

LaFoy, Hurdzan and others discuss the state of the industry, the impact of technology and other subjects

Architects Weigh In

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

Golfdom informally polled a variety of architects by e-mail and asked their thoughts on the state of the golf industry, the impact technology is having on restoration projects and what the architects would do to put the distance fire out. Here's what they said:

Architects on the state of the golf industry and other comments

John LaFoy: "When I think of the golf industry in recent years, I think of Alan Greenspan's comment about the stock market during much of that same period — 'irrational exuberance.' Not that I blame anyone or anything for being exuberant about their profession, but at some point you have to wonder if things were not going a little too fast. My personal observation is that the golf industry is still strong in the renovation and remodeling sectors. The biggest difference is that many of the architects and contractors that once were not interested in this type of work are now very interested in it."

Michael Hurdzan: "I still don't think the entire golf industry (clubs, shoes, carts, resorts, clothing, instructors, etc.) realizes that golf

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Architects are worried that some classic courses, like Merion Golf Club, have become outdated because they don't have room to expand.

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and the environment is everybody's problem. The entire industry needs to support those who are trying to fund the research to show that golf courses can be even better neighbors to Mother Nature. Somehow they see it as the superintendent's problem alone.

With the water shortage in many parts of the country, golf courses will be one of the first to be cut off, denied permits or pay a high price in one form or another, with the result being fewer golf courses or at least higher-priced golf. Tied to that is the need to keep golf affordable and accessible, and here again most of the industry sees it as someone else's problem, which it's not. We all need to support the growth of the game, make it a family-friendly sport and be aware of its overall image."

Tim Liddy: "The length issue is getting tiresome, but it's a big problem, better stated by others like Jack Nicklaus. Only Augusta National has the ability to require a tournament ball, and I hope it does this year. Golf is going the way of tennis and becoming boring to watch. The talented golfer has also lost his advantage with the new technology. Just look at the recent major winners."

John Fought: "The more I work in the design business, the more I appreciate timeless, classic works from the Golden Age. Why do architects feel the need to invent new gimmicks and create loads of courses that neither

Architect Bob Cupp says golf needs more players who play because they "love the sight of the ball against the blue sky or backdrop of trees – not because they want to thump on their chests."



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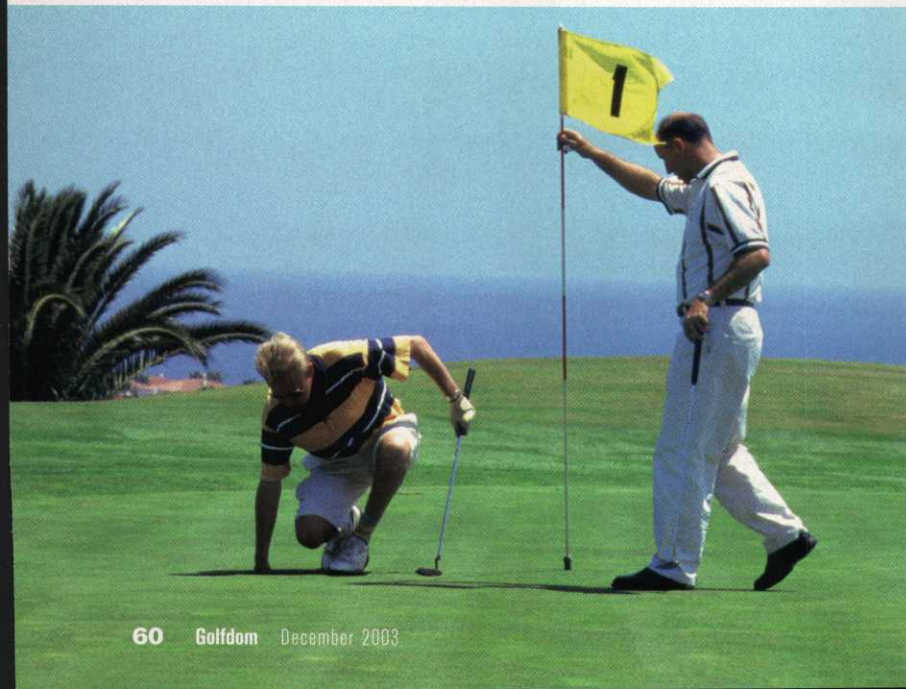
— MICHAEL HURDZAN

look natural nor play well? I find myself constantly looking back and studying."

Tom Johnson: "With regard to the current low level of new-course activity, golf is just going through a normal business phase. We overbuilt from the mid-1980s until 2000, and the cyclical nature of any industry will have to adjust. The most disturbing factor in golf is the Neanderthal reluctance of Augusta National to join the real world. It opens its door to the media and the golfing public each year, yet flaunts its own right to privacy, bigotry and gender bias each year. It's quite disgusting."

Bob Cupp: "First, it would be better for the game if it wasn't so egotistical. Ego drives the cost, and subsequently fewer people play. People should play because they love the sight of the ball against the blue sky or a backdrop of trees, and its bounce and roll toward the flag — not because they want to thump on their chests. Second, we are headed down a dangerous road right now with the equipment."

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Architects love to talk about Augusta National (pictured above). Says Tom Johnson, “The most disturbing factor in golf is the Neanderthal reluctance of Augusta National to join the real world.”

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Neal Meagher: “It’s incumbent upon people who deeply care about the courses we play on to continue going forward with positive education of all types to disperse information on what is good, bad and indifferent design. That is the challenge — to make the average golfers more savvy about what they are getting for the extra money they pay to play at most of the name designer courses. So they will know if the result is worth the brand’s name or is just average design from a firm that is supposed to stand for excellence only.”

Clyde Johnson: “I’m tired of hearing everyone talk about how bad or slow business is. We knew this was coming, and you should have been prepared for it. The economy and the war haven’t helped matters, but golf was due for a slowdown regardless.”

Are you in favor of golf ball rollback, a tournament ball or neither to keep designs relevant?

Steve Smyers: “I’m definitely concerned about a tourney ball. Where do you draw the line — at the club or junior or college level? I don’t know or believe it can work as simply as it sounds. As far as the PGA Tour goes, it’s all about entertainment dollars. People love to watch long tee shots. Just observe the number of people following Hank Kuehne or John Daly. As far as rolling the ball back, this is a hot topic, and I really need to analyze whether this is good for the masses or not.

The USGA and Royal & Ancient Golf Club have released a Statement of Principles (www.usga.org/test_center/joint_statement) regarding this issue. I back this statement for now. The USGA is examining this issue and

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is in touch with all of the constituents of the game. I believe it will do what is best for the game.”

John Fought: “We should go back to the old K2A Titliest ball spec, and the clubs should be reviewed as well. It would help so many classic courses without having to do what Augusta did (I may be crazy but I wish Augusta could be restored to its original holes). I hope that we can get this situation under control.”

Clyde Johnson: “What the manufacturers have failed to recognize in their zeal to milk more distance out of balls and equipment is the liability associated with errant shots on older golf courses that were not designed for this technology.”

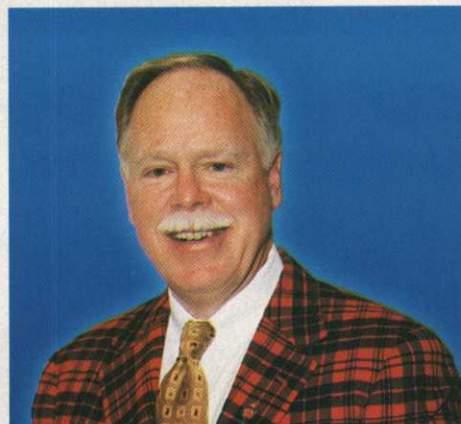
Tim Liddy: “I’m in favor of a tournament golf ball and a maximum size driver head for tournament play.”

Tom Johnson: “I would rather see some definitive variety in the courses we see on the PGA Tour. Since the Deane Beman days and the TPC courses, the courses seem to be quite generic with green speeds the same, fairway cuts the same and bunker sand the same. Even the IBM scoreboards are the same, and the Buick courtesy cars the same. The list is endless. The only things different are the outfits worn by the volunteer marshals.”

Dana Fry: “I favor a tournament ball. It would be the easiest thing to control and can help the distance problem we’re now experiencing.”

John LaFoy: “If the distance standards are rolled back, it will hurt the average player much more than it hurts professionals, as distance will never be a problem for the professionals. I would vote for setting up tour courses to USGA-type conditions and let the pros whine. If they want to hit 320 yard drives, make accuracy as important as distance.”

Bob Cupp: “Dick Rugge [USGA Technical Director] has charts that show the average PGA Tour driving distance increased 12 percent from 1996 to 2001 — owing 6 percent to the titanium driver and 6 percent to the new breed



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— JOHN LAFOY

A tournament ball – to control the distance problem – is a hot topic of discussion among architects.



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of ball. In the most simplified form, if the sides of a square are increased by that same 12 percent, the area of that square is increased by 25 percent. Therefore, if 200 acres were required for a good golf course in 1996, by 2001 the number was 250. What are we doing to ourselves? We have to buy more land, cut down more trees, move more earth, use more materials, install more drainage and irrigation, use more water, more fertilizer and more pesticides. And the bottom line, as our industry likes to say, is that somebody must pay for it, and that somebody is the player.

Ego makes people pay hundreds of dollars to play some nameless inland golf course because they are promised they will be coddled when they get there and the golf will be breathtaking — but it seldom is. Eventually, the American player figured it out, and the high-end daily fee has gone largely by the wayside. It has taken about 10 years to prove the idea hurt the industry, even in spite of the oversized egos of the players. We need \$25 and \$30 courses. Thanks to Tiger and Sergio and other young players, a 12 year old in America thinks it is cool to play golf — and we are totally missing it.”

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Is the restoration movement being influenced by technology race?

Dana Fry: "Too many classic courses are so concerned with distance and getting major tournaments that they will do anything to get them, sometimes totally disregarding the past history of the course."

Michael Hurdzan: "Restoring classic courses is way overrated unless we are also going to turn back the clock and do classic maintenance such as no irrigation or have at least less, slower and more undulating greens, and bunkers that don't necessarily play the same from bunker to bunker. Putting a suped-up engine in a Model T and then driving it

on the freeway at 70 mph is not classic restoration."

Tom Johnson: "'Restore' might not be the right word. 'Stretch' is probably more appropriate. Classic courses like Merion Golf Club that do not have room to stretch are now fossils. Merion at 6,500 yards would need to be played with nothing longer than a four-iron to make it interesting. The distance gained is part of an evolutionary process that all sports encounter. Golf's evolution over the past few decades with the solid ball, titanium heads and graphite shafts has been radical on the evolutionary scale, thus the need for more than 7,400-plus-yard courses."

Tim Liddy: "I don't want to get too heavy, but I would say the movement to restore classic golf courses has more to do with quality-of-life issues. That is, people (society) look back to try and reinforce the aspects of their heritage that they like, and trying to implant in their future the qualities of life they value most deeply from experience. In other words, when people look into alternative futures, they inevitably look back, which reinforces the aspects of their heritage they like and comforting them."

Bob Cupp: "I would like to see any restoration project that was just that — a restoration. It would be the same size, dedication to shape, no matter how mean or impoverished. Anything else is a redesign. But true architectural restoration has little value in today's world unless the course is mandated to play with a regulated ball. Ancient bunkers in the world of modern dimension are little more than a curiosity. The most glorious part of older courses was the proximity of things — a kind of coziness that provided a certain comfort. They were, in the most explicit terms, friendlier. But they're gone, thanks to balls that now go where they never could have in those days, not to mention pervasive litigiousness." ■

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