

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

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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."

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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."

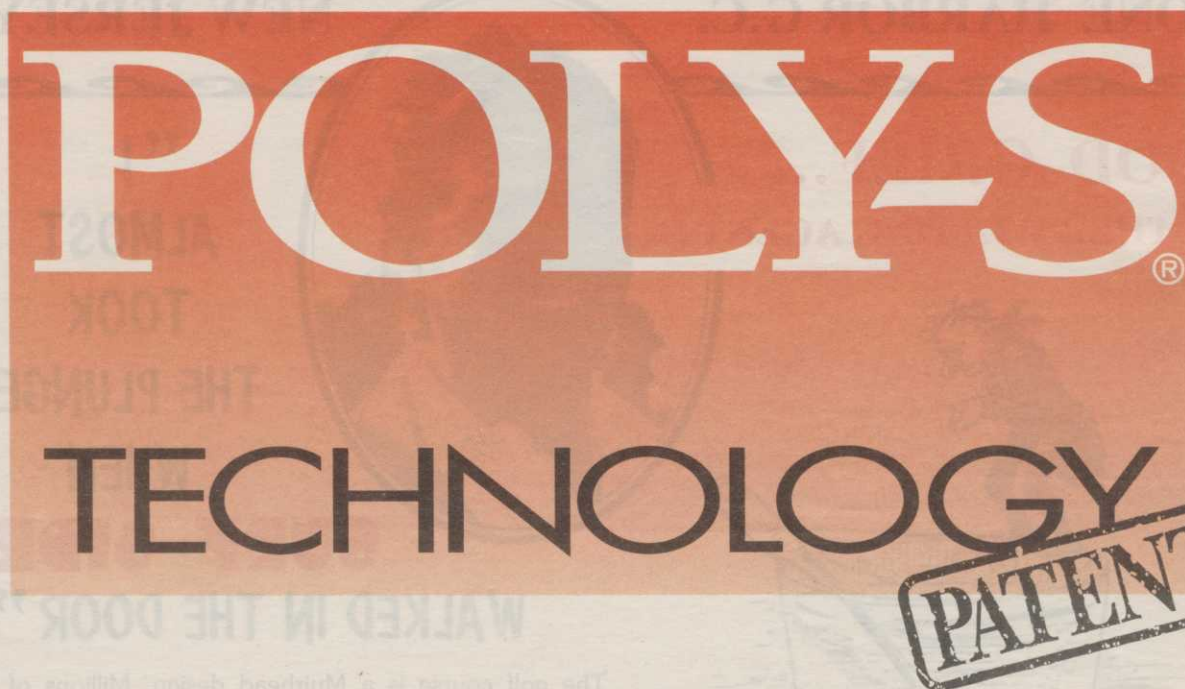
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For all the debate, polls will not soon go away. *Golf Course News* conducts its own polls for Best Architect and Best Builder each year, as well as Best Conditioned Course on one of the professional tours.

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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Superintendents moved to anger over 'conditioning' criteria

By MARK LESLIE

The debate over whether to rate a course's conditioning when ranking it, has stirred superintendents to anger and panelists to don flak jackets ever since *Golf Digest* began its rankings with conditioning as one of several criteria in 1985.

Superintendents complain course raters don't take into account special and dynamic circumstances that confront them. "Soil conditions, drainage

topography, amount of play, ownership directives, budgetary restraints and weather are only a few of the many factors that are considered when it comes to grooming a course. No two courses are the same even if they're next door to each other," said Richard Staughton, superintendent at Colonial Charters Golf Club in Longs, S.C., whose condition was criticized in one poll. "Keeping a course in top-notch shape

requires routine maintenance practices such as aerifying, top dressing and verticutting."

"If anything, I've tried to de-emphasize conditioning in the Golf Magazine poll," said that publication's survey coordinator, architect Tom Doak. "That's why we have 60 or 70 panelists. Some haven't seen the course for 10 years. They can't be voting on what kind of condition it is in today. They may have heard about its condition, but using that

[using secondhand information] is wrong."

Ron Whitten, who directs the various *Golf Digest* polls, defends his inclusion of conditioning. That evaluation is removed from calculations two years after a panelist last sees the facility, he said, "so a course is not penalized if it has changed conditioning. That is one area we think we need to keep more up-to-date on."

Shot values, he said, "are far and away the most important

factor. So we double that number. Everything else has equal value, equal weight. Some think that should not be true of conditioning. But you can have a great golf course that people like even if it is in bad condition. And there is some great conditioning on ordinary designs that elevate the courses. It shakes out pretty well."

Golf Digest's 700 panelists are told to rank courses — from one to 10 — on shot values, resistance to scoring, playability, design balance, memorability, aesthetics and conditioning. Their findings are published in the magazine's lists of America's 100 Greatest, America's 75 Best Public Courses and 75 Best Resort Courses, the annual Best New Public and Private Courses, and Best Courses in each state.

Doak complained that "with a lot of raters, if the greens were aerified yesterday, [to them] the course was in lousy shape. That's stupid, but they don't know much better than that."

But Whitten said: "Our panelists understand routine aerification is part of the life of a golf course. We ask how playable were the tees, greens and fairways the last time they played it. Even if it was aerated, the greens are still playable."

"What you are looking at are poor maintenance practices — a lack of irrigation — or, more commonly, too much irrigation — thatchy greens, infestations of poa annua, fairways that are patchy, tees that are beat up, a lot of divots not repaired or filled."

He said a number of panelists will explain in their evaluations why a course was not in good shape — pointing to drought or flood, for instance.

"We do not punish for those cases, but we do hold a course accountable for poor maintenance practices," Whitten said. "Harbour Town [Golf Links on Hilton Head Island, S.C.] got

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KEN THOMPSON

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"I know a lot of the panelists. Most are sincere in their efforts. They are golf people — professionals, superintendents, talented amateurs, managers — and they take what they do for us seriously even though they are not compensated for it. They get absolutely no glory because we don't even print their names any more. There were clubs showering them with invitations, videotapes, etc."

Saying that he gets letters from clubs "all the time," Whitten added: "Not that they're doing anything wrong. No one on paper has offered an illegal inducement. But they do want 30 panelists to visit their clubs so they can get qualified."

SAND GREENS

SAND GREENS