

Pearson leaves Golden Bear, enters the fray of golf course design

By MARK LESLIE

JUNO BEACH, Fla. — Testing the waters and finding them temperate, golf course architect Tom Pearson has left Nicklaus Design Co. and formed Pearson Golf Design, headquartered here.



Tom Pearson

Opening his own firm, Pearson follows in the steps of former Nicklaus cohorts Jay Morrish, Bob Cupp, Scott Miller, Rick Jacobsen and Rick Robbins.

"I've been at Nicklaus Design a long time," Pearson said. "I always felt that I was at the top just by working with Jack. The only thing I could personally see that would be a step up would be to go on my own. This is that step."

Pearson spent 15 years working with Nicklaus and also worked with Robert von Hagge and Bruce Devlin, assisting on more than 70 courses at varying stages of design and construction. "I was a pencil-pusher for Jay [Morrish] and Bob [Cupp] when I started out," he said.

Nicklaus has been very supportive of his move, Pearson said. He added that he is finishing up work on some Golden Bear projects as well as starting his first Pearson



The view from the left of the approach on the par-5 3rd hole at the Tom Pearson-designed Shore Oaks.

signature tracks — The Tradition at Ibis Golf & Country Club in Palm Beach County and Aston Oaks in Cincinnati, Ohio.

"I like to see what the land is going to yield to me," Pearson said of his design philosophy. "It breaks my heart when we have to make slope cuts and things like that. I've been on a lot of old golf courses and they have blind shots and things like

that... In some ways I wonder if all this modernization and availability of equipment may have interfered with some of the mystique of golf design."

His decisions on earth-moving, he said, are based, first, on safety; and second, on playability of the hole.

"The environment is a big concern," he added. "All my jobs have been confronted

with environmental concerns and we've always been able to accommodate the desires of environmental agencies and our clients, and make it all come together and work...

"There are some uncertainties about what we have to do to preserve the environment and sometimes you wonder if we are going to the extreme in certain situations. But we don't know any different, so it's the sure way of preserving things now. Maybe down the road we will find out we didn't have to do some of the things we've done, or that it would have been better if we had enhanced it rather than left it alone."

The biggest challenge facing golf development today, Pearson said, is putting together an adequate land package to support a course.

"We need to have so many acres to do a golf course. A developer has to put together enough land to make the numbers work. If there is wetland or something else, he has to obtain more land... There are just so many variables involved."

"We've always had to work with the land. Years ago it was the topography, soil conditions and things like that. Now it seems to be more the environment. And so it has always been a challenge to work with the land in one form or another."

Cooks Creek points way to future

Continued from previous page

Jim plans to build some housing the property.

For them all, especially course builder Niebur Golf, it was a major undertaking confronted by one massive problem — flooding. The Scioto River runs along the 355-acre property and merges with Little Walnut Creek on-site. That confluence over the years has often submerged the property under three to four feet of flood water.

"We explained it was a lousy site,

virtually flat except for one huge ridge that runs down the middle," Hurdzan said. "But Jim said, 'By God, we'll do it anyway.'"

With the help of environmental groups and the Ohio departments of Natural Resources (DNR) and Fish and Wildlife, they have done just that. Some 63 acres of wetlands were created, and the soil dredged up was used to raise the fairways six to seven feet to get out of the flood plain and not alter any of the flood capacity of the valley. Some



Michael Hurdzan

800,000 cubic yards of dirt were moved.

"We had to build big detention areas," Hurdzan said. "Those areas became wetlands and, ultimately, the habitat."

Audubon Society of New York

President Ron Dodson counted some 40 varieties of birds on the property when he visited to sign Cooks Creek into the group's Cooperative Sanctuary Program.

"We're promoting the bluebirds," said superintendent Galen

Scharenberg. "We've installed houses for American kestrels [small hawks], bluebirds, martins, barn owls, woodducks, bats... We have a blue heron rookery, and will start putting floating logs and tying them off in the lakes for them to perch on."

"It's not actually the bird houses that do the most good," Scharenberg added. "It's the natural areas, like the tall grasses. Whenever we clear areas for air circulation we pile the branches back up like wigwams. People don't realize that pile of sticks in the forest has 10 times the amount of animals than the birdhouses."

Ohio DNR personnel visit every several months to discuss what Cooks Creek is doing and how they can help Scharenberg and his crew.

"Initially, environmentalists saw our intentions were to do it right," Hurdzan said. "Once they saw that and we could show we weren't going to alter the flow of the river, that indeed we were going to stabilize the land to erosion, and increase the wildlife value of the site, they were thrilled."

The story line, Hurdzan said, is that "wetlands have always been unusable ground. We have taken modern earth-moving equipment and put the flood plain into recreational use without changing the intention of what a flood plain is all about — to allow for flood waters. The flood plain today is probably a better storage area than before."

Cooks Creek? It's a narrow, three- to six-foot-wide creek that runs down through the Upland nine which looks down on the Bottoms nine set in the wetlands. "We made it," Hurdzan said, explaining that water from near the river is pumped to an upland pond that flows down through the creek and the wetlands.

"So the water is circulating. It allows for greater biodiversity on the site," Hurdzan said.

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