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WHAT 'ARCHITECT' MEANS

As a long-time golf course architect and past president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, I cringe when people overlook and understate the value of qualified golf course architects.

The announcement that Tiger Woods is now a golf course architect highlights the false notion that golf course design is easy. Top PGA Tour pros often have claimed to be golf course architects, and always will, as long as developers believe their names add marketing value. But are they really golf course architects? The concept of the Tour pro as golf course architect begs questions that rarely have been answered satisfactorily.

How does playing courses in events throughout the world apply to designing for golfers who play for leisure? Is Tiger's perspective about how to play a hole the least valuable of all, given he plays the game like no one else?

How does envisioning a high, butter-cut 6-iron spinning off the back slope translate to envisioning turning a deeply wooded or rocky area into a golf hole?

How does the idea of copying great holes they've seen work given different slopes, soils, grasses and vegetation – not to mention different owner pro formas, the addition of surrounding housing, environmental constraints, etc.?

Simply put, the technical and artistic visual skills of a golf course architect aren't the same skills needed for competitive golf. It's a full-time job and requires years of study and experience. And yet, golf developers – and perhaps the public at large – want to believe Tour pros design golf courses. In fact, only a few – Jack Nicklaus and fellow ASGCA member Mark McCumber – are among the exceptions who are very involved in design.

Take note of Nicklaus' comments during a recent President's Cup news conference. As the player who has made the most successful transition from player to architecture, he said he doesn't think Tiger is a golf course architect, at least not yet.

"I'm sure he has great ideas," Nicklaus said. "He's a very smart young man, and he'll figure it out. But it depends, at this point in his life, whether he'll be doing it himself or lending his name or both."

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It'll take time to figure out. He certainly can't go out and do a design himself. He wouldn't understand that. He wouldn't understand all the things that happen with it. It takes time to learn that. Can he make an input? Absolutely, he can make an input, and he'll grow."

In that news conference, Jack said:

- He felt like a consultant for about 10 years;
- Many of his early designs require renovation now;
- It took a while to stop designing for his game and to focus on designing for average golfers;
- He has worked with more than 20 ASGCA members to learn the craft.

I agree with Jack's self evaluation (I felt like an architect after seven years of apprenticeship before starting my own business, and I would love to

renovate some early designs.) I also agree with his opinions about Tiger's career path. In the beginning, Tiger most likely will be lending his name to his design projects more than actually designing them. The time demands of trying to win 18 majors don't mesh with those of trying to design 18 holes.

I hope Tiger eventually follows Jack's path of being an apprentice in his own design company that's been built with talented golf course architects, providing he gives them due credit. While Tiger might always leave much of the difficult work to his staff, if he devotes considerable time to it, he will earn the golf course architect title someday. I hope he ignores the examples of other Tour pros, most of whom are best known in the design world for:

- Attaching their name to several golf course architecture firms – sometimes simultaneously, meaning quality might vary.
- Not knowing their staff. At a recent interview, a famous pro asked his agent, "What's the name of the guy who works with us?"
- Not being able to find the first tee at grand opening.

The above examples hint at how much involvement those pros have in their "signature" projects. Based on what I know about him, Tiger will beat them in architecture as soundly as he beats them in golf. He probably deserves it – and I know they do. **GC**

