

# An eye for design

A YOUNG GOLF COURSE ARCHITECT STARTS HIS OWN FIRM TO MAKE HIS MARK AND CREATE UNIQUE GOLF COURSES

by  
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**Q** When did you know you wanted to become a golf course architect?

I grew up learning the game at a course called Pasatiempo in Santa Cruz, Calif. That's an old Alister MacKenzie gem. I was ignorant to its history and who he was, but it rubbed off, and I traveled around to see other courses and realized they didn't stack up. I tried to understand what made the course special and why everyone loved it. That spurred an interest in why the design was unique and what made it good.

I went on to play college golf, and around that time I figured I wasn't going to make the PGA Tour. I thought about what I was going to do and had an easy answer. I embellished on my interest in golf course architecture. I was intrigued to enter the profession and jumped right into it about half way through college.

**Q** What did it take to become a golf course architect?

I was going to UC Santa Barbara, on track to earn a pre-law degree, but that wasn't going to be the proper training tool. It was a liberal arts school and didn't have any other degrees that were applicable to what I wanted to do. I started getting feelers out and talking to architects and was surprised to see many architects write back and take the time to give me advice. The majority of what I heard was to get a degree in landscape architecture and some experience in the field in construction. After I fulfilled my degree from UC Santa Barbara and my college golf commitment, I transferred to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, which is a great technical school in Central California and went on to graduate with a degree in landscape architecture. Following that, I took the advice of my peers and worked in construction for a bit.

**Q** How did you make the transition from general architecture to the golf market?

I wasn't in construction long. I worked for Landscapes Unlimited briefly on a nice Tom Fazio project in Colorado. I wasn't there long enough to learn a tremendous amount in the field, but in part because I worked for them and they're such a reputable company, I received many design offers. About three months later, I went to work in Nashville, Tenn., for Gary Roger Baird, and that launched my career in design.

My fortunate background at Pasatiempo helped get my career started because I was able to talk about elements of its design and what I learned from it. The process I went through sounds almost formulaic because so many other architects took a similar route. But there also are architects who entered the profession from unusual backgrounds or unrelated fields. Many have some sort of design or construction-related experience.

**Q** At what point in your career did you want to become a member of the ASGCA?

As soon as I knew I was qualified. There's a qualification process that I was aware of, and as soon as I felt I had met the requirements, I pursued it. The ASGCA always interested me, as far back as when I was trying to get into the field, and it was one of my resources for understanding who the architects were and where they worked. The history of the association intrigued me – the founding members who were such quality architects, from Donald Ross to Mr. Trent Jones, Stanley Thompson, Perry Maxwell, Billy Bell Sr. and guys like that.

**Q** What are the qualifications?

Though I'm not an expert on the qualification process, it consists of eight years of experience in the profession where you're responsible for all facets of the design process, from formulating plans and specifications to construction supervision. Additionally, you must complete at least five golf courses during those eight years. If you're part of a large organization, you have to be the

lead project architect on those specific projects. Beyond that, there's an interview process, evaluation of your professional practices and a peer-review process in which members of the society review your five golf courses and make sure they're up to the high level of ASGCA standards.

**Q** You're an associate member. What's an associate member?

The two main distinctions are associate members, which is what everyone comes in as when you're initially accepted, and regular members. You have to be an associate member for three years, complete two more golf courses in that time, and be voted in by the general membership to become a regular member.

**Q** What are the benefits of being an ASGCA member?

There's a support system that's tremendous as far as gathering information and contacts and associated things you expect a large society to have. What's most enjoyable is the chance to meet fellow architects and mingle, particularly at our annual meeting and at different trade shows. The annual meetings are special. We generally convene at great golf destinations. This year we're in Monterey, Calif. Last year we were in Hilton Head, S.C. There's a great meeting of the minds, which is really something because all year long you go head to head with these guys whether you're friends or not. It's a competitive business, and you're always competing for jobs. At the annual meeting, you're able to put that aside and enjoy each other's company, meet families, pick each other's brains and see what different people are doing and how they're reacting to the changing industry. There also are many valuable educational sessions daily.

**Q** What's the relationship like between architects who are members and those who aren't?

Generally fine. There probably is some friction between certain people, but I can't say that I have any. You'll see architects whose

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ECKENRODE, GOLF  
COURSE ARCHITECT  
AND MEMBER OF THE  
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF  
GOLF COURSE  
ARCHITECTS.



Photo: John Nelson



Photo: John Neilson

Architect Todd Eckenrode started his own firm because he wanted to create and implement his own design ideas.

qualifications might be suspect who aren't members of the ASGCA. On the flip side, there are a handful of architects who aren't in the ASGCA who are tremendously qualified – Tom Doak is a great example. There are a handful of talented architects practicing who aren't members, and hopefully someday, they'll be because the benefits of it for them and for the society would be mutual.

**Q Why did you start your own firm instead of going to work for a bigger, more well-known firm?**

I worked for Gary Roger Baird for a number of years and gained a lot of wonderful experience and knowledge from him about how the industry works and the natural progression of a project, from the beginning with the first plans to finishing the project in the field – all facets of how a design office works. It was a tremendous experience, but it was time to go out on my own. I had my own ideas and wanted to implement them and create unique golf courses around the world. The name of our firm is Todd Eckenrode Origins Golf Design. I have a partner – Charlie Davison, who's all you could ask for in a partner. I'm the lead designer, and Charlie runs the business end of the firm.

**Q Was going on your own difficult?**

It wasn't that difficult for me. It was a similar process to what I already had been doing. But there was more internal pressure to perform. When you have to go out and get your own business, there's another element to the game than being an employee. Running your own business has its upsides and drawbacks, but is best for me.

**Q Is there advice that you seek from the more experienced architects?**

Absolutely. I've made a point to try to meet some of the more experienced members of the society at our gatherings, from Pete Dye to Jay Moorish and Rees Jones. They've been extremely open and kind to sit and talk to me. They have some great stories. There are other guys in the society I've wanted to meet for their particular expertise, such as Bill Love and Mike Hurdzan for their stature in the industry on golf and the environment, and other guys who are doing tremendous work who I've gotten to know, such as Gil Hanse and Steve Smyers.

**Q Would you like to work with another architect on a project?**

Occasionally, you'll run into situations in which two architects collaborate. We've proposed it once or twice with fellow architects, but it never materialized. The reasons why using two architects might be preferable are different for each circumstance. I don't feel that it has to be my job only. If I can collaborate with another architect and get a client a better golf course for the money he's going spend, I would be open to it. You saw much more informal collaboration in the old days, and I hope that comes back. Pine Valley is a perfect example in which so many talented architects gave their design input. We try to work that way and invite other guys to see our projects while we're in the dirt and listen to what they have to say. Sometimes more minds are better than one.

**Q Have you worked with a pro?**

We haven't yet, but we have a project we're planning on doing with Fred Couples. It's a tremendous project in California. We're excited about it.

**Q How did you hook up with Fred Couples?**

Occasionally, we've run into situations where a developer asked us to partner with a PGA pro because they would love to have that kind of input on our course, and we've said sure. He's a guy that brings a lot to the industry from his playing background and experience on the greatest golf courses throughout the

world. He's also a guy who's respected and liked on tour. He's someone that would be a joy to work with, and our personalities are compatible.

**Q Environmentally, what are you doing when designing golf courses?**

There's so much that goes into building a golf course nowadays, especially in California, that golfers don't see. There are set-back issues that eat up acreage. There are mitigation measures, water quality standards in drainage ways that have to be met, and vegetative and species habitat controls. There are many levels of getting over these hurdles, and it takes a lot of diligence and creativity. You have to adjust because there will be hurdles you'll need to get over. It's not a simple process anymore. If you think your first routing plan is the one that's built, you're kidding yourself. Oftentimes it's the 20th routing plan that gets built. Trying to keep the 20th routing plan truly the best routing plan for the site is the challenge. But it's a fun ride. Fortunately, my design style, in working with the land and not against it, as well as our expertise in the environmental facets of the industry, enable us to achieve success as measured in the quality of the golf course and of the environment.

**Q What's your relationship with golf course builders?**

If you have a typical builder/architect relationship, it's important they work as a team. I've been on projects where there's a lot of head butting going on, and that isn't in the best interest of the client or getting the best golf course built. The best golf courses come out of a strong bond between the designer and the builder and when everyone is on the same page. We work hard to make sure that happens and try to limit our teams to contractors who feel the same way.

**Q How do you work on a project?**

It depends where the course is, but I'm out there at least once a week. I'm a detail freak and a huge field guy. I don't ever want to assume anything will be done exactly how we want it. We're constantly checking details, particularly greens and bunkers and a variety of specs, to make sure it's what we want. You can't miss a week's worth of construction and have that accomplished. So much of our design happens in the field. We design courses in the office to a certain extent, but the best courses come out of the dirt, and you have to invest a lot of time in the dirt to find all the natural features the land offers and to let the design evolve naturally.

**Q Is there anything you would like to work on that you haven't?**

Absolutely. I want to work in the dunes and on a true links site. There's a rebirth of people's understanding of how much fun dunes golf can be. You see it with the Bandon Dunes courses, which are waking up the country to what's so special about playing in the United Kingdom. I was thrilled to see Bandon Dunes created, and commend Mike Keiser for his vision. There are so many dimensions to it. It brings back some old-school-type play and ground-game-type shots. The diverse terrain and naturalness of the dunes is attractive to me, and it's what golf is all about. That's a landscape we want to work in in the future, but the amount of great dunes sites in the world is few. We're waiting for that call.

**Q Are there many young architects?**

There are many young architects that probably jumped into the industry during the boom years in the 1990s. Some will be able to continue, some won't. The newer generation is much more aware of quality architecture and the history of architecture. I have a lot of hope for this generation of architects. You're going to see some great work in the next 30 years. There's a synergy between members and a willingness to understand and apply the history of the game, and it's going to lead to many great golf courses. My hope is that this growth of quality golf venues will aid the growth of the game as much as any of the other movements to introduce players, retain players, appeal to alternate markets, etc., which are positive programs.

**Q Is there a need for more architects?**

It's extremely competitive right now, so no. The number of courses has declined during the past three years. When we were building 400 or 500 courses a year five to eight years ago, there were many more people trying to become golf course architects. I'm sure there are many more architects today than there were 10 years ago, but the market is probably self-correcting itself.

**Q Have you felt the effects of that competition?**

Somewhat. You see it on a few high-profile jobs that search for an architect. We've entered a couple of these during the past couple years in which there are 30 to 40 architects going after a job. That's unheard-of competition, and it's difficult to land those jobs. However, if you're doing good work, there's still plenty of work. The guys that are doing great design are doing fine. There are still about

150 and 200 courses a year being built, and that's enough work to go around for the quality people in the industry. We're fortunate, we have a number of projects in design. Things look pretty great for the future.

**Q Are the number of renovations and reconstruction reasons why there's plenty of work?**

Probably. That's something we don't do too often. We keep it at two or three at the most under our current work load. It's less than a quarter of our business. That's the model we look for, but other architects are fully vested in renovations and restorations. We only take on special renovation or restoration projects that interest us. It's either a relationship with a club or a club with a great history or design that intrigues us.

**Q Why is that?**

It's much more interesting to create something fresh than to aid a club in its goals to progress in the future, whether that's a renovation or restoration. It's more interesting to take a blank canvas and be creative. That's what gets the juices flowing and keeps me interested. It's a more exciting process. On the flip side, however, special clubs are an honor and a pleasure to be involved with because of their place and importance to the game. I feel a lot of responsibility on these types of courses to further their stature in the game, whether that means a restoration of what's been lost, or improvements based on how different the game is than 100 years ago.

**Q What's your philosophy about building less expensive golf courses?**

It's frustrating because many architects try to do that. We're not trying to overbuild golf courses and overspend clients' money. We're trying to get the best golf course we can for the most reasonable cost on a site. But the cost of development for an owner, particularly in California, is so high and that has to do with the amount of time it takes to take down a piece of land, gain the proper permits and approvals and develop it. It's such a lengthy and drawn out process. You see it even more drawn out on the special sites that have an environmental character to them. Those are the type of sites where you might run into environmental hurdles. It's not so much the overspending, overbuilding, an architect's style or construction costs. Costs have increased throughout the years, but it's been a steady climb. It's the cost and the time it takes to move from buying a piece of property to opening day. In the past, it might have been a year or two. Now, it can be a 10-year process on a

special site, and that's reflected in the greens fees. These costs are ultimately passed on to the golfer, and that's sad.

**Q What can architects do to reduce those costs?**

Use alternate materials. If you're lucky enough to find a site, such as Bandon Dunes, in which you're able to use on-site sand for bunkering, greens. If there aren't suitable alternate sources for greens and bunkering, then you have to go to more industry- or USGA-type of specs, that increase the cost. We always look for alternate sources, and if it's feasible, we're open to that.

There's a fine line for how little acreage of turf you want to develop. There are architects who have pushed the limit down to 40 or 50 acres of turf, and that's way too far. There's a cost savings when doing that, but it's practically unplayable. But on the high end, you don't need 150 acres of turf. You want to be responsible in your turf allocation. Irrigation is a huge cost of golf course construction. That has increased more than any other line item in typical construction costs. I've berated guys in the irrigation industry, and everyone points a finger over their shoulder at the other guy. I don't know why it's increased so much. In Southern California, if a course can't rely on regular rain to establish outside areas, then you're talking about a \$2-million irrigation system. It's unbelievable. You can build an entire golf course in some parts of the country on a suitable site for about \$2 million. That's a major problem.

There are many things you can do to lower the cost, and we're open to all of them. But you have to investigate whether they're feasible or smart from an investment point of view for the client.

**Q What advice would you give people who are considering golf course architecture as a profession?**

It's competitive, but it's something that's easy to be passionate about if you're a golfer and have a design eye. If so, there are spots in the industry for people. I would never discourage people from trying to enter this profession, but they have to be realistic. It's extremely competitive, and it's not easy to make a living from unless you've won 20 majors. The inherent rewards of creating a great golf course that can be enjoyed for generations to come, however, are tremendous and unique. GCN

*To read a longer version of GCN's interview with Todd Eckenrode, please visit [www.golfcoursenews.com](http://www.golfcoursenews.com).*