

# GOLF COURSE NEWS

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Arnold Palmer addresses attendees at the inaugural Golf Course Expo, which drew 1,500 public-access decision-makers to Orlando, Fla. For a complete rundown on the show and conference, see pages 10 and 62.

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## USGA, wildlife groups cooperate on research

By MARK LESLIE

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Extensive research investigating golf courses as ecosystems will be undertaken as early as this fall, thanks to funding from the U.S. Golf Association (USGA) and enthusiastic support from several environmental organizations.

After a meeting here with environmentalists, Ron Dodson, president of the Audubon Society of New York and chairman of the USGA Wildlife Subcommittee, said: "The col-

lective agreement of all those attending was that instead of spending so much time looking at particular species, we should be looking at golf courses as ecosystems.

"And we should focus our attention on ecosystems where there are many golf courses and lots of potential for new courses to be built — like Florida, California, New England and the coastal mid-Atlantic region."

Enthusiased by the input  
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## Summit illustrates need for image-building PR campaign

By HAL PHILLIPS

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — The recent Golf Summit yielded this stark realization: Poor public image stands as the single largest hindrance to golf industry growth.

If image isn't everything, it's darn close. Many still consider golf a pastime of rich, white males. Whether this assessment is less accurate than it was in, say, 1970, is irrelevant. The public at large has this perception, and it's particularly damaging because it adversely affects golf's other two major obstacles: the environment and player development.

This became crystal clear during Golf Summit '94, the two-day strategy session sponsored by the National Golf Foundation (NGF) here in November. In response, Summit attendees agreed that golf

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Joseph Beditz



Pinehurst Plantation is one of the private clubs in the Golf Communities USA portfolio.

## Golf Communities USA bucks public trend

By PETER BLAIS

ORLANDO, Fla. — Golf Communities USA President Warren Stanchina has always run against the tide.

When everyone was building private golf course communities in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Stanchina was buying and selling daily-fee facilities. "I usually made money," said the head of the Orlando, Fla.-based firm.

Now it's the 1990s. The consensus is that daily-fee developers are the

king and private course developers the jesters. While some may view Stanchina's recent purchases of several high-profile private course communities as the acts of a fool, he plans on laughing all the way to the bank.

"The United States is fast becoming a two-class country, the rich and the poor," he said. "That's why affordable, private courses will boom in the late 1990s. There are simply too many up-

Continued on page 51

## The Ratings Game

What's fair, and has it affected design?

By MARK LESLIE

The good, the bad and the ugly. The dramatic and the costly. The bells and whistles — and foghorns. Golf course rankings have helped create them all.

"We accept some of the credit for elevating standards of golf architecture — which is good for the game and the business — and some of the blame for the escalating costs of architecture and, therefore, golf," said *Golf Digest* rating guru Ron Whitten.

"A lot of courses are built to make a great initial impression," said *Golf* magazine rating coordinator Tom Doak, himself a course architect. "Unfortunately, the surge of popularity of rankings has tended to obscure [the fact that] a golf course is not built so someone goes there once. Does the course have lasting value? Is it going to be better to play the 10th time than the first? Or is it going to get old really fast?"

The consensus is that the mere existence of the *Golf*, *Golf Digest* and other course rankings has meant more competition between architects — and devel-

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Should  
Conditioning  
Be Judged? p. 44

Mark Leslie photo

# For good or bad, magazine ratings have affected course design

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opers — to outdo one another. This has led to more costly golf courses, both for the developer and the golfer, as well as more circus-style playing fields.

"I think that's true," said course superintendent and *Golf Digest* panelist Terry Buchen of Galena, Ohio. "In the '80s they were doing a lot more for show, or to attract members than anything else. Then they all got in a bandwagon to compete... and they got into

one-upsmanship."

Saying that ratings, and sometimes the demands to create "memorability" of a golf course have had an effect, course architect Jeffrey Brauer of Arlington, Texas, likened this pressure to a goalie in the Stanley Cup. "He can't say, 'Gee, I'm in the Stanley Cup!'" Brauer said. "He'd clutch up. He's got to play it like it's a regular game. When you get into the design of a golf course you have to be more concerned

for the needs of that course than some *Golf Digest* poll."

"A lot of architects have said that if they build something that's subtle, some of the raters overlook it," Doak said, "and to some extent, I think that's true. Not all the raters know what they're looking at. I think I'm a good judge of picking out stuff, but on a really good course, there are some things you don't see until the second time, or the fifth time."

When *Golf Digest* coined the

phrase "memorability of golf holes," Doak said, architects started trying to make every hole "really different from anything else, and that tends to lead to gimmickiness. I want a variety of holes and different shots, but I don't want them to jazz up the landscape on every hole to make it look like some other golf course on some other planet."

Whitten agrees "gimmickiness" has resulted from the *Golf Digest* poll. The survey began in

1969 as the 100 Greatest Golf Courses, and ran every second year. In the 1980s the magazine added a survey on the Best New Courses. The surveys, and perhaps the popular Whitten-Geoffrey Cornish book, "The Architects of Golf," gave more public exposure to golf architecture. "There was a bigger explosion of 'designer labels,'" Whitten said. "[Jack] Nicklaus, [Pete] Dye and [Tom] Fazio were making headlines every week, it seemed. There was a good deal of attention-grabbing architecture designed, I think, to capture the fancy of panelists, of the public, of magazines. Owners told me their goal was to make the cover of *Golf Digest*..."

"Fazio and Nicklaus will tell you the clients will expect this of them. And if guys of their stature can't resist, how can the young guys?"

Yet, the tide may have turned from the bombastic back toward the natural look.

"The razzmatazz age is over," Buchen declared. "So many courses have chocolate mounds, etc., and it isn't so great."

"Architects are less and less inclined to do these real visually over-dramatic statements," Whitten agreed, paraphrasing Ben Crenshaw: "They're now speaking in whispers rather than shouting at us."

"Most of us were enamored by the '80s, but it almost got too excessive," Whitten said. "We'd eaten too much chocolate. It got gimmicky. Now we think, six waterfalls is a gimmick. I see it as a big change."

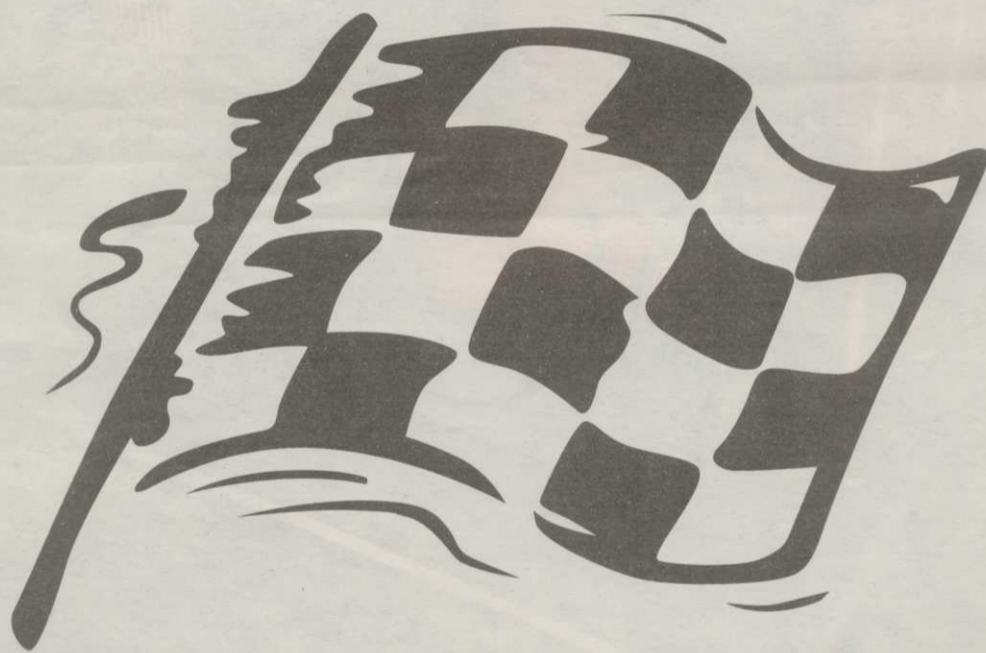
"Now, we're getting back to the basics — the 'less-is-more' concept," Buchen said. "It's minimalist design. I hope they stay that way."

*Golf Magazine's* Doak takes exception with some of the aspects of golf course design that *Golf Digest* panelists evaluate in their voting. "*Golf Magazine* has no definition of what a great golf course is, whereas *Golf Digest* has a very rigid definition and gives points for each thing," he said, eluding to GD's judging criteria of shot values, resistance to scoring, playability, design balance, memorability, esthetics and conditioning.

But Whitten responded: "[*Golf Magazine* Editor and Chief George] Peper said we're not going to give panelists a predetermined definition of greatness. We're not so arrogant. But you have to have some standards by which to judge. Whether it's simply looking at their [*Golf Magazine's*] list, or categories that we use, you have to have something. I've seen Tom's ballot. There's nothing wrong with the way he does it. It's A,B,C, D or F. It's fine as far as it goes. We just try to break it down more. It gives me more to write about. I can analyze and tell people

Continued on next page

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By MARK LESLIE

Conflict of interest. Bought favors. The accusations fly each year when golf magazine polls on the best courses are released. But they are quickly debunked by the accused.

Ron Whitten, a former district attorney who runs the *Golf Digest* surveys, doesn't even vote himself, he says, and has dumped several of his panelists over the years for accepting gratuities or "acted contrary to our code of conduct."

Perhaps the harshest criticisms have been directed at Tom Doak, a golf course architect who operates the *Golf Magazine* poll and whose High Pointe Golf Course in Michigan has been ranked in the magazine's Top 100 listing.

"Some people think there was tremendous impropriety because High Pointe made the list," Doak said. "I sent in my resignation to *Golf Magazine* because everyone would call it conflict of interest. But they've asked me to stay because they think I run a fair game... So, at least for the next time, I'm staying."

High Pointe may have received

## Conflict accusations fly, but raters duck

"more credit than it deserves because some of the panelists know me and came up to see it, and because they perhaps tended to like it a little more," he said. "But it got the vote. And all golf course architects benefit from that. You can't tell me Jack Nicklaus' courses, or Tom Fazio's don't get some more credit because of their name."

Doak said he has become less and less involved with *Golf Magazine* over the years since

See related story  
on next page

hanging up his shingle as a course architect because he knew conflict-of-interest would be an issue. Today, he has no connection with the magazine's selections of the best new courses of the year, which is under the aegis of the travel editor. He instead runs the selections of Best 100 in the World and in America.

"A couple of my courses have been selected, and I think they deserve to be in," he said. "If somebody else doesn't, that's fine. I just hope they have seen my courses and think they don't deserve it before they criticize me for conflict of interest."

Ten other architects are on the panel, all get one vote, and no votes for their own courses are counted, Doak said.

Meanwhile, at *Golf Digest* no staff members participate in the

panel, Whitten said.

"We don't want an editorial influence in the numbering. We're the survey-takers. It would be like asking the Nielsen people, or Academy of Arts and Sciences people to vote. They're the people counting the ballots," he said.

"We try our damndest to make this above-board. There are clubs that try very hard to influence votes. Panelists can accept only greens fee and cart, nothing more... It is not designed to be a clique to get free golf."

Continued on next page

## The Ratings Game

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why this course is strong.

"Tom's is so subjective he can write the results, but has little to draw on to write about."

One outcome of the my-course-is-better-than-yours phenomenon has been rising costs in construction.

"I've found costs have been accelerating," Brauer said. "Most architects don't have the budgets to create 18 memorable holes. Both players and architects I've talked to use PGA West as the classic example of 18 spectacular holes, and when you get to the end of them, you still can't remember the difference. So, to a certain degree it's sort of self-defeating to try to do all 18 as memorable holes because they do blend together."

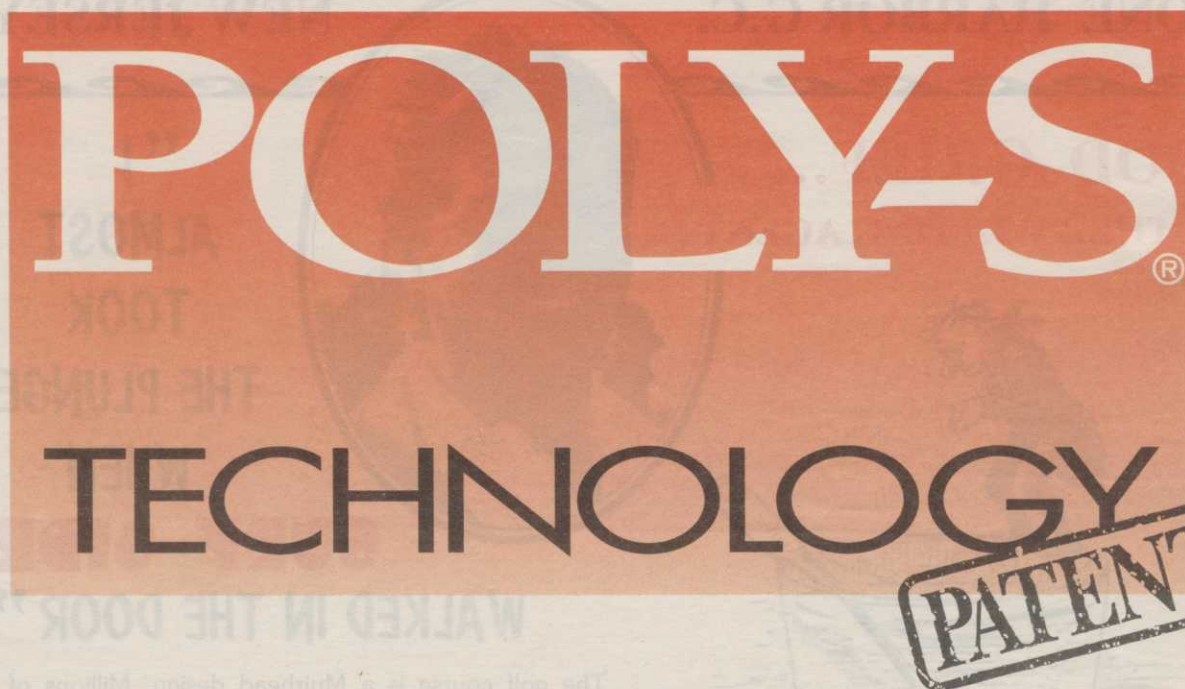
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For all the debate, polls will not soon go away. *Golf Course News* conducts its own polls for Best Architect and Best Builder each year, as well as Best Conditioned Course on one of the professional tours.

The attention has its benefits, says Brauer. "It creates more interest in what I do," he said. "Whether I win or don't win, if it is flawed or favors one type of golf course over another, it creates interest in golf in general and that can only help us."

"I'm not holding ourselves out as judge and jury," Whitten said. "It sells magazines. It has an impact on the state of golf architecture which I don't find entirely bad. It is a standard by which architects measure themselves against each other. And a little competition isn't bad."

GOLF COURSE NEWS



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