inconsistency this year, Kite isn't planning on putting away the sticks anytime soon.

"I won last year at 58, haven't won this year at 59, so that's been a little disappointing," he said. "I'm working hard to stay in shape, to try and give myself every opportunity to do that. As long as I'm competitive, well then I'll keep playing."

#### Kite on going global

While Kite notes that there are too many golf courses right now in American as compared to the demand, the foreign market for golf is headed for a boom. Kite doesn't have any international projects pending, but he's looking into markets like South Korea, Indonesia and South America, where the game's popularity is on the rise.

With the globalization of golf, Kite says it's imperative the PGA is willing to play outside the U.S.

"I think the Champions Tour will (plan more international events), and I think the PGA Tour will have to," he said. "If they don't, the European Tour will."

#### Kite on Kerrville

"We really had a great experience in Kerrville, building Comanche," Kite said. "I had been to Riverhill a few times, but hadn't really spent much time there. I love the community. It's two hours from Austin. Quite honestly, if it was an hour from Austin ..."

Kite trailed off, talking about his ties with family, friends and business in Austin. He expressed a will for a place of his own to watch football and basketball games, a place where he could get away from the city now and again.

“If Kerrville was an hour away from Austin, instead of an hour away from San Antonio, that would be perfect,” Kite said. “I could live there in a second.”

I offered Kite a bedroom at my apartment, and I told him the morning round at Scott Schreiner Municipal would be on me.

He’s thinking it over.

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