

The pros:

Are they a good choice to design?
There's disagreement in the industry

Hurdzan says: 'No'

BY DR. MICHAEL HURDZAN

It would be foolish to suggest that the world's best golfers should not be involved in golf course design. First of all, they obviously know a lot about the game, having played it on the best courses around the world.

Secondly, golf course design is highly subjective, a combination of art and science, and anyone with a basic understanding of the game is likely to have a few ideas that can make any course design more interesting or more fun to play.

Having participated in about 150 golf course design projects in the United States and elsewhere, I learned long ago that no one has all the answers. Thus, as golf course architects, we always remain open to suggestions from our clients, and from others. Golf course development has to be a team process.

However, I do object to celebrity golfers who almost magically take on the label "golf course architect" when they clearly lack the training, experience and technical competence implied by that designation.

Playing excellent golf, even winning major championships, no more qualifies a person as a golf course "architect" than being a champion race car driver qualifies a person to be a highway engineer. The driver may have a good feel for surface conditions, but probably doesn't have a complete understanding of the more complex "big picture" beneath the surface — "for using" and "producing" are two different things.

I would expect someone who intends to take credit for designing a golf course would, at a minimum, be able to handle the following:

- Analyze a site from a contour map and aerial photos, create a base map, and lay out a golf course on that map, insuring that the course will have adequate water, drain properly, be compatible with the environment, and meet the needs of the client with respect to land use, playing characteristics, and budget.

- Formulate detailed construction plans and specifications to insure that the course can be built as designed, and within budget.

- Supervise construction on site, from selecting contractors and reviewing bids, through effective oversight of actual activity.

- Provide agronomic advice and consultation through the establishment and maturation of the course, to insure a successful opening.

All of the architects I know, and I know most of them, can handle all of these tasks and a great deal more. They all have had some formal training in design, served an apprenticeship, and obtained hands-on experience in course construction before they presumed to hang out a shingle as a golf course "architect." Some of them also happen to be excellent golfers, but it is not their playing skills, in my opinion, that qualifies them to design golf courses.



Dr. Michael Hurdzan

Wait a minute, you might ask, if all that is true, how do all these pro golfer "signature" courses come into existence? And why are so many of them fine courses?

The answer, in many cases, lies somewhere between plagiarism and ghost writing. Some celebrity golfers (now I hear we even have a couple of television announcers involved) design courses in the same way that Hollywood stars write books. They affiliate themselves with someone with the technical competence and experience to see that the job gets done right. The "star" makes a contribution, to be sure, but the real architect usually stays behind the scenes.

Another method common to celebrity designed courses is to bring in a competent builder, a company that is so good it will not let the so-called architect make any serious mistakes. In effect, the contractor actually does the technical design.

A third method, one that is all too common, is to make up for lack of technical design skill with a fat budget. With plenty of money, mistakes can be corrected and faulty design can be fixed by trial and error and building golf features over and over until they turn out right. Given enough money, anyone can create a fine golf course.

Now, to make sure the record is straight, I want to say that there are a few world-class golfers who have earned the right to call themselves golf course architects. They have studied, committed the time and effort, have the experience and know what they are doing. But I emphasize the words "a few."

In most cases, when you see a pro golfer's name on a design, you might as well take it for what it is, a marketing strategy. Nothing more and nothing less. The course is probably not any better or any worse than it would be if the pro golfer had not been involved.

In closing, I would offer a quote from one of history's greatest golfers, who collaborated with one of history's greatest golf course architects, Dr. Alister MacKenzie, on the Augusta National Golf Club:

"I think MacKenzie and I manage to work as a completely sympathetic team. Of course, there was never any question that he was the architect and I his advisor and consultant. No man learns to design a golf course simply by playing golf, no matter how well."

— Robert Trent Jones Sr.

COMMENT



Jim Applegate

Applegate: 'Yes'

BY JIM APPLGATE

Golf's rapid rise in popularity and the subsequent demand for additional facilities, both public and private, is both undeniable and well documented. Accompanying this demand has been a relative proliferation of individuals and firms offering golf course design services.

Any prospective owner or developer of property that would include a golf course or courses is faced with a myriad of questions, problems and options. Frequently, the first question asked relates to the choice of the golf course design firm.

While there are many very competent firms that do not offer the "signature" of a professional golfer, we at the Gary Player Design Co. feel that, under appropriate and controlled conditions, a design firm that includes a knowledgeable, dedicated professional along with a technically and professionally competent design staff offers the prospective owner/developer the very best alternative. Some individuals might immediately ask, "Why?" In our case, Gary Player's personal accomplishments in the game are well documented. No one has ever won more tournaments in more countries under as many different conditions (both good and bad) than Gary. Personal ability and professional accomplishments are only part of the ingredients, however. We feel that Gary's personal experience and knowledge gained from playing courses all over the world in every conceivable condition is invaluable in producing a finished product of the highest and most appropriate quality.

For more than 30 years he has played with amateur golfers of all abilities in the weekly pro-ams and understands, with certain knowledge, what the amateur golfer — who is certainly the driving force and as such the single most important aspect of golf's popularity — can and cannot accomplish on the golf course.

Courses that are designed to reflect the professional's personal game are not appropriate for the average player. The experience gained from years of professional play are, however, an invaluable asset in designing courses that are at once memorable, beautiful, functional, and perhaps most importantly, playable.

It is our position that Gary's vast experience allows us to offer courses

that are truly playable. This experience must, however, be combined with a talented staff of designers and technical experts to insure the very best finished product. Our staff includes individuals who are in the forefront of all segments of the golf course design industry from agronomy to engineering to computer aided design (CADD). These professionals are well versed in Gary's personal design philosophy and produce designs that reflect that philosophy.

It is, of course, critical that the "signature" be personally involved in all aspects of the design and production of the course. On-site visits at various stages of development insure that the design is faithfully created and constructed.

A final site visit prior to grassing allows us to provide the owner with Gary's personal touches and finishing which we believe are an invaluable benefit to the course and its developer. Many golf course developments today are real-estate oriented or driven. In these instances name recognition of the professional designer invariably produces a marketing advantage for the owner/developer both in the sale of real estate and equity memberships when appropriate.

Why should an owner/developer choose a "signature" design? We feel the reasons are self-evident. The combination of playing experience, technical competence and expertise, the dedication of the professional and his reputation for excellence, and the increased marketability of the finished product are clear and irrefutable reasons for making such a choice.

Dr. Michael Hurdzan is a former president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects. Jim Applegate is president of Gary Player Design Co.

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