The ‘name’ sells the course for many Pros, ex-pros cashing in on celebrity

BY MARK LESLIE

The market. Image. Personality. Expertise. Money. The bottom line--developers pondering who they will hire to design their course.

And nowadays the highest fees are being commanded by famous professional golfers who earned their reputations with clubs, rather than drafting pens, in hand.

One million dollars will buy you Jack Nicklaus’ services. A million Trevino. A million Palmer. A million Crenshaw. The total number of dollars is less important than the image and the personality that will be brought to the project.

But what about the expertise? The bottom line is that developers are pondering who they will hire to design their courses, and not solely on the basis of their reputations with clubs, rather than drafting pens, in hand.

Nicklaus has been involved in the design of more than 100 courses over the last 20 years. Tom Weiskopf has been busy since setting aside his professional play and joining forces with architect Jay Moorish.

Skev Ballesteros and Bernard Langer are signing contracts to put their names on courses in Europe.

Lesser-known pros as well are getting into the business.

None have the education in landscape architecture or agronomy that is normal for golf course architects. Rather, they are selling their knowledge of the game—and their names.

“It’s a heavy ‘celebrity’ business,” says Seay. “Naturally the play of the ‘name’ is marketing and advertising decision... If they have Arnold Palmer involved in their golf course people know it’s going to be pretty spiffy, pretty nice...”

“arvin Development Co. Vice President William Bissett, who is overseeing the Wisconsin project, explained the choice of three pros:

“A couple of things that we considered to be important were at play here. On the one hand we wanted a golf course architect that would give us a playable course that could handle a 20-handicapper one day and a tournament the next. We thought that after interviewing a number of architects these three represent the best mix for us. They were willing to work with us, to do what we wanted to do; they believe in playability of courses; and they were the best mix in terms of competitive spirit...”

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“We’ve got an A team and a B team. We’ve got an A team and a B team.”

Robbins qualified his statement, saying, “It (hiring famous pros) is not for all developments. It depends on the market you’re targeting. You don’t always need a big name. If the market can’t afford it you can’t justify it.”

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“How much marketing is too much? Arnold Palmer reportedly was taken aback by the crossed swords at his press conference announcing Lake Forest Country Club in Louisville, Ky., just he walked his walk.

We may be losing some degree of marquee value, but we’ve got more made up for it in quality, service, responsiveness, and expertise in the development process. There are no ego problems whatsoever. It’s been a wonderful relationship.”

In the Kingsmill on the James case, Strange lives in the community, adding a different angle to his participation in the new course.

“He’s well respected here and very much enjoyed by our membership and residents,” said Knight. “Curtis adds a dimension that might not be added by going with another golfer. He lends the value of his name and it also makes him a bigger part of our development.”

Expertise

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“The long haul

Speaking of pro golfers and their commitment, or lack of commitment to the professionalism in design, Seay said, “They’re going to get more interested or they’re going to get out because that’s the nature of this beast.

“Every day you learn a little bit more, and a little bit more, and that compounds energy and excitement, or it compounds frustration and a pain in the neck.”

Robbins of Nicklaus/Sierra summed up his feelings on the question of matching the golf course architecture business: “A lot of guys are calling themselves golf course architects who don’t deserve to be in the business. I think that’s the same with guys who aren’t pros as well as those who are.”