

editor's
letter

BY
BENNY TEO

IN TIME WITH

ROLEX

A GOLF FASHION MOGUL RETURNS

Californian through and through, John Ashworth emits casual cool naturally and puts people at ease. Some guys have it, some don't.

Almost 60-years of age, the fashion trendsetter who started the Ashworth brand in the late Eighties is anything but aging.

In fact, his rebellious spirit is well represented in his latest apparel line, Linksoul, which is a throwback to cotton comfort in an age where major brands have gone with high tech fabrics, bright colours and a focus on performance rather than wearability.

He tells **SWING** where he gets his inspiration from.

SWING: Was a life in golf what you've always wanted?

JA: I was a golf nut even from an early age. I grew up playing at a course called San Luis Rey Downs Golf Club. My dad was a school teacher so he would play at the weekends and throughout the summer months so I would spend the whole day at the golf course.

As a teenager, I thought I might be good enough to pursue a touring life. But it wasn't until I played in college at the University of Arizona that I realised it wasn't for me.

And what did you think about what golfers were wearing at that time?

Honestly, I didn't like the golf clothes at all. Growing up in Southern California, I was much more influenced by surf culture and into European or surf brands. I was wearing 'Hang Ten' or 'OP' and would wear those to play golf.

So you set about saving the world from checked pants and screaming loud polyester shirts?

I wasn't planning it. I got out of school with a degree in agronomy. But by good coincidence, I was caddying for a tour pro buddy of mine, Mark Wiebel, who had a sponsor called Jerry Montiel

who was starting a sporting goods store in Denver, Colorado.

I became his first employee and buyer. Unfortunately for Jerry, the economy at the time was not good and he decided to close down the stores and asked me to help him go through that process.

I was 26 at that time and Jerry asked me, "What would you do? Where's the opportunity out there?" and I said, "Golf clothing is terrible! There's nothing I would want to wear. I would start my own clothing company." So, off we went and that's how it started.

What was key when starting Ashworth during the time?

I went and spoke with Fred Couples and John Cook and told them what I was doing and asked them if they wanted to be part of it. I couldn't give them cash but I could give shares in the company. So I struck a deal with both Freddie and John.

Fred Couples seemed like a perfect fit.

For sure! You know, he had won only once before he started wearing Ashworth. In 1991 he won a couple more times, then in 1992 he won The Masters. That was it! Things started going crazy and for the next three or four years we just kept doubling in size.

Then you ran into conflict with your own company. What happened there?

Eleven years after I started it, I left the company. To be honest, I was a little burnt out. To go from being a 26-year-



Above: John Ashworth with the legendary Jack Nicklaus (middle).

Left: Bill Murray (far left) lending his support to John Ashworth (middle) for the "Save Goat Hill" project.



old kid with no idea where I was going to running this multi-million dollar company was pretty intense. When I left, Ashworth was doing US\$90 million in revenue annually.

Hindsight's a great thing, right?

There were a group of factors that made me leave. At the time, we were bringing in a Chief Officer of Operations who was more of a 'bean-counter' and he and I just didn't get along. It was a typical corporate move.

The board directors were more on his side and finally it got to a point where I thought, "Hey, I've made more money than I ever thought I could. Life's too short! I'm not happy so I'm going to resign and leave." That's what I did.

And after so many years, you've decided to make a comeback with Linksoul. Why?

There is still plenty of room for a brand like Linksoul. I think the creativity we bring to the game can also be expressed in the clothes we wear and that's where Linksoul is coming from. It's a different angle, it's more recreational.

I enjoy the process of making clothes that are not just for golf but also multi-functional, super-comfortable.

Sounds great, and does that easy style reflect the way the company is run as well?

Yeah, people love working for our company. We're about as modern as it gets in terms of management style, in as much as the roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and we get the job done.

But for instance, we have mandatory 'Golf Friday' where we close shop on Friday afternoon and everyone usually goes out and plays nine holes at Goat Hill Park which is just about a mile away.

Coming back around, what motivates you to do this?

I felt like I still wanted to express certain things. I enjoy the creative process and I felt there was still a niche in clothing that I'd like to address. It seems to me like there's a 'golf uniform' out there and it doesn't necessarily resonate with everyone.

Goat Hill Park is a municipal golf course that John Ashworth, together with various celebrities like Bill Murray and Mark Wahlberg and local volunteers, had saved from the threat of redevelopment.

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