

## Bruce Hepner — with Tom Doak a Renaissance man

### Restoring the classics is a career goal



Bruce Hepner is casual but intense on site of one of his design projects.



Restoring classic courses designed by the likes of Donald Ross, Walter Travis, Seth Raynor and Willie Park has earned a reputation for Renaissance Golf Design of Traverse City, Mich. Vice President of Design Bruce Hepner, who works with principal Tom Doak, is in the midst of several restoration projects, as well as new courses in 1999. Before joining Doak in 1993, Hepner was a design associate with Forse Design in Pennsylvania from 1989-93. He holds a bachelor's degree with distinction in civil engineering from Michigan Technological University in Houghton, Mich. We spent a day with Hepner at Cape Arundel Golf Club in Kennebunkport, Maine, where he is restoring a 1921 Walter Travis design. Though our conversation was not carried out as a question-and-answer session, it was so intriguing we have restructured it as such.

**GCN:** You're a proponent of minimalism in design. Have you seen a major shift in that direction in the last few years?

**Hepner:** When people talk about minimalism, some architects say, 'We haven't moved earth all of our life. What's all this minimalism talk?' Minimalism is understanding how to route a golf course on a good piece of land. You can still route a bad golf course on a good piece of land. Minimalism is maximizing the land.

**GCN:** On old courses, it seems the greens have changed the most, doesn't it?

**Hepner:** Yes. At Cape Arundel Golf Club, they had lost 30 to 40 percent of the putting surfaces. That's normal all over the East Coast. When they went to triplex mowing, they couldn't get all the tight corners and nuances. And it's hard to see. These are 80-year-old courses. If you lose an inch a year it's 80 inches. Unless you have a keen eye coming in... That's what we do. From our experience with old courses we can tell you exactly where the green was...

I always say when a putting surface is really natural it drapes the land. It's almost like you took a sheet and went "poof," and it laid right over the ground. It's almost like a vacuum form sucking it to the ground. When we came to Cape Arundel, we found the greens were little circles inside what had been the old greens.

**GCN:** On older courses, water was not such an issue either. How do you feel about that?

**Hepner:** Come to Cape Arundel in August and the fairways are brown and

purple. It's hot and hard. It plays perfectly.

One thing great about coastal golf in Maine is that it's bedrock. It's a blessing because they can't put irrigation in the ground. So they have hard conditions like they used to. People don't understand that healthy turf is a little brown, not green. Lush green turf is not healthy. The plant is getting all its moisture in the crown and leaves, not in the root.

In a nuclear war you could still play golf out here pretty good. I always think the perfect test of a design is if you had a nuclear war, would the golf course still hold up. Conditioning should have no effect on how good the golf course is. Unfortunately in America we do that. A lot of people who go to St. Andrews the first time say, 'Ugh!'

**GCN:** What is your feeling about blind shots?

**Hepner:** The problem with American golf is the same as with our society: instant satisfaction. Golfers want to know everything in the one round of golf they play at a course. But golf is a game of adaptation. You adapt yourself to the course. You should play a golf course many times. It's like a wine; you should try it a lot to understand its nuances.

Resort golf is, play it once — wow, wow, wow — and drop your 200 bucks and go back to the office on Monday and say, "Boy, I had fun."

Great architecture is not that.

**GCN:** Do you find drainage to be a major problem in restorations?

**Hepner:** The old-time architects found the dirt as close as they could. They took it from little valleys to create or enhance drainage and used it to build bunkers.

The world generally drains before you build a golf course. Otherwise you have wetlands. The ground drains naturally over thousands of years. When you put turfgrass on it, that slows drainage and runoff, so sometimes you want to enhance it. And you put in catch basins.

They didn't do much to fairways. They added features. They built great greens. They found the dirt on site, within 100 yards of the green sites because they didn't have big equipment...

If you have pushup greens, as long as they adequately surface-drain you should have no problem with them. Top soil is a good growing medium.

The best superintendents can grow grass on anything. It's the weak superintendents who need all the bells and whistles so somehow maybe it will grow itself.

**GCN:** Tell us some ways in which equipment has changed golf course construction.

**Hepner:** They [old-time architects] found the greens and

tees and left everything in between and mowed it...

See the randomness of the natural tree line. It's not perfect. Man would make it perfect. Today, it's shapers on dozers showing off that they can make a perfect mound.

Some golf architects make the most beautiful landscapes. They are landscape architects almost and make gorgeous golf courses. But they are not that natural because everything is so perfect, so polished. Human nature is to polish things. When do you stop polishing furniture? When you're happy. Modern architects and shapers polish. That's why they have these perfect mounds. To recreate nature you have to know when to stop polishing.

A lot of times you should just gouge and slash and get off it.

This [Cape Arundel] is not polished. The fairway grass is long here. Usually it's tight, it's brown, awkward lies, goofy stuff going on. If you play golf overseas it's the same thing. You love it. You don't know what you're going to get.

**GCN:** You talk about long grass. What's the difference?

**Hepner:** They didn't manicure courses. When you look at old photos of the U.S. Open in the '40s they had [long] grass in bunkers.

We've eliminated the step cut. We have three cutting heights: putting greens, fairways and tees, and roughs. They didn't have triplex mowers. They had gang mowers and kept it simple. They didn't have collars.

In the old days it was called a "fairgreen," not a "fairway." Greens are an extension of the fairway and fairways are an extension of the green. It's all one.

**GCN:** What about the saying "An architect who hasn't gone to Scotland is like a divinity student who hasn't read the Bible?"

**Hepner:** It's a sales pitch. I know so many guys who have gone over and played and they just don't get it. There is a certain thing that you get about architecture in golf and understanding the spirituality of golf, and understanding that having a quirky lie is okay. The ASGCA [American Society of Golf Course Architects] takes 100 guys over there, and maybe 20 get it and they come back and still build their perfect mounds. And that's fine. Those are nice products and there is a market for that. But you can still read the Bible and not get it.

**GCN:** But in many cases, isn't it a good idea to add shapes because our equipment today makes it so easy?

**Hepner:** Here's a good lesson in modern versus old architecture. A modern architect would have put mounds behind this green [pointing to a green ahead] for depth perception. If you put mounds behind it, you'd lose all the contours. Right now,

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## Hepner: Watch the wind and greens

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what defines that green more than anything is the light green with the dark background. You see all the contours. You might get depth perception but you lose the contour. And as a golfer all you need is two pieces of information: the yardage and where the contour is.

Depth perception is the golfer not feeling comfortable with his yardage. He wants as much information as he can get to allow himself to get a good shot. Depth perception is you not believing your eyes.

If you're out there hitting in God's country don't try to change it. It's pretty good as it started.

**GCN:** You're a proponent of "walking" golf courses, and Tom Doak designed Stonewall Golf Club in Bulltown, Pa., a walking-only course. What's your feeling about golf cars? And, while we're at it, what about outings?

**Hepner:** Golf cars and outings are a false economy. [Outing] golfers probably do more damage than members do, because they're probably all taking golf cars and many of them are half in the bag by the 6th hole and are driving all over the place. It's good revenue, but if I were a member of the club I would pay higher dues to not have the outings.

And I'm a big proponent of giving some of that revenue to the superintendent to clean up the mess. I've never seen a case where the cart revenue pays for the \$300,000 worth of cart paths on a golf course.

**GCN:** One thing the old-time architects did not have to contend with was building on some of the gravel pits and dump sites that they deal with today.

**Hepner:** That's where modern architecture does help. Some guys are masters at creating a course on those sites.

We don't take those projects. We can't build every golf course because not every client fits our style. This [classic courses] is what we love and this is what we try to build.

**GCN:** How's your own golf game going?

**Hepner:** We get two or three calls a week from kids wanting to get into golf architecture. The first thing I ask them is, "How's your game?" They're pretty proud and tell you what it is. I say, "You might as well forget that. In two years it will double and in five it will triple. Forget about playing serious golf ever again because you're going to be out in the dirt."

But I enjoy playing golf more now than I ever have.

## Harbottle, Harris collaborate on 36 in Minnesota

MILLE LACS LAKE, Minn. — Nestled near the shores of Mille Lacs Lake 90 minutes northwest of Minneapolis are two new golf courses designed by John Harbottle in collaboration with 1993 U.S. Amateur champion John Harris and owner Chip Glaser.

The courses meander over gently rolling terrain, through a hardwood forest and along the shore of Mille Lacs Lake. Natural wetlands border several holes, giving the

feel of playing golf inside a large nature preserve.

The Sanctuary Course is geared toward the average player, with shorter yardage than its counterpart Black Brook. It plays in and out of the forest and through a more open landscape. Just right of the 9th-hole tees sits an historical building, the restored chapel which lends the course its name. Resort guests and neighbors can make the

short trail walk each Sunday morning to church.

Black Brook stretches to more than 6,800 yards, winding through trees, around ponds and along Black Brook which guards the 13th hole.

On both courses, old-style architecture is adapted to the milled terrain to create a variety of holes demanding skilled shotmaking and careful thinking.

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