

The annoying phone call came on a recent Monday evening when I was watching a 1992 U.S. Open rerun on the Classic Sports Network. "Say, uh," the despondent caller

said. "Do you know a PGA Tour player we could join forces with? Our client insists we need a player-designer to get the job."

I, not being a kind soul, replied: "Scott Hoch surely must still be available."

Deep moans emanated from the other end of the line. I was forced to make up for my vile comment by launching into my youthful, ignorant speech about ideals, integrity, honor and all that other righteous stuff that means nothing anymore.

The sad truth is that the notion of the "player-designer" has become the most ludicrous, embarrassing and unjust trend in modern golf-course design. Now, I'm not referring to the Ben Crenshaws, Tom Weiskopfs, John Foughts and Greg Normans of the world. They actually visit their courses in progress, study the art, care about what they do and use their background as players to help create interesting design strategy. They *are* practicing golf architects.

I refer to the disturbing notion that golf architects, who have spent years working and building their businesses into respectability, now must have partners in crime who don't know anything about golf architecture.

Preferably, the new partners should have PGA Tour wins (it used to be that victories in the Majors were required to crack the design ranks). The new design associates should also be available about five Mondays a year where they will be asked to show up at construction sites wearing silver Persol sunglasses and logo-drenched shirts so they can point shamelessly at some dirt and say: "Boy, I didn't know bulldozers were that big."

The concept of the player-designer seems logical. A great golfer plays hundreds of courses around the world. He studies the game his entire life and is able to refine design strategy in the field thanks to his vivid imagination as a player.

Well, Crenshaw and Bill Coore have proved to be an excellent team, and their work certainly has a timeless quality partly because of their vast knowledge and appreciation of the game.

Player-Designers: Partners in Crime

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



DO PEOPLE REALLY
BELIEVE THAT GOLF
COURSE DESIGNS
ARE ENHANCED BY
JOE TOURPRO'S
PLAYER-DESIGNER
STATUS?

Weiskopf and his former partner, Jay Morrish, were a different but equally appealing example of how a design pairing can bring together each person's unique talents with sound results.

Fought has built a thriving business and seems embarrassed when you mention he played his way into the final group of the 1983 PGA Championship. And Norman has disappeared from the Tour since the Masters because he loves spending time in the dirt building courses.

These days, almost half of the Tour's top 125 are involved in course designs, basically lending their names for generous fees. Those fees usually include photos with the clients and nice opening-day appearances.

As one architect recently told me, however, he could count the number of weeks he was on site, while he could compute the number of minutes his player-designer partner appeared to offer his wisdom. Needless to say, the architect wasn't complaining; he was just pointing out that not only do player-designers provide little in the way of wisdom, they do it in short time.

Whatever happened to the build-it-and-they-will-come mentality, instead of this brand-recognition obsession? Do people really believe that golf course designs are enhanced by Joe Tourpro's status? Are average American golfers so shallow that they believe that they're getting more for their money by playing courses designed with player-designers involved?

Sadly, the answer is probably "yes." The unfortunate reality is that player-designers have become the necessary evils of the golf-architecture business. Like it or not, more and more Joe Tourpros will sign up to lend their names to projects, collect big checks and do those things they do. Whatever they are.

Geoff Shackelford's latest book is The Golden Age of Golf Design. He can be reached at geoffshac@aol.com