

# Alabama's Trailblazer — David Bronner and the RTJ Golf Trail

*David Bronner helped bolster the state's image through the creation of the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail*

By *Cary Estes* - August 12, 2024



Cambian Ridge, in Greenville, has 27 holes on three courses. Pictured is one of the holes on the Canyon course. Photos by Jonathan Hoomes courtesy of RTJ Golf Trail.

In 1990, the state of Alabama was only a few decades removed from some of the most violent visuals of the civil rights era. In fact, a mere four years earlier, George Wallace — known throughout the country primarily as a staunch 1960s segregationist — had not yet finished his fourth term as the state's governor.

Those memories could not be easily erased from the national consciousness. But David Bronner, CEO of the [Retirement Systems of Alabama](#), was determined to try to move the state past its reputation. He decided the best way to accomplish this was, of all things, to build a series of golf courses forming a sort of trail across the state.

Nearly 35 years later, Bronner's vision — the 26-course [Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail](#) — has become one of the leading tourist attractions in Alabama. A total of approximately a half-million rounds of golf are played at the 11 RTJ sites each year, and the [Alabama Tourism Department](#) has estimated that about half those rounds are by golfers who live outside the state.



Dr. David Bronner, CEO of the Retirement Systems of Alabama.

"When we started the project, George Wallace was all some people knew about Alabama," Bronner says. "RTJ gave us the opportunity to talk about something else. I wanted to see if we could change the world's impression of Alabama through the use of a sport. I wanted something that would give us a constant flow of a positive image."

At first, Bronner simply was trying to come up with a way to effectively diversify the assets of the RSA pension fund. In the process, he decided he also wanted to help change the conversation away from Alabama's controversial past and instead focus on the state's attributes, namely as an outdoor recreation location for tourists and a business-friendly environment for industry.

"Back then, when recruiters in Alabama were looking to bring in industry, businesses still had visions of fire hoses and police dogs," says former [Jacksonville State University](#) Professor Mark Fagan, whose book

“The Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail: Its History and Economic Impact” was published in 2016 and updated and re-released this year. “He wanted a quality-of-life attraction for industries and their employees, and a tourism attraction to get people to stop here and spend money instead of just passing through on the way to Florida or New Orleans.”



Once the idea was formed, Bronner needed places to build the courses, as well as somebody within the industry to create them. He says he chose the approximate locations simply by sticking pins in a wall map near the cities he thought should be represented on the trail. “I didn’t know the exact site,” Bronner says. “I just knew the areas I wanted to be in.”

Finding a golf course architect willing to take on such an enormous project was a bit more challenging, and Bronner admits that a few people turned him down. But he found a willing partner in Robert Trent Jones, a British-born designer who had worked on more than 500 courses in 35 countries throughout his career.



Hampton Cove, located in Owens Cross Roads near Huntsville, is the northern gateway to the trail. Photo by Jonathan Hoomes courtesy of RTJ Golf Trail.

“If I was going to establish an animal like this in Alabama,” Bronner says of the trail concept, “then I needed somebody with credibility in the world of golf. Bobby had just finished a project in Florida. I went and looked at it and said, ‘Let’s try to get him.’ What did we have to lose?”

Jones accepted, though he was 84 years old at the time and unable to handle some of the on-site work involved in creating even a single golf

course, let alone seven at one time. So, he enlisted a younger course architect, Roger Rulewich, for assistance. Then, as Fagan puts it, Bronner gave the duo “a canvas so they could do their artistry.”



In 2012, during an event at the RTJ Oxmoor Valley course in Birmingham marking the 20th anniversary of the Trail’s opening, Rulewich recounted how the project formulated quickly, and progressed into a rare opportunity for elaborate creativity from the course designers.

“I was over in Ireland at the time,” Rulewich said, “and I get a call from Bobby and he says, ‘There’s something going on in Alabama, I think you’d better get there.’ So, I came directly here, met Bobby, and he took me out to this very site.

“The way we worked with this project was probably what every golf course architect would like to do but never gets a chance to. We scratched out a road for these golf courses, then we walked them, staked them, adjusted them, changed them. Bobby and I probably did 99 percent of all the markings to decide where these holes were going to go, and then it was free-form from there.

“We weren’t working off the detail and the planning that we would normally see on a golf course. We did what we wanted to do, and we adjusted everything to what we thought was the way it should be done. We sort of did this by the seat of our pants. We built holes that we wanted to build. We built ponds, dams. Whatever hazards we wanted were available to us.”

And all this happened at a rapid pace. The first four courses opened in 1992, a mere two years after Bronner initially contacted Jones, and three more followed in 1993. The trail was so expansive and different that it gained national and even global attention. It also became the hot property to have in Alabama. “As word started getting out how popular they were,” Fagan says, “communities around the state wanted one of these golf courses.”



Grand National, in Opelika, is built around Lake Saugahatchee with 32 of its 54 holes draped along its shores. Photo by Jonathan Hoomes courtesy of RTJ Golf Trail.



So, courses were added in four more locations: Prattville, Point Clear (at the Grand Hotel), Muscle Shoals and Hoover. But expansion lost steam after Jones passed away in 2000. Still, by that time, the RTJ Golf Trail was firmly established as one of Alabama's premier attractions.

"It can be very difficult to do things that take longer than a week or two to develop," Bronner says. "When you elect politicians, you want them to get rid of 20 years of errors in an hour and a half, but it can't be done. You have to go step-by-step.

"We're just part of the big puzzle. You need politicians, mayors, economic development people. But you also have to have something to sell to industry and tourism to get them to come here. When Mercedes and the other automotive companies started coming here (in the 1990s), I saw the impact the Trail could have. I think it has made a positive difference in Alabama."

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