Robert Trent Jones Jr. exceeds expectations with Golf by Design

BY MARK LESLIE

It was a long time coming, but Robert Trent Jones' new book was worth the wait. Jones, whose dad dizzled golf course design aficionados a couple of years ago with "Golf's Magnificent Challenge," provides a unique twist both on design and play. Impossible? No way.

In what may be the best-written golf coffee-table book in some time, Jones sheds his designer's sketch pad and doffs his player's thinking cap in this morsel of reading and viewing treasure, "Golf by Design — How To Lower Your Score by Reading the Features of a Course."

"No two courses or rounds are so alike that you can attack them with exactly the same game plan," writes Jones, who worked on this book for several years. "For me, the constantly changing conditions and the diversity of holes define the essence of the game."

Indeed, Jones relates architect-equals-defense golfer-equals-attacker in terms of chess, pool, and air & land strikes in warfare.

"A well-defended golf hole is a giant chessboard where the designer has created a system of defenses" — sometimes obvious like waste bunkers, sometimes camouflaged, to sabotage the golfer's game, he writes.

Jones looks his book with hints for the golfer — from the view of a designer who is himself a pretty darn good golfer. A couple of out-takes:

• "Your first lesson in course mastery is to be aware of the significant natural factors that should influence how you approach a course."

• "Visualize a hole as a series of planes without grass, trees and water. That's the designer's view when he lays out a hole."

• "Tally your shot-making abilities to the course. You mentally take control of the design...Designers try to tempt you into hitting risky shots. Smart players know their limits and avoid trouble."

• "Letting you into the mind of the architect's id: "On certain holes, a designer may attempt to upset a golfer's balance and mindset. He tempts you to push too hard or take unnecessary chances. I often say, 'Lost ball, lost stroke, lost confidence.' "

Jones talks of strategic, penal and heroic design. He compares geographic categories of courses — links or seaside, prairie, parkland, desert, mountain and tropical. He talks of psychology and rhythm. He talks of the evolution of different aspects of golf design, such as the tremendous changes in the physical and strategic importance of tees in the last 30 to 40 years; and the technical advances in ball and club construction that have produced higher shot trajectories and moved the game from a "land campaign to an aerial assault."

He even gives insights into how to study a scorecard to analyze the course through its yardages, par, hole handicaps, slope rating and the like. "Golf by Design" is spiced with myriad four-color photographs and drawings to illustrate Jones' points.

"Our ambitious attempt," he recounts, "was to take you into the mind of a golf course architect. Just as you are the player, or 'attacker' if you will, the golf course architect is the 'defender.' He has mustered all his skill and creative energy to present you with a playground which you try to conquer with every stroke of your club. He tries to tantalize you with an inviting landscape, camouflaged and beset with bunkers, swales and grassy slopes."

It was an ambitious attempt realized for Jones, and I hope this tantalizes you into reading it for yourself. Ah-h, sweet success.

"Golf by Design" costs $25 and is published by Little, Brown and Co. of Boston, New York, Toronto and London.

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