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Michael Meldman

The Man Behind Some of Golf's Best Development Projects



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By Matt McKay

The Man Behind

Some of Golf's Best Development Projects

MIKE MELDMAN TURNED ONE FAILURE INTO AN IMPRESSIVELY LONG LIST OF SUCCESSES

If young Mike Meldman had passed his law school admissions test, gone to law school and become a lawyer, would Discovery Land Company have been created?

We'll never know. Because he *did* "bomb" his LSAT, he *didn't* go to law school and he *did* create Discovery, now widely recognized as the modern gold standard for residential golf-course developments.

Meldman, 59, is founder and CEO of Scottsdale, Arizona-based Discovery Land Company, a name that conjures images of the world's athletic, industrial and social elite enjoying the fruits of their labor in thoughtfully-designed spaces, on golf courses built by the best and in residential estates that melt into the landscape.

Yet he got into real estate development purely by chance.

After graduating from Stanford in 1981, law school plans scuttled, Meldman began dealing blackjack at Harrah's Casino in Stateline, Nevada. There, he met Bruce Ashwill, who'd just formed Bishop-Hawk. The rest is history.

"[Bruce] asked me if I wanted to make as much money as I wanted and work as little as I wanted, and I said, 'sure,'" Meldman recalls. "He put me in an area called Fremont, which was all farms. My whole training was, 'Put up a sign, someone will call.' It was all commission and I'd go to Tahoe on weekends to deal blackjack just to have some money to live on."

Then Fremont started selling and he said to himself, "Well, that was easy."

Meldman sold Fremont and spearheaded a development in Portola, California, learning to develop in concert with the environment. He turned to residential golf development in 1994, creating Scottsdale's Estancia with course-designer Tom Fazio. With its natural appearance, dream location, stunning golf course and dramatic residential lots, Estancia was an instant success.

"It's basically Pinnacle Peak mountain, where we dropped a golf course in without a lot of grading, de-veg[etation] or re-veg[etation]," Meldman says. "By the time we opened the course and started assigning real estate, it looked like it had been there forever."



One of Discovery's next creations was Iron Horse in Whitefish, Montana, where Meldman's growing boys, Hunter and Will, began to exert their influence on their dad's developments.

Iron Horse was created with an inter-generational intention, luring families with the promise of world-class golf and adventure in the Pacific Northwest. The boys were living in San Francisco, but soon became "mountain men" at Iron Horse, according to Meldman. Other member families, many from San Francisco, did the same.

"Once Iron Horse hit, I knew we were on to something," Meldman says.

The Montana experience drove Discovery's next projects. The Kuki'o development on Hawai'i was created with the same family-adventure theme as Iron Horse; however, instead of

conquering the backwoods, Kuki'o member families—and Meldman's boys—learned to become "Hawai'ian watermen," capable of surfing, scuba diving, canoeing and anything else involving water.

The boys, now 30 and 28, respectively (little brother Max is five), also helped make Discovery's golf experiences unique by inspiring the comfort stations that appear on every Discovery course. From a candy store to a Kobe beef slider bar to the Casamigos Taco Bar, players are never more than a few holes away from their next on-course delight—all because Meldman wanted the boys on the course.

"Next to some tee boxes I put a cooler with candy bars, Cokes, Sprites, stuff like that," Meldman says. "Instead of playing golf, the



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five-year old goes to the first tee, opens the cooler, has a Coke, has a candy bar, then runs down the fairway to the next tee so he can have another candy bar. That was literally the beginning of the comfort stations."

The hits kept coming, including the Coachella Valley's own Discovery gems, The Hideaway and The Madison Club. Meldman says the time was right for developing a desert property in the early 2000s, and Discovery produced The Hideaway in La Quinta, a 36-hole facility





with Pete Dye and Clive Clark-designed courses. Lots and memberships sold out in 18 months.

With excess land from The Hideaway, and inspiration from Shadow Creek in North Las Vegas, Nevada, Meldman and Fazio teamed up to produce the Madison Club.

"I went to Fazio and said, 'Let's do a Shadow Creek with a limited amount of lots, because over the last 18 years you've learned a lot about architecture and I've learned a lot about land planning, so let's try to build the perfect golf club.' That's how The Madison Club came about. I still think playing at The Madison is one of the best days of golf you can have."

Building clubs that drew the world's professional elite soon had Meldman running with the planet's big dogs. He was befriended by film producer/talent agent Jerry Weintraub, who "immediately gave me credibility. We loved each other," Meldman says. The two remained close until Weintraub's passing in 2015.

Hanging with Weintraub led to friendships with Tommy Armour III and with entertainers George Clooney and Rande Gerber. The latter three's relationship developed at Discovery's El Dorado Golf and Beach Club in Los Cabos, Mexico, where they

were neighbors and partners in their Casamigos tequila, an exclusive spirit made specifically for the trio. The tequila is sold at Gerber's bars and Discovery properties and stashed in Clooney's liquor cabinets.

"When I did El Dorado, George and Rande both bought houses down there. We drank a lot of tequila. We liked a lot of different tequilas but figured we should just make our own," he says.

Meldman currently has multiple projects in the works and on the horizon.

"We have Vegas, we have Chileno Bay, which opened two years ago in Cabo. We're building new courses in Nashville, Tennessee, and in Texas. There's a new project in the Dominican Republic and Barbuda, and another in New York called Saddle Ridge," he says. "So yeah, we're busy."

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Matt McKay is a staff writer with
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