

Back on West Coast, Robin Nelson still designing in the Pacific

MILL VALLEY, Calif. — Robin Nelson is one of those fortunate souls who knew his destiny almost from the start. A golfer from age 10, he was only 14 when he visited Spyglass Hill Golf Course, in Pebble Beach, Calif. It was 1965. The famous layout was still under construction, and Nelson had an epiphany.

"I walked out there on a cleared fairway," he says, "and it was like the clouds parted and God said, 'This is what you will do for the rest of your life.'"

At the University of California at Berkeley, class of '73, Nelson designed his own program, he says, "all geared at becoming a golf course architect." A native of the San Francisco Bay area, he remained in California after graduation, working for Bob Graves and, later, Ron Fream.

In 1982 he pulled up stakes and moved to Honolulu. Over the next 17 years he designed 10 courses in Hawaii and numerous others throughout the Pacific — Indonesia, Australia, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand. He and partner Neil Haworth eventually opened a branch office in Singapore. All told, Nelson has more than 100 new or remodeled courses to his name, in 21 countries on six continents.

For family reasons — mainly his children's schooling — Nelson moved back to the Bay area in 1999, setting up shop in Mill Valley. "For golf course architects, it doesn't matter where you live," he says. "It's not like you're going to build a course down the street. You have to travel. And I haven't abandoned my overseas work. I still have quite a few things going on in Hawaii."

Today, Nelson is one of the industry's hottest architects. He was recently named BoardRoom magazine's "Architect of the

Year" for his work in 2000. He opened eight courses last year, including the Creek Course at Moose Run, in Alaska, and The Dragon, in California's Sierra Nevada, listed by Golf Digest as one of the top 15 new layouts.

Nelson's latest designs are moving forward on a number of fronts, from New York State to Louisiana, in California and Hawaii, and on through the South Pacific.

Editor Jay Finegan recently caught up with Nelson at his studio.

GCN: How has your work life changed since moving back to California?

Nelson: We've gone through a transformation recently. I decided I wanted to get small. I used to have five designers, but I ended up being less a designer than an overseer of what everybody else was doing. I like being involved from the first phone call to the opening day — every single decision, every single line on a paper, every single kick of a clod of dirt. So actually I'll be doing less work, but I'll be more involved with it.

GCN: What's the difference between designing courses in Asia versus the States?

RN: The U.S. developer is a lot more sophisticated. The priorities in Asia are different. A lot of times you run into a developer who's just interested in having an image more than the final result. They are primarily interested in having a big-name architect, whereas in the United

States they really care about the golf course, the environment, and what golfers will think and if they will come back.

In the United States, of course, it's a business, but people realize it's all-encompassing, where it's the environment, and reputation, ease of maintenance, and so on. So they will seek out an architect who specifically has done these things, instead of just a big name.

GCN: You've designed some courses in China. Do you have anything in the pipeline there?

Nelson: We've done five courses in China and have three under construction. One of the most fascinating is a



Nelson at Muana Lani South Golf Course on the Big Island of Hawaii

project up in the mountains, in the legendary Shangri-la, from the book by James Hilton. It's in this incredible valley, up at 10,000 feet. The course is designed at 8,400 yards, but you can hit the ball 20 percent farther at that altitude. One of the attractions will be getting up there and driving the ball 300 yards. There's a 280-yard par-3 that's probably going to be a 5-iron. My partner in Singapore is person-

ally handling that one.

GCN: Any other action underway in the Pacific?

Nelson: I have three projects down on some remote islands in the South Pacific. Two are just like Pebble Beach. Those are on Saipan and Tinian. The third one is on Palau, with beautiful views of the Rock Islands. These islands are building up as resorts, and the courses are on magnificent oceanside sites, with coral reef outcrops.

We also did a course in Bali, which is probably the most enjoyable place I've ever been as far as the people, the climate and the working conditions. It's a mystical, magical type of place, and absolutely spectacular. Our course there plays along the beach, goes into a palm grove, and goes up the side of a hill. It commands \$200 a round, and it's always full.

GCN: You do a lot of work on military courses. What's the attraction?

Nelson: I love working with the military. We've done projects on various bases, in Alaska, Florida, Virginia, Hawaii and Osan Air Base in South Korean. It's mostly remodeling. The military courses are all on really nice pieces of property, located strategically around the ocean or someplace remote, and they are usually beautiful sites. And these guys have a definite agenda, usually well thought-out before we get involved. There is some red tape involved, but that's expected.

GCN: How's your own golf game these days?

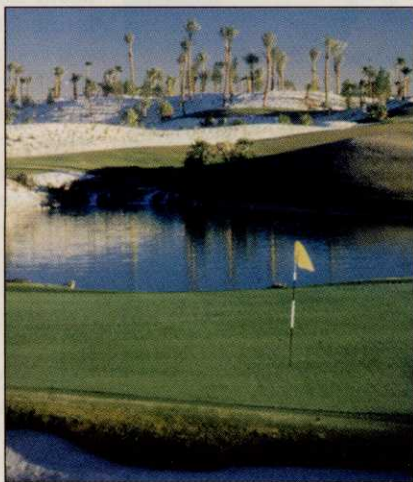
Nelson: I try to play a lot. I'm a 12-handicap. At one time I was a five-handicap. I can tell people, 'Yeah, I've shot par, but sometimes I still fight to break 100.' So I can see the entire golf course when I play. I can see the middle of the fairway and I can also play from the rough.

Tropical-themed Bali Hai course debuts on Vegas Strip

LAS VEGAS, Nev. — A desert strip that features the Eiffel Tower, the Great Pyramids and the Manhattan skyline now also boasts a golf course that evokes the idyllic isles of the South Pacific.

Bali Hai Golf Club, a tropical-themed layout, opened here on the famed Las Vegas Strip recently. And in a twist from the saying about the month of March, this course comes in like a lamb and goes out like a lion — the drama and challenge build as you go.

Designed by Lee Schmidt and Brian Curley, Bali Hai is a 7,015-yard, par-72 track that sprawls over 145 acres, adjacent to the Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino. Developer Bill Walters, chairman of Walters Golf, didn't scrimp on the landscaping. The course is spectacularly planted, with 100,000 tropical flowers and 4,000 trees, including 2,500



The island green at Bali Hai Golf Club

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DEVELOPMENT

Bali Hai opens in Las Vegas

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towering palms.

"This golf club will be more than just a place to play golf – it will be a sightseeing adventure unto itself," said Walters. "We have incorporated some very authentic touches into the design of this club that will virtually transport our guests to a tropical paradise."

ISLAND GREEN

Seven acres of water features, including an island green, help foster the atmosphere that Schmidt and Curley strove to create – of being on a South Pacific island. Another touch: transition and out-of-play areas will be accented with Augusta white sand and black volcanic rock outcroppings.

"This is a fun course," said Curley. "We want to give guests an opportunity to loosen up and enjoy the surroundings before we begin challenging their skills. When you're finished, you'll know you've been tested, but it won't beat you to death. It's the kind of golf course you could play day after day and never tire of its charms."

POLYNESIAN CLUBHOUSE

The playing surface will consist of Bermudagrass overseeded with rye everywhere except on the greens, which will be bentgrass.

A stylish, Polynesian-like clubhouse, designed by Hayermagnus Architects, will house the golf shop and Cili, described as an "exquisite" restaurant serving a gourmet menu "with tropical accents" at breakfast, lunch and dinner.

A private dining room overlooks the 16th green. At more than 30,000 square feet, the Bali Hai clubhouse also has an outdoor pavilion and a tropical boutique. ■

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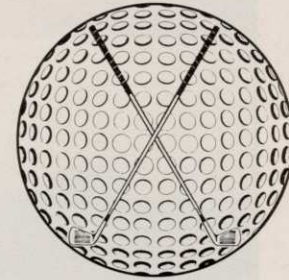
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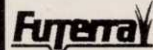
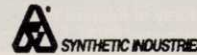
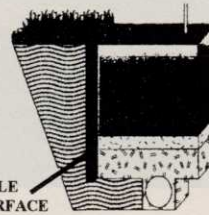
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