

# Jawing with Jack

Golden Bear says superintendents need to understand playability  
and architects need to aim for more than just top-rated tracks

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

**I**f there's *one* thing superintendents need to improve, says Jack Nicklaus, it's learning the playability of their golf courses. So if you're a superintendent who doesn't know how your golf course plays, Nicklaus advises you to learn its tendencies — from the thickness of the grass in the rough to the firmness of the sand in the bunkers.

Many superintendents don't understand what playability should be because they don't play their own courses enough, Nicklaus asserts. The Golden Bear is not afraid to imply that many superintendents don't know how their courses should play because they ain't got game. "A lot of superintendents aren't very good players, and a lot of them don't play golf," he adds.

Who's going to argue with a guy who won 18 Majors? But don't stew if you don't agree with Nicklaus' observation. He's not trying to be antagonistic. Nicklaus realizes many superintendents don't have time to play their own courses, but he also knows golfers appreciate superintendents who maintain their courses according to proper playability.

Nicklaus says superintendents don't necessarily have to play a lot of golf or be decent players to understand playability — but it helps. Nicklaus says his long-time employee Ed Etchells, president of Golfturf (a division of Golden Bear International) and the company's head agronomist, doesn't play golf, but he learned how Nicklaus prefers his courses to play.

"I had to hammer it into his head," Nicklaus says of his 29-year employee. "It took a long time for him to understand what I was interested in."

Etchells, a former superintendent, was more interested in how courses appeared, says Nicklaus, who stresses that there's a difference between agronomy and playability. "Playability is about how a course plays, not about how pretty or green it is," he adds.

While Nicklaus is not afraid to criticize superintendents, he also recognizes their importance to the industry.

"What did they make 25 years ago? \$20,000? And what do they make today?" Nicklaus asks, aware of the answer. "Obviously, superintendents are a big deal. But there aren't enough good superintendents to fill all the golf courses that want high-profile maintenance."



Nicklaus sympathizes with superintendents who are under pressure from green committees and golfers to keep their courses in near-immaculate condition. He knows upscale courses must also have the hefty maintenance budgets in place so superintendents can do their jobs effectively.

"What most golfers want is a good putting surface, a good tee surface and reasonably good fairway grass," Nicklaus says. "The rest of the golf course isn't as important to them."

Until Tiger Woods unseats him, the Columbus, Ohio-born Nicklaus will carry the greatest-golfer-ever label. But these

days, Nicklaus is garnering a lot of press and prestige for his golf course design.

"He has left a very large Golden Bear footprint on golf course architecture around the world," says fellow architect Rees Jones.

Dublin, Ohio's Muirfield Village GC, which Nicklaus designed with Desmond Muirfield in 1974, is regarded as one of the nation's top modern courses. So is Harbour Town Golf Links, which Nicklaus helped Pete Dye design in 1970 in Hilton Head, S.C. Nicklaus says Dye gave him his

start in architecture about 35 years ago.

"He called me up and said, 'Jack, I'm doing a golf course on the other side of town, and I'd like you to come out and take a look at it to see what you think.' I said to him, 'What would I know?'"

The course was The Golf Club in New Albany, Ohio, one of Dye's and golf's greatest tracks, which opened in 1967. Nicklaus went to the site, and it's a day he remembers vividly. "It was the first time I'd ever been on a golf course that was under construction," Nicklaus says.

Nicklaus recalls standing with Dye near the second hole.

"There was a beautiful round green with four round bunkers around it," Nicklaus says.

"Pete said to me, 'What do you think of it?' I said, 'It looks awful.' He said, 'I think it looks awful, too. What would you do?'"

Of his first experience with design, Nicklaus remarks, "I had a blast." He says Dye called him a few weeks later and offered him a consulting job.

"Working with Pete and Alice [Dye, Pete's wife] was one of the greatest experiences I've ever had," Nicklaus says. "That started something for me that has been very special."

Designing golf courses enables him to leave a legacy, Nicklaus says. Muirfield Village, perhaps, will be Nicklaus greatest gift to the golf world. "It represents what I believe and love about the game," Nicklaus says.

The notion to build a "special" golf course near his hometown struck Nicklaus during the 1966 Masters. He was inspired by Georgia-born Bobby Jones, who pursued his goal of building a dream course, Augusta National, in his home state in the 1930s. Jones teamed with famed architect Alister MacKenzie.

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"I was thinking, wouldn't it be neat to create something like this in Columbus?" Nicklaus recalls. "The idea was to bring golf back to my hometown."

Nicklaus went looking for a course site in the Columbus area in the mid-'60s. Muirfield was eventually built on land where Nicklaus hunted as a kid.

It was fitting that Nicklaus received the American Society of Golf Course Architects' most prestigious honor — the 2001 Donald Ross Award — in the dining area of Muirfield's homey clubhouse on a cool spring evening in May. More than 150 of Nicklaus' architectural peers, including Dye, Arnold Palmer, Tom Fazio, Robert Trent Jones Jr., Rees Jones and Geoffrey Cornish, were in attendance, clad in their traditional red-and-black plaid member jackets. Nicklaus received the award for making "significant contributions to the game of golf and profession of golf course architecture."

Nicklaus addressed his colleagues candidly and humbly. He said architects should stop aiming for trophies when designing golf courses.

"It's a shame, but everything seems to be about what your golf course is rated

and who's going to get the best award," Nicklaus says, adding that architects often conveniently pass the prices of their lavish designs on to owners. "I'm as guilty as the rest of us, but I don't think we need to be outdoing each other."

Nicklaus probably was preaching to the choir when he told fellow architects that the far-flying golf balls used on the PGA Tour are hurting the game. Too many courses have to be lengthened because players are using balls manufactured to travel to the next town, he says.

"When I first came into the ASGCA about eight years ago, we had a poll in which 93 percent of you said the golf ball was the biggest problem in our profession," Nicklaus says. "If that was the biggest problem then, what do you think it is now?"

Nicklaus says average golfers should be allowed to use "improve-your-distance" balls. But he insists a regulation ball — and not a specialized solid-core ball — be designated for tournament golf.

Interestingly, there is talk that Nicklaus isn't a full-fledged architect. Nicklaus and other golfer/architects use their eminent names to command big projects, but they aren't heavily involved in them

**A Who's Who of golf course architects helped Jack Nicklaus celebrate his reception of the Donald Ross Award in May. Pictured from left to right are Arthur Hills, Pete Dye, Mike Hurdzan, Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer.**

as designers, some critics say.

Damian Pascuzzo, president of the ASGCA, disagrees with the critics, and says Nicklaus brings a distinctive perspective to design.

"He has played golf all over the world, and he has played under intense, competitive conditions," Pascuzzo says. "That's a viewpoint I could never bring to a client."

Pascuzzo admits that Nicklaus' name gives him a marketing leg up.

"Would we love to command his fees? Absolutely," Pascuzzo says. "But Jack brings a lot to the table that a lot of us can't in terms of name recognition. My name does not sell real estate."

Nicklaus told his peers that he's a "lucky guy" to have had found success in two careers. He advised the architects to work together.

"This is a cooperation, not a competition," he told them. "If there's anything I can ever do to help any of you, please feel free to ask." ■