The pros: Are they a good choice to design? There's disagreement in the industry

**Hurdzan says: ‘No’**

**BY DR. MICHAEL HURDZAN**

It would be foolish to suggest that the world's best golfers should not be involved in golf course design. First of all, they obviously know a lot about the game, having played it on the best courses around the world.

Secondly, golf course design is highly subjective, a combination of art and science. While there is a basic understanding of the game is likely to have a few ideas that can make any course design more interesting or more fun to play.

Having participated in about 150 golf course design projects in the United States and elsewhere, I learned long ago that no one has all the answers. This is the case for all artists and architects. We always remain open to suggestions from our clients, and from others.

Each golf course development has to be a team process.

However, I do object to celebrity golfers who almost magically take on the label “golf course architect” when they have only had a few years of training experience and technical competence implied by that designation.

Playing excellent golf, even winning major championships, no more qualifies a person as an architect than being a champion race car driver qualifies a person to be a highway engineer. The driver may have a good feel for surface conditions, but probably doesn't have a complete understanding of the more complex "big picture" beneath the surface, nor the "for using" and "producing" are two different things. I would expect someone who intends to take credit for designing a golf course would, at a minimum, be able to point to the following:

- Analyze a site from a contour map and aerial photos, create a base map, and lay out a golf course on that map, insuring that the design will have adequate water, drain properly, be compatible with the environment, and meet the needs of the client with respect to land use, playing characteristics, and budget.
- Formulate detailed construction plans and specifications to insure that the course can be built as designed, and within budget.
- Supervise construction on site, selecting contractors, and reviewing bids, through effective oversight of actual activity.
- Provide agronomic advice and consultation through the establishment and maturation of the course, to insure a successful opening.

All of the architects I know, and I know most of them, can handle all of these tasks and a great deal more. They all have had formal training in design and architecture, and obtained hands-on experience in course construction before they presumed to hang out a shingle as a golf course "architect." Some of them also happen to be excellent golfers, but it is not their playing skills, in my opinion, that qualifies them to design golf courses.

Wait a minute, you might ask, if all that is true, how do all these pro golfer "signature" courses come into existence? And why are so many of them fine courses?

The answer, in many cases, lies somewhere between plagiarism and ghost writing. Some celebrity golfers now hire ghost writers (even have a couple of television announcers involved) design courses in the same way that Hollywood stars write books. They affiliate themselves with someone with the technical competence and experience to see that the job gets done right. The “star” makes a contribution, to be sure, but the real architect usually stays behind the scenes.

Another method common to celebrity designed courses is to hire a competent builder, a company that is so-called architect “for using” and “producing” are two different things.

A third method common to celebrity designed courses is to bring in a competent builder, a company that is so-called architect “for using” and “produced.” If it will not let the so-called architect make any serious mistakes. In effect, the contractor actually does the technical design.

A fourth method is to make up for lack of technical design skill with a fat fee. "We pay better than you do," he says, and contracts the "signature" be personally involved in all aspects of the design and production of the course. On-site visits at various stages of development assure that the design is faithfully created and constructed. A final site visit prior to grassing allows us to provide the owner with a realistic get-a-touch, personal touches and finishing touches which we believe are an invaluable benefit to the course and its developer.

Many golf course developments today are real-estate oriented or driven. In these instances name recognition of the professional's design skill invariably produces a marketing advantage for the owner/developer both in the sale of real estate and equity memberships when appropriate.

Why should an owner/developer choose a "signature" design? We feel the reasons are self-evident.

The combination of playing experience, technical competence and expertise, the dedication of the professional and his reputation for excellence, and the increased marketability of the finished product is clear and irrefutable reasons for making such a choice. 

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