

Designer's forum

By Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan



Michael J. Hurdzan, Ph.D., is a partner in the golf course architectural firm of Kidwell & Hurdzan, Inc., Columbus, Ohio. Dr. Hurdzan received his Doctor of Philosophy in Environmental Plant Physiology and his

Master of Science in Turfgrass Physiology from the University of Vermont. Dr. Hurdzan is a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, and is on that association's Board of Governors. He is also a member of the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation, USGA, NGF and the Golf Collectors' Society. Dr. Hurdzan has authored many articles on golf course design and maintenance and is currently writing a book on the history of golf course architecture.

"So you want to be a Golf Course Architect . . ."

Yes, you and everyone else who can break 100". That was the sort of cynical but true response I got when I was just beginning my career. Now that I have been in the profession for over a decade, I have my own cynical but true response and that is: "This is a great profession, but your chances of becoming a Golf Course Architect are about the same as being struck by lightning". Such a cruel answer to honest inquiries deserves an explanation. The reasons for the extremely low probability of ever becoming a Golf Architect are a saturated market, the diversity of skills needed, and the experience requirement.

First let us look at the prospective market for Golf Course Designers. According to National Golf Foundation statistics, about 70 courses will open for play in the United States this year; and there are about 85 under construction to open next year. Now I personally know of about 120 Golf Course Designers; thus, there are more designers available than clients, so the competition to offer services is fierce. On top of that with the high cost of doing business these days, and the need to keep fees modest, one can not survive very well with only 1 client per year. With ever escalating construction costs, sky rocketing interest rates, and the economic uncertainty in this country, I would expect that even fewer courses will be built in the foreseeable future.

The second note of pessimism for

budding golf architects is their saleable skills. With the average cost of golf course construction approaching \$1 million, few clients will risk such large sums of money on inexperienced or unskilled designers. In my opinion the minimum credentials that I advise students to have before attempting to work in a design firm, is a degree in Landscape Architecture and also one in Turfgrass Management. Once you have that educational background, you should try to work for 4-5 years in a firm that has a history of creditable projects and is currently active. Today there are several designers with such academic credentials, who were active in the profession during a period when 350-400 golf courses would open each year, and they could afford to learn by making cheap mistakes when construction costs were low. Today there are no cheap mistakes and one does not dare risk being caught up in a legal hassle over negligence in design. Beware of those who purport to teach a program in Golf Course Design for there is no such curriculum that can hope to cover the multiplicity of factors that the competent Golf Architect must be knowledgeable about.

Experience is the third reason that makes becoming a Golf Architect difficult. It is my belief that Golf Course Design is a collage of acquired skills that must be imprinted on the designer's mind; so that although he acts in an intuitive way, his decisions are drawn from a great data base of observed sequences under various conditions. (Some designers today have such fantastic reputations that clients are willing to substitute a blank check for real skills and by trial and error learning on someone else's money, they achieve some success.) In my case, when Jack Kidwell consented to be my mentor, I had 9 summers of experience in golf course maintenance, a Ph.D. in Agronomic-Turf Studies, and some design and engineering skills. But it took 5 years of daily participation and immersion in preparing construction contracts and drawings, observing sequences of actual construction, concentrated study, and honest critique of decisions and judgements before I felt confident to call myself a Golf Course Architect. To study the products of past masters teaches you little compared to studying their process.

But if in spite of the above warnings you wish to pursue this constantly changing and evolving profession, then I would offer the following career track. To start, I would strongly suggest first getting a degree in Turf Management because a modern Golf Course Designer must understand how to specify and manipulate the physical factors of a golf course to maximize growth conditions, while accommodating equipment and procedures. To design a course that can only produce a moderate to weak turf cover or is too costly to maintain, will result in the early demise of a Designer in this era of tough competition. The young Designer must understand agronomic principals and limitations if he is to have much luck competing for jobs.

After getting this degree and picking up 3-4 summers worth of practical experience in golf course maintenance, you should seek a second bachelors degree in Landscape Architecture. This training will teach you basic design concepts, graphics, construction techniques, contracts, professional practice, and how to prepare formal drawings.

It is equally assumed that during the summers of this program that you would either work in a Golf Course Architect's office, if you can find one that hires summer help, but better still would be to work with a Golf Course Contractor. By working for a contractor, you would have the opportunity to see the actual sequences and techniques of construction, learn the limitations of the building equipment, and learn how to read, interpret, and evaluate the construction documents of several architects. You will experience the problems and frustrations of constructing a golf course, which will unquestionably prepare you to be a better designer. Remember the process is more important than studying the finished product.

Let me conclude by reiterating that anyone's chances of becoming a golf architect are about the same as being struck by lightning. But if you are willing to dedicate yourself to the 8-10 years necessary to prepare to compete in this economically stagnating profession, then you will be rewarded with a life's work that may be the most gratifying in the world.

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