

Here's Johnny... and John

THEY'RE NOT SUCH AN ODD COUPLE AFTER ALL

by
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HARBOTTLE.

In the back of my mind, I knew John Harbottle and Johnny Miller were probably aware that I'd been occasionally... perhaps ... kind of ... just a wee bit critical of Mr. Miller and his comments about "grain" on putting surfaces and other maintenance matters during his golf broadcasts on NBC.

When they agreed to conduct a joint interview with GCN about Timilick Tahoe, their newest collaboration, which is in California, I wondered if that might be uncomfortable and how they'd handle it. Also, I thought a limited design partnership between a serious architect and a TV commentator might be ... well, kind of an odd-couple thing. You know ... the "celebrity" designer who "partners" with a legitimate craftsman in name only. Well, I was wrong on both counts.

Johnny Miller is, quite simply, a golf legend. A junior golf prodigy and Brigham Young University graduate, Miller broke into the big time with a surprise second-place finish at the Masters in 1971 at the ripe age of 23. Two years later, he captured his first major with a win at the 1973 U.S. Open. He sizzled in 1974 and 1975, winning an amazing 12 events. He went on to take his second major championship at the British Open in 1976. Eventually, he retired from the regular Tour with 24 victories, his last coming at the 1994 AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am.

Now 59, Miller is collecting Emmy Award nominations (he has two) instead of tournament trophies. He is the voice of NBC golf and arguably the most candid commentator sitting in any television tower today ("Lousy shot, huh, Roger?"). When he's not announcing, or skiing or fishing, he designs golf courses. He's credited with a few beauties, including Thanksgiving Point in Lehi, Utah; Entrada at Snow Canyon in St. George, Utah; and my personal favorite

Badlands Golf Club in Las Vegas. Oh yeah, he's in the World Golf Hall of Fame, too.

Harbottle isn't necessarily one of the best-known architects in the country, but some think he's one of the best in the West. A Pete Dye protégé whose parents were outstanding amateur players (they're both inductees into the Pacific Northwest Golf Association's Hall of Fame), the 46-year-old is a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architect's board of governors and has worn the society's Don Ross plaid for more than 15 years.

In his career, Harbottle has designed 17 new facilities, including the highly rated Olympic Course at Gold Mountain in Bremerton, Wash., but also has received plaudits for his redesign work at Los Angeles County Club's North Course and other classics. He's no stranger to partnering with Tour players, having collaborated with players/comedians Fuzzy Zoeller and Peter Jacobsen.

Does that last point suggest it takes a sense of humor to work with sometimes irascible Johnny Miller? Let's find out.

Q How did you two hook up?

JH: We first hooked up on a resort course that's now called Genoa Lakes in Nevada. The owner was the guy who founded Tombstone Pizza. Johnny was brought into the project along the way, and I loved working with him. He's personable and low-key. When the owners of Timilick came to me and asked about bringing in a high-profile player, I recommended Johnny immediately.

JM: Working with John has been a really nice thing, and we'll do more courses in the future. He doesn't need me, but when the developer is selling homes, it helps to have a name attached. I could just do that and show up once, but that's not my style.

Q That's a pretty honest approach. Johnny, what do you bring to the process?

Two heads are better than one as long as the egos don't get in the way. It makes for a good product. I've been doing this since the early '70s. I've learned from so many people. I've worked with maybe a dozen different architects. Collaboration is a way for me to learn the craft a bit better.

My expertise is visual. That's why I'm a good announcer. I'm the ultimate nitpicker. I have a good eye for what makes sense. He's got the eye of the tiger. Best of all, we never B.S. each other.

Q OK John, what's Mr. Miller really like?

He's exactly what you'd think from watching him on TV. He's completely honest and totally passionate. And he doesn't give himself enough credit for what he knows about architecture.

Q Johnny, your turn. Tell us about Mr. Harbottle.

He's so dedicated to his work. I have complete confidence in him. I've worked with some designers in the past and always had to look over my shoulder. I worried about things such as bunker placement, wind, etc. — the 90 million little technical details that make a great course. I'd think, 'He's not that great a player and doesn't get it.' It's never been like that with John.

Q Johnny, how much time do you spend on a site?

I try to get there when they need me. I'll probably go more than required. I enjoy going to Truckee, Calif., near the Timilick project. They have great fishing flies at the local hardware store. The area is pristine and so beautiful. Other developers and course



Photo courtesy of Timillick Tahoe

designers in the area have done a great job. I'm hoping the market stays strong. Not that I'm going to make any more money on the project, but we just want it to be a success.

Q What do you disagree about?

JH: We don't disagree a lot. But I remember at Genoa (Nev.) Lakes Golf Club, Johnny wanted to add a (longer) back tee on the 18th. He just mentioned the idea to someone, and it later got back to me he had the impression I wasn't listening. We went back and added it, but now we spend a lot of time talking about every aspect so we resolve stuff like that in advance.

JM: It's funny because I came in halfway through that project. It's like going to the hospital where John and his wife just had a baby, and I come waltzing in and criticize how the baby looks. He could have said, 'Hey, it's my baby' and tell me where to go. But, after a day or two, he listened, and we found a solution. I won't force him to make a change, but I also won't ask for something flippantly.

Some of the best designs in the country come out of collaborations. What I always say about ideas is that, if you're open to them, you'll learn stuff you never would have. In the process, you go into a whole new 'room' of knowledge. You can learn much more.

Q How would you describe the design at Timillick?

JM: It's a mountain course, but it doesn't have the supersevere contours of most mountain courses. The back nine has great terrain – large rock outcroppings and pretty spectacular stuff. There's a rippling water feature through holes 17 and 18. We aren't trying to build the next U.S. Open site, so it's a little longer than 7,000 from the tips. It's got a great feel about it – a great spirit about it. It's a nice mix of different design features. It'll be in the 'pretty hard' category.

JH: We have a common design philosophy that combines risk/reward with dramatic bunkering. That allows you to challenge a good player, but not kill the average one. Timillick is going to be a great example of that.

Q What newer courses have you visited recently that you admire?

JH: I don't visit new courses too much. I don't want to be influenced. Give me the old stuff. I played Royal County Down in Ireland (during the 2006 Ryder Cup), and it might be the best course in the world.

JM: John's right. The really phenomenal courses are there already. Pebble Beach is probably the only true 10 on the scale when you combine beauty and great golf. I agree County Down is right there, too. That said, I love Bandon Dunes. Timillick is pretty close to a nine on the scale. There's nothing that replaces a good piece of land. No matter what you do, there's nothing that can equal a great site. You're excited because you know you can't screw it up.

Q John, do you sometimes get "pooh-pooed" by others because you're now working with a "celebrity" design partner?

When I first got out on my own, I wanted



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to show what I could do, but the owner brought in a 'celebrity.' I didn't want to share the limelight and resented it. As I've gotten older, I feel I've made my name. My feathers are much less ruffled by the idea. Particularly when it's someone like Johnny who's a good person and contributes to the project.

It's just business. Sometimes the developer gets nervous partway through a project and wants the celebrity. The bank might even make financing for the project contingent on it. We're all affected by brands and 'signature' status. It doesn't mean you can't do a great job, but when you're investing millions, you can't ignore the appeal of the 'name' a celebrity brings to the table.

Q John, you've helped design 17 courses and worked with many superintendents. What separates the good from the great?

That's an easy question. Owners will ask you what to look for in a superintendent, and I tell them to ask their job candidates,

'If you come across a problem, where do you turn?' The best one's will say they never stop asking questions and learning. Those that just want to sit around and do what they've always done won't make it. Plus, I always respect guys who spend a lot of time on the course. A good friend of mine, a great superintendent, walks his course every morning.

Q Will this be an ongoing partnership?

JH: We don't have a company, per se, and I'll keep doing my own stuff. But, he'd still be the first guy I'd recommend. Johnny gets it.

Q Johnny, many folks criticize you for talking about 'grain' or other maintenance issues. How do you respond?

Hey, the truth will set you free. I never, ever have a problem with talking about grain on a Bermudagrass green that tilts to the west or the southwest. I do my homework. I'm

not just some flippin' guy on the air who has no clue about how grass grows.

Q You're kind of walking into the lion's den by agreeing to speak at the Golf Industry Show next year. Are you ready for it?

I hope they give me some trouble. I'm looking forward to it. The improvement in course maintenance in my lifetime is just incredible. It's an art form. When I came on tour, the only course that was in really good shape was Firestone Country Club in Akron, Ohio. I don't think these young guys on the Tour today have any idea of how great the conditions are now.

Q Will you say that on the air?

Yup. There aren't too many guys who come close to me in the department of shooting from the hip. GCN

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