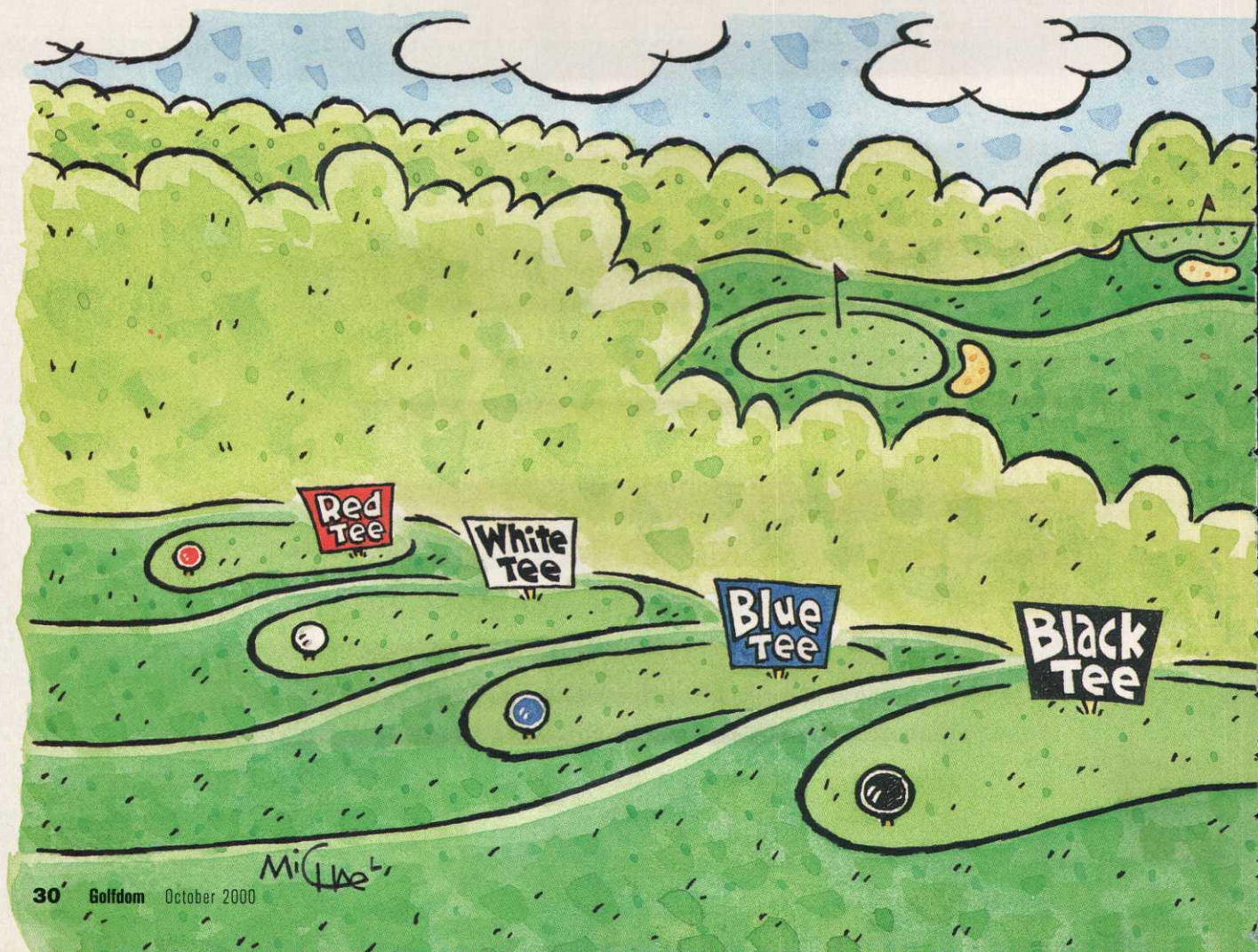


The Politics of

Modern course design involves a mix of egos, miscommunication, beliefs and bureaucracy. Boy, do we have some funny (but disturbing) stories for you

When amateur architect George Thomas and his engineer sidekick Billy Bell were building Riviera CC in 1926, they had one annoying problem. It wasn't the site, their crew or their budget — it was developer Frank Garbutt, who didn't play golf or know anything about it. But that didn't stop Garbutt from visiting the site regularly and offering architectural suggestions for each hole.

Since Thomas was providing his services for free, he didn't have to listen to Garbutt. But instead of insulting the developer by telling him to bug off, Thomas and Bell agreed to talk to each other nonstop whenever Garbutt visited, never allowing the clueless client to get a word in. Eventually, Garbutt stopped making site visits.



Design

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

Times have changed in golf— sort of. There are no amateur architects and only a handful of designers who have the clout to overrule problematic clients without fear of being canned. In most cases, client design ideas become the focal point of projects regardless of the clients' architecture backgrounds — just like green committees when they cluelessly overrule superintendents and then blame everyone but themselves when things go wrong.

Modern course design involves a peculiar mix of clashing egos, miscommunication, artistic beliefs, maintainability and politics — all converging as dirt is moving, but rarely to the betterment of a project. Yet this power struggle in the golf business goes on because, unlike a building or home design that relies on precise engineering, a golf course can be built and

maintained no matter how many odd ideas are injected into the design.

However, the balance between client involvement and architectural wisdom has tipped so far into the client's favor that many of the courses opening cost millions more than necessary. Worse, many of the courses are falling apart because the architect wasn't given enough freedom to make the holes work or because superintendents weren't hired during construction.

Several architects shared their horror stories with *Golfdom*, all off the record out of fear that even the mention of their names will be used against them by future clients and their peers. Many of these tales are humorous, but others are disturbing, considering what's at stake.

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A few architects did share their advice on dealing with politics in golf (see sidebar), but as anyone involved in the business today knows: There are no clear-cut answers to dealing appropriately with tricky political situations. Because as superintendents, managers, professionals, contractors and architects are finding out too often, golf course jobs live and die by who treads most carefully through a set of land mines laid out by developers, who are usually doing their first and often last golf projects. Now, for the stories:

Par 4s equal bad fortune

One architect, who deals with several overseas projects, offered his worst client nightmares, including the story about the Chinese fellow who didn't want any par 4s because "four" in Chinese means "death." The fellow said par 8s were good, though, because they mean prosperity. "The more par 8s on the course, the better," the architect recalls the man telling him.

Then there was the client who insisted on combining French Renaissance garden design philosophy into golf course architecture. "That was interesting, too," the architect says.

Trees of life

We've all heard of hugging memorial trees, but how about the famous club that desperately sought a U.S. Open, but told USGA officials it wouldn't cut down problematic trees nor even trim them because human souls were entrenched in the bark?

Right, left, right, left ...

Another successful architect told of the client who bitterly complained about the fairway bunker built on the right side of the first hole. The client said, "It shouldn't be there because everyone slices [their balls]," the architect recalls.

"I was confident he would like the second hole, with its fairway bunker on the left," the architect said. "But when he saw it, he said, 'Why not a fairway bunker left if no one hits there?'"

Tee-d off

A popular and respected architect recounted this typical development nightmare:

"One day, the money half of the partners was making a rare site visit. As we walked the holes, I tried to give him a play by play of what was going on, and what the finished product was going to look like. When we got to a par 3, I figured there was no way our tour could not brighten, especially with such a naturally wonderful golf hole. I explained that the back tee played to about 185 yards and the angle of the wetland bank favored a right-to-left shot. Pointing out the first peninsula, I showed how the angle was less difficult and the distance on the hole was reduced to about 140 yards [from the middle tee]. Then [we moved on] to the last tee setting and a hole of about 105 yards. I turned to the money guy expecting him to toss me a crumb, and he said tersely, 'Why so many tees?' Only mildly



Do Your Research

Several architects note that researching who you might be working for is one of the best ways to avoid tense situations during the designing of a course. It's simple but important advice. Consider this story from a former American Society of Golf Course Architects president relating a classic example of someone not researching his client, which led to disastrous results:

"An architect went to a prestigious club in the Minneapolis area to be interviewed for a potential remodeling project. During the course of the interview, he extolled the virtues of Rain Bird Irrigation Products. Had he done some research, he would have known that some board members were executives of the Toro Corp."

The same architect points out that simple research — perhaps a phone call to a superintendent in the area who formerly worked for the client — is the kind of basic research many designers don't do because they are too excited about the prospects of working for particular clubs or developers.

"Any club that frequently changes architects is likely the cause of its own problems," the architect says. "While architects certainly can do poor work or not fit the bill at a particular club, any club that goes through four well-known architects for four renovation projects is trouble."

So if you're a superintendent or architect, don't go to a club with the idea of removing several trees without knowing they are part of the club's current memorial tree program. And don't respond the way one architect did when a green committee chairman asked him, "Can you save this tree?" To which the soon-to-be-unemployed architect replied, "No problem, just tell us where you want us to stack the logs." — **Geoff Shackelford**

flustered, I waded in with the typical stuff about par 3 and players of various abilities and playing lengths and angles, and all that stuff. I went on for three or four minutes only to again be greeted with, in an even more terse delivery, 'Why so many tees?'

"Then I got more direct, something to the effect of ... it's a par 3 ... people take divots ... you need the extra space for the turf to repair itself ... and so on. Giving new meaning to terseness, the money man said, in a totally serious fashion, 'Why don't you just use a rubber mat?' With no further words, we moved on to the next hole."

Not funny

A long-time architect known for his graceful handling of tough clients had this to say when we contacted him:

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"The political issue! Will you make it politically correct? Will we have elephants and donkeys? You have a difficult subject. I have found little that is comical about committees and golf course remodeling. Unfortunately, most of this end of the business is uncomfortable and often confrontational."

A failure to communicate

How do you make situations less confrontational? Architects and superintendents, even though sometimes pitted against each other on design issues, tend to be the victims in the end. Even the consensus of two knowledgeable industry veterans is usually not enough to convince committees and developers to listen to the experts.

Many of the architects questioned for this article said each case is distinct, but there are some ways to handle these delicate political situations. Most say that superintendents and architects must find creative ways to give clients an out so they can admit they were wrong and not turn situations into tense battles.

"When committee persons have their own personal design 'solutions,' I find it best to direct the conversation toward design 'concepts' and 'philosophy,' says Don Knott of Knott-Brooks-Linn Design. "I'll say, 'I like the concept of your idea,

but we should look at a variety of design options that accomplish your concept.' Or I'll say, 'It's an interesting idea and one that I will certainly consider in relation with other variables and options.'"

Renowned architect Brian Silva advocates open communication and involving all parties in the design process as the best way to deal with differing viewpoints and to help create the best result.

"Often when looking at a problem, a great deal of good is derived from standing there and asking, 'What do you think we should do here?' That's key — because a lot of clients have a general idea or concept in mind — and it's your job to convert that on the ground to grading, shaping, fine shaping and the like," Silva says.

The bottom line: Most everyone tries too hard to make their points or to settle situations without simple non-confrontational communication and good listening skills. It's always difficult dealing with egos, armchair architects and experts on everything, but skillful communication is your best bet in dealing with the politics of design. ■

Geoff Shackelford, a contributing editor for Golfdom, knows that politics make the world go 'round. He can be reached at geoffshackelford@aol.com.

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