

The 'name' sells the course for many

Pros, ex-pros cashing in on celebrity

BY MARK LESLIE

The market. Image. Personality. Expertise. Money. The bottom line is most often money for golf course developers pondering who they will hire to design their course.

And nowadays the highest fees are being commanded by famous professional golfers who earned their reputations with clubs, rather than drafting pens, in hand.

One million dollars will buy you Jack Nicklaus' services. A million will get you Arnold Palmer. A \$500,000 check will bring in Gary Player. A mere \$200,000 nabs Lee Trevino.

One company, Arvan Development Co. in Lombard, Ill., indeed hired Palmer, Player and Trevino to design three courses in one project in Lake Geneva, Wis.

Is this high cost worth it?

"Of course it is, or they wouldn't pay it," said Ed Seay, a former president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects who has worked alongside Palmer designing courses since 1971.

"Yes," agreed Rick Robbins, vice president of Nicklaus-Sierra Development Corp. in Tampa, Fla. "Using 'name' architects is important," more than paying back the extra investment through higher land prices.

Robbins qualified his statement, saying, "It (hiring famous pros) is not for all developments. It depends on the market you're targeting. You don't always need a big name. If the market can't afford it you can't justify it."

"It (high fee) is all relative," said Harry Knight, vice president and general manager of Kingsmill on the James in Williamsburg, Va., which has hired a resident, pro Curtis Strange, to join forces with architect Tom Clark in designing a third course at the high-end development.

Hundreds of developers must feel they have that high-end market because hundreds are hiring pros

from Palmer to Ben Crenshaw to Tom Watson.

Jim Applegate, an ex-pro himself and president of Gary Player Design Co. in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., said his firm has 35 projects underway around the world, and "the only reason we don't have more is we've limited ourselves to six or seven at one time being under construction."

Palmer, with a bigger staff, has 66 courses in various stages of planning or construction.

Nicklaus has been involved in the design of more than 100 courses over the last 20 years.

Tom Weiskopf has been busy since setting aside his professional play and joining forces with architect Jay Moorish.

Seve Ballesteros and Bernhard Langer are signing contracts to put their names on courses in Europe.

Lesser-known pros as well are getting into the business.

None have the education in landscape architecture or agronomy that is normal for golf course architects. Rather, they are selling their knowledge of the game — and their names.

"It's a heavy 'celebrity' business," says Seay. "Naturally the play of the 'name' is a marketing and advertising decision... If they have Arnold Palmer involved in their golf course people know it's going to be pretty spiffy, pretty nice..."

"For the immediate, past and for a long time in the future, Arnold's the king. They know what he's meant to golf... That feeling of caring and involvement gives a project credibility."

"You add an unbelievable amount of credibility," agrees Robbins, adding that with the Nicklaus name his firm has "been able to sell faster and with much larger prices than equivalent developments in the same areas."

"One of the major things in real-estate or resort development is 'value-added,'" Robbins said. "What added value do you get for using a name architect? Having Jack Nicklaus be a part of our developments has meant a lot in



How much marketing is too much? Arnold Palmer reportedly was taken aback by the crossed sabres at his press conference announcing Lake Forest Country Club in Louisville, Ky., but he walked his walk.

housing prices and lot prices and in gaining respect within the community..."

Arvan Development Co. Vice President William Bissett, who is overseeing the Wisconsin project, explained the choice of three pros:

"A couple of things that we considered to be important were at play here. On the one hand we wanted a golf course architect that would give us a playable course that could handle a 20-handicapper one day and a tournament the next. We ... thought that after interviewing a number of architects these three represent the best mix for us. They were willing to work with us, to do what we wanted to do; they believe in playability of courses; and they were the best mix in terms of competitive spirit — we could pit the three of them against one another and tell them to build the best golf courses they could."

"That's one end of the spectrum. The other end of the spectrum is that this is a residential, recreational community and we felt that it was important to us to have name recognition for golf course architects, and we were also trying to market a number of residential lots and we thought those names could do us more good in that realm than a Pete Dye or a Jones or those guys who weren't professional players and didn't have the name recognition to the non-golfer who wanted to buy a lot in a golf course community."

Too much to pay

Yet the number of developers hiring pros is far fewer than those who are signing architects.

"I have a problem with paying that much money," said Kin Clifton, project manager for the real-estate development that will feature Cape Charles Golf and County Club in Virginia.

Clifton and the Houston, Texas, firm of Brown and Root, which is developing the project, chose Ault, Clark & Associates of Wheaton, Md. And Clifton has no regrets.

He said, "Conventional wisdom might say to hire a (famous pro).

We may be losing some degree of marque value, but we've more than made up for it in quality, service, responsiveness, and expertise in the development process. There are no ego problems whatsoever. It's been a wonderful relationship."

In the Kingsmill on the James case, Strange lives in the community, adding a different angle to his participation in the new course.

"He's well respected here and very much enjoyed by our membership and residents," said Knight. "Curtis adds a dimension that might not be added by going with another golfer. He lends the value of his name and it also makes him a bigger part of our development."

Expertise

Arvan's Bissett commented on the crucial issue of expertise that has been questioned by people who oppose the idea of pros designing courses.

"These three people we hired had the right support groups," he said. "We liked their support groups. We liked their attitude. It was the best mix for us, not strictly in terms of building playable golf courses but also in terms of the support that we wanted from them."

Player Design's Applegate said, "There's no question that in today's highly technical system you need to know how to deal with the environmental and land-use laws, the sophisticated irrigation systems, and you have to have trained experts. That's what we provide Gary."

"When you get into a business without a strong support team you won't succeed. A number of 'name' players are designing courses. I'd go to their offices and look around and see if they're staying in step with the engineering involved and with the law."

Seay of Palmer Course Design agreed, saying, "Architecture involves 20 or 30 different disciplines... There have been lots of pros who tried this business and one of the reasons they failed was

they didn't hire experts in the business."

He said Palmer is involved "in every aspect of the business... His library is the same as mine, with books on layout work, greens, everything he needs to know about the business."

Seay added, "When people hire Arnold Palmer Design they know they're going to get treated exceptionally well. We don't have a B team. We've got an A team and that's all we've got."

At what point involvement?

The norm with pros' design firms is that the "support team" does the preliminary work — from examining the site to negotiating the contract, and perhaps even designing the routing plan — before bringing the pro into the project.

For instance, Player's initial visit to the site is at the point the course is announced to get the optimum marketing value form his participation.

He'll next visit the site when the builder starts moving dirt; then 60 to 90 days later, during shaping to "finetune" it.

"A process that goes unseen and unsaid is the countless hours Gary spends with the design staff ... so that we are extensions of his philosophy," said Applegate.

Player will actually play each hole while it is being shaped, hitting flubber-type shots so that it can be designed with the ordinary golfer as well as the expert in mind.

As Seay said, the developer should keep several things in mind in deciding which architect to hire. "People are going to be living with us for two years. We're going to go beyond the client relationship. We'll become your friend, You'll see more of us than you probably care to."

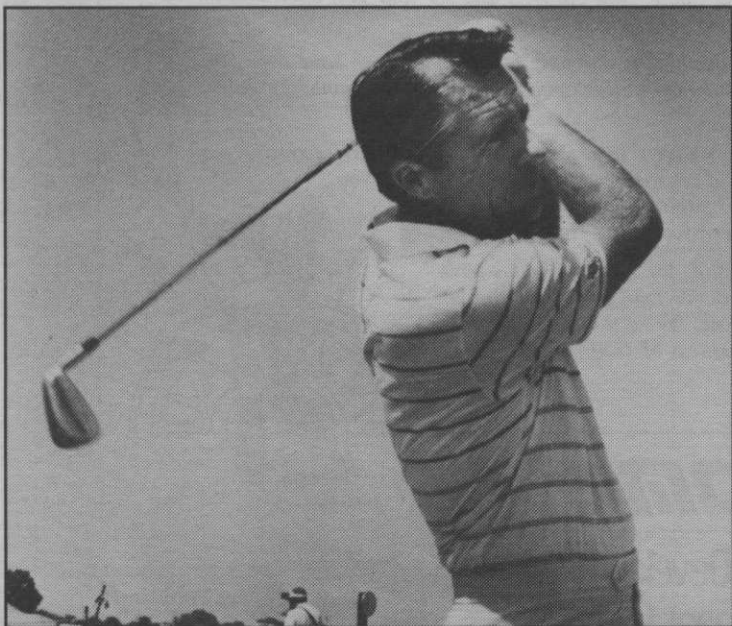
"We're going to spend a great deal of your money. It involves a tremendous amount of trust. You're looking at, Who am I going to entrust this \$10 million to for the next three years? And the product they give me has to make it a pretty solid investment."

The long haul

Speaking of pro golfers and their commitment, or lack of commitment to the professionalism in design, Seay said, "They're going to get more interested or they're going to get out because that's the nature of this beast."

"Every day you learn a little bit more, and a little bit more, and that compounds energy and excitement, or it compounds frustration and a pain in the neck."

Robbins of Nicklaus/Sierra summed up his feelings on the question of professionalism in the golf course architecture business: "A lot of guys are calling themselves golf course architects who don't deserve to be in the business. I think that's the same with guys who aren't pros as well as those who are."



For years, Gary Player won big money playing on courses. Now he's earning big money designing them.