



JOHN ASHWORTH

Founder of the original Ashworth brand has returned with success in an unusual golf course project and a reimagined clothing brand called Linksoul.

BY DAVID J WHYTE

A Californian through and through, John Ashworth emits casual cool naturally and puts people at ease. Almost 60-years of age, the fashion trendsetter that 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.

“Good Morning John. How has it been out in sunny Southern California?”

“Actually, it’s drizzly - kinda like Scottish weather. More what you’re used to,” said the almost 60-year-old dude.

And that is what he basically is – the definitive ‘dude’. Nouns like ‘cool’, ‘charming’, ‘surfer’, ‘relax’; they drip off the man like an easy couch with an attitude.

From starting (and selling a multi-million dollar apparel business) to saving a much-loved golf course from a bitter end, to launching an anti-establishment clothing company, John Ashworth’s life is anything but casual despite the collected exterior.

GV: Let’s go back to the beginning. You were growing up at the time of the Beach Boys and Byrds. What was life like back then?

JA: I was born in LA but grew up in San Diego County in a little town called Escondido. It was a great place to live. Idyllic, really great weather, lots of sports, music, all that sort of stuff. The 70s was definitely the Golden Age of Rock - Led Zeppelin, Crosby Stills Nash and Young, Jethro Tull, Aerosmith. I loved it all.

What were your ambitions growing up?

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 during the summer I would spend the whole day at the golf course.

Basketball and golf were my two sports. I really didn’t have any ambition beyond that. As a teenager, I thought I might be good enough to pursue a tour life. But it wasn’t until I played in college at the University of Arizona., I realised it wasn’t for me. I didn’t think I was good enough and to be honest, I wasn’t sure if the lifestyle suited me, either.

And what did you think about what the guys were wearing at that time? Were you conscious of it?

I was! Growing up in the 70s in Southern California, I was as much more influenced by the surf culture and into European or surf brands than I was golf brands. I was wearing Hang 10 or OP (Ocean Pacific) and would wear those surf brands to play golf in. Even more fashion styles like Alexander Julian were good.

So you single handedly 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 which is turf grass management and thought, “I didn’t want to be a tour pro but I did want to be around golf.”

Then a buddy of mine that I grew up with, Mark Wiebe, was trying to become a tour pro so he asked if I would caddie for him. He then went to Q School and got his card. I caddied for him for about a year. That was in 1984.

There wasn’t a lot of money in it at that time and after a year I thought, “I don’t want to do this.”



MAIN PICTURE: Cool, collected, casual is John Ashworth’s distinct style.

INSET: A young, aspiring amateur golfer who went on to become a fashion king.



By coincidence, Mark had a sponsor called Jerry Montiel who was very entrepreneurial and was starting a sporting goods store in Denver. I became his first employee.

I bought all the golf clothing and equipment but unfortunately, the economy at the time was not good and he asked me to help him close it down.

"If you can do that," he said, "we'll figure out another business to start." I was 26 at that time and Jerry asked me, "What would you do?" and I said, "Golf clothing is terrible! I would start my own clothing company." So, off we went and that's how it started.

Who else was making golf apparel at that time? It wasn't big companies like Callaway or Nike, right?

No, it was a small, cottage industry, which was pretty lucky for me. We got our feet on the ground and organised way before the big boys got involved. I then spoke with Fred Couples and John Cook and asked 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.

Was having Fred Couples sporting your brand a big influence on Ashworth?

He was a huge influence. You know, he had won only once before he started wearing Ashworth. In 1991, he won a couple more times, and then in 1992 he won The Masters. That was it!



FROM LEFT: The "Save Goat Hill" team celebrating their victory; Swanky Californian style with a swing to boot; Bill Murray had been a strong advocate in the "Save Goat Hill" campaign; "Save Goat Hill" was a project that brought a smile to his face.

You couldn't have picked a better 'influencer' then. What's Freddie Couples like?

Freddie's a super-nice guy. He's sort of an enigma though. I became friends with him but I never really got close with him. I knew I had to give him his space. He was getting pulled in so many directions at that time. But yeah, he's a lovely guy. He's very nice in person.

So Ashworth became the biggest brand in golf clothing and 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. When I left, Ashworth was doing US\$90 million in revenue annually. There wasn't many dull moments in there but it took a lot of energy to do that.

Hindsight's a great thing, right? I was interested in taking the company to the next level which I believed was building a lifestyle around golf, something that would put us at the very heart of the game in the US and around the world.

I got in a project to bring back two 'lost' golf courses in East Lothian in Scotland which had been abandoned during World War II. They were right next to Muirfield, the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers in the village of Gullane. The plan

was to restore them and create a golf retreat with a little boutique hotel.

I thought, if we could put the Ashworth flag behind something like this, it would be an international statement that would resonate around the world, not just in America. I put it before the board of directors and they thought I was crazy.

At the same 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 of directors were on his side and finally it got to a point where I thought, "I've made more money than I ever thought I could. I'm not happy so I'm going to resign and leave." And that's what I did.

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Did you continue with the Scottish project then?

Yes, I kept going with that. The course was called Archerfield. After two years of working with the local East Lothian planning department and council, we were granted final planning permission on the project. Unfortunately, things went very wrong with a certain local financial partner and I ended up leaving that project also. The cool thing is it all ended up being built anyway.

Did you enjoy Scotland though?

I had a great time in Scotland. It was like the 'Field of Dreams'. I fell in love with the country, the culture and of course, the golf. Most of the villages there have their own golf courses and everyone understands the etiquette and virtues of the game. It's so much different than here in the States. Scotland just has deeper culture.



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You're back in business with Linksoul. What motivated you to get back?

It seems to me like there's a golf uniform out there and it doesn't necessarily resonate with everyone. 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.

Would you say the clothing business is a lot different today?

I have blinders on and don't really see what anybody else is doing. I enjoy the process of making clothes that are not just for golf but multifunctional, super-comfortable. I also like to shine a light on all the positive aspects of the game so if what we do helps, that's great. I feel like golf is a positive influence at a deeper level. Maybe that's idealistic but what the heck.

I notice you've gotten your siblings involved as well.

The Linksoul Company has a very strong family connection. I worked with Hank and Mary at Ashworth. They're very capable and know what they're doing. It's great because I know they've got my back and I can trust them. My nephew, Geoff Cunningham is also on board, actually my co-founder and partner and an extremely talented artist and designer.

He's probably 46 now. As a kid, he worked in the warehouse at Ashworth and then went to Art School in Italy as well as spending some time over in Scotland with me. Also, in between the Ashworth and Linksoul years he worked with me to set up a brand called "Fidra" with the surfwear company Quiksilver. That's how he learned the clothing business.

Sounds like the Linksoul office is a fun place to be?

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 the shop on a Friday afternoon and everyone goes out and plays nine holes at Goat Hill Park, which is just a mile away.



Yes, I met you at Goat Hill Park last year, a great little neighbourhood public course that you saved from developers.

We're in the black now and it's gradually picking up. It's been a great experience. The Goat Hill Park project is a testament that a community can come together to save a 'green space'. It also shows the importance of a golf course to be positioned as a park, meaning that it can act as a hub for the community.

We altered the narrative and expectations. We don't have a dress code, we allow people to bring dogs, we play music around the clubhouse area, we have a disc golf course, we have a 3-hole kids course where kids play free.

We're the home of the local North County Junior Golf Association, and we've started a caddie and leadership program for kids of the community. We are accessible for parties and weddings and non-golf functions. Our motto is 'World Class-Working Class' and I truly believe we need more Goat Hill Parks all across the world.

What's on the horizon now?

I'm happy these days. I'm plenty busy. If I was going to put energy into anything, it would be more projects like Goat Hill Park. Public golf courses that people can afford and that are accessible for kids are really important.

Sometimes those courses are maybe not managed or maintained properly. It'll be five years since we took over Goat Hill Park and we've gained the experience so I suppose getting involved with similar projects might be a driving force in years to come. All I need is a benevolent billionaire to see the same thing. There's gotta be one out there so I'm putting the vibe out.

OK John, I'll see if I can find one for you. It's been a pleasure! 🍷

The Goat Hill Park project was featured in our last issue (GV Vol. 97) and 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.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Overview of the Goat Hill Park municipal golf course.

THIS PAGE, FRPM TOP: Teeing off as casual as they come at Goat Hill Park; Kids who play for free at Goat Hill Park in what is a new way of looking at a golf course.