

'The future is here,' says Weiskopf of course design

By MARK LESLIE

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Wrapping up his co-design work with ex-partner Jay Morrish, Tom Weiskopf has formed his own golf course architecture company here and declared the world is his stage.

"This is my future. This is where I want to be and what I like to do," he said of Tom Weiskopf Signature Designs. "Playing golf still remains a hobby."

Weiskopf has worked to put together a design team since last November when Morrish decided to slow down his design work and Weiskopf opted to increase his own load. "I have two associates who will do working drawings and help in the field and with the routings," he said. "It's taken me some time. The choice is one of blending personalities and philosophies and experience."

The response has been "unbelievable," he said. "I'm overwhelmed. It has given me so much confidence."

Saying he already has seven course designs under contract, Weiskopf attributed the success in part to "the package I've put together — in regard to promotional agreements, during construction and ongoing; in regard to management, by associates outside the company..."

"We're trying to keep this under one roof: marketing and feasibility studies, management, and design. More than half our clients have needed a total turnkey package."

Under contract are:

- Vestosa in Tucson — a four-course project, with two public and two private tracks, that will be built out over the next five years, beginning this fall when ground will be broken on one of the public courses.
- Another course at Troon North, which is under negotiation with the city of Scottsdale.
- A new private facility at PGA West, construction of which will start in late fall.
- A private residential community in Lake-of-the-Ozarks, Mo., which will be started this fall.

Faced with this bulk of work, Weiskopf said he will continue to set Tour play aside, where it basically has remained since 1983. "This golf course design business with Jay was a full-time job," he said. "It's even more full-time now. I will play, but very sparingly. I will never let play interfere with my responsibility to my clients. I'm not just putting my name on these projects. I will continue to respect my clients and their needs in time, not just in using my name."

"It is attention to detail that gave Jay and me our respect in the industry. I'm going to take it to another level."

He said he is interested in projects the world over — "if I have the time and they are the right people in the right market and with good land." He is involved in talks concerning three courses in Mexico, which, he said, "is busting out," and others in South America.

A key player on the Weiskopf team is former Pebble Beach assistant superintendent Dave Porter, who holds degrees in agronomy and aeronautical engineering and has helped build golf courses, including Loch Lomond in Scotland.



Tour pro/golf course architect Tom Weiskopf, left, and former design partner Jay Morrish, right, talk with Double Eagle Golf Club owner John H. McConnell at the Galena, Ohio, course.

Q&A: Morrish on design, superintendents...

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bounce the ball onto the right half of this green right here. He would close it off. We will allow you to bounce the ball to a portion of it. But we still have a nice, tucked-away pin position where you're going to have to work the ball...

GCN: To make it tougher for the pros.

JM: Sure.

GCN: Weiskopf and Nicklaus can help design for pros. But what about the influence on designing a golf course for the average player?

JM: I rely on my own instincts because I'm a mortal. I've always felt Nicklaus really doesn't understand how bad people are. To him, a bad player is a two-handicap. If you're a 15-handicap, you're hopeless. There's no sense of you even being out there.

He's never said that. That's just a sense I've gotten. I've always been the one to make certain we give poor players the easy angle on the tee shots, that we get them up close and let them bounce the ball.

GCN: You've designed courses in the desert, in the mountains, links. What is your favorite kind?

JM: Somebody asked Johnny Mercer, "What's your favorite song you've written?" He said, "The next one." That's the way I feel.

I think an architect shouldn't critique his own work until the course is 4 or 5 years old. I'd say the best I've worked on of that generation are Forest Highlands [in Flagstaff, Ariz.], Troon and Troon North [in Scottsdale, Ariz.]. I lump all three of those together.

I think Double Eagle [in Galena, Ohio] will prove better than those. And one we will never equal again is Loch Lomond [in Scotland].

GCN: How much does ease of maintenance affect your design?

JM: We're not creating a paradise for a superintendent. We're creating a golf course. And our courses are much easier to maintain than some I've seen. We do try to make it easier around the green, but once in awhile you have to build in a bunker that they [grounds crew] are really going to have to take care of.

GCN: Do you find a conflict between the demands of a superintendent wanting a course that's easier to maintain, and your own desires to make a course that's fun and difficult to play?

JM: My philosophy is, there are 100-and-some-odd architects in our society.

Somebody's going to do it the way you [developer] want it done. If you like what I do, hire me. If you don't, hire whoever you want. If I'm going to make bunkers in a way you think is unfair, hire somebody else.

GCN: More superintendents are coming on the job during course construction. How much influence does he have on design for maintenance ease?

JM: We discuss everything with the superintendent. But I'm not going to let him go out there helter-skelter and change our design. Certainly we want to be cooperative with them. We don't ever want to get the image we have created a monster to maintain.

For instance, [superintendent] Terry Buchen at Double Eagle said: "Make it as hard for me as you can. It's a challenge. Do anything you want."

GCN: Does seeing and playing great golf courses like this one (San Francisco Golf Club) affect your design?

JM: I'd love to be able to emulate these bunkers. They're fantastic.

GCN: What sets these bunkers apart?

JM: [A.W.] Tillinghast took some relatively simple shapes, put bunkers in combinations and created intricate designs. He made some very simple bunkers, and some very complicated ones.

One thing I'm trying to do with bunkers (that a lot of American architects aren't doing) is; You'll see fingers coming out of low areas, instead of off high areas, into the bunkers. I've seen a lot of the great old architects do that. It's very difficult to get the modern construction company to understand that because they've never done it. As simple as it looks, it's very difficult to get a contractor to build

that. It's like the finger is torqued.

I'd like to find some 90-year-old construction guy and get him on one of my jobs.

GCN: There's something to be said for having a shaper or two who knows your style. Why doesn't everybody do that?

JM: We do limit it to three contractors. If we ask for so-and-so we usually get him.

GCN: You talk about getting back to classical design. How do you define classical design?

JM: I wish I knew. I can relate to courses I call classical design. They have some of these elements here. Shinnecock, for example. There's nothing behind the greens and very few bunkers. It's a good example that you don't need big mounds to stop the ball going off the green. Let it go off.

GCN: What if you're Stimping greens at 10 or 11 — doesn't that become penal?

JM: The greens should still be designed to hold the shots. Pinehurst #2 is a great example. The edges of the greens go down the slope and, if you don't put the ball in the proper place, that ball is going to run off down there. But what is so neat about it is, Ross gave you the option to chip, pitch or putt it.

GCN: Do you think golf will go in the other direction from green?

JM: In maintenance, yes. Dry them out. Reduce pesticides. They may even take away some of the materials that control poa annua and weeds in greens.

That doesn't bother me a bit — as long as everybody does it. I don't want to be forced to do it while the guy up the road is not. But if the whole industry does it, I think that would be great.

GCN: How about the architects taking a lead in doing that? Or is it not up to them?

JM: It really isn't. It's maintenance.

GCN: So you are putting it in the lap of the owner. It is the owner or greens committee that will tell the superintendent how they want the course.

JM: It won't work. They want them green. I remember a conversation I had with Byron Nelson and he said when he was learning his craft, part of the challenge was the fact that one green might putt four on the Stimpmeter and the next one might putt nine. You might get a horrible lie right in the middle of the fairway. You might get a great lie in the rough.

You had to be very innovative. It was part of golf. He said now if they ever get any kind of a bad lie, they just scream about it. He said that is wrong. And I agree with him 100 percent.

I think golf courses are maintained too well. I'm just as guilty as anybody else. I want my course to be better maintained than somebody else's down the road.

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