

When Design is Par for the Course



Meet Ronald Fream the man pro golfers love to hate...

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Photography: [Ron Fream](#)

Golf course designer Ronald Fream takes pride in describing himself as a man professional golfers love to hate. As keeper of the course – someone whose job is to defend par and maintain the integrity of the course – his stated mission is to keep the winning score of a four-day tournament as close to par as possible. In an era where 25-under par is not uncommon on the PGA Tour, he’s got his work cut out for him.

That’s why Fream was a strong supporter of the decision to narrow the fairways and grow the rough to hitherto unheard-of heights at Sentosa Golf Club’s Serapong Course during last week’s Singapore Open. With primary rough at 80 millimeters and secondary rough at 28 millimeters, the tall stuff could be considered the horticultural equivalent of the distant Singapore skyline, posing nasty problems for visiting pros and providing spectators with the grim pleasure of watching some of the best players in the world hacking their way back onto a fairway with the sort of ungainly strokes any weekend golfer can relate to. Fream, who designed Serapong more than 25 years ago, was in Singapore to root for his creation.

Apart from Adam Scott, whose 13-under-par score won the tournament by seven strokes, Serapong played the pros to draw or better. Only four other players in the entire field broke par.

“The closer I can keep the game to par the bet-

ter it is,” Fream said. “We’re trying to put the course into a form that can be compared to the US Open or the PGA Championship. I would be seriously distressed if the winning score was 20-under. I don’t want them to rape and pillage the course; I want them to say ‘fair,’ ‘great,’ ‘challenging.’”

Fream has been designing courses for 40 years – working first with Robert Trent Jones before starting his own California-based company, Golfplan (www.golfplan.com) in 1972. He has built over 160 new courses and renovated at least another 150 more in about 65 countries around the world.



The Serapong Course at Sentosa Golf Club
View to hole 14 green & Singapore skyline

Much of the Serapong Course was created by reclaiming land from the sea and pumping up about three million cubic meters of sand from the seabed. Fream said when he undertook the task in 1978, and completed it almost four years later, the feat was quite unique. Since then, however, he’s grown accustomed to creating beautiful courses from the most inhospitable environments, including in the Sahara and

the Arctic Circle. Compared to that, moving mountains – which he’s done in Korea – is practically child’s play.

Fream is responsible for some of the most challenging and visually stimulating courses in Asia, including the course-in-a-volcano at Bali Handara, Kuala Lumpur’s Saujana and Genting’s Awana (both in Malaysia), the Club at Nine Bridges on Jeju Island, Korea and the magnificent Bonari Kogen Golf Course at Fukushima, Japan. Each is notable for its unique setting.

"I don't do a Fream trademark design – we do what fits the location," he said.

Fream studied ornamental horticulture in college and is both a traditionalist and an innovator who believes that technology is spoiling the game.

"The troubling thing in golf is all this new technology," he said, adding that he would outlaw big-head drivers and add weight to golf balls to slow them down in flight.

"The average handicap has gone up in the US," he said. "That big driver doesn't lower your score; it just lowers your bank account."

Fream also cites the Augusta National Course (site of the Masters) as a good example of a golf course that is trying to recreate itself in order to fend off the technology onslaught as well as the course-taming exploits of a certain Mr. Woods.

"You can't design a course for Tiger Woods," he said. "Besides, he doesn't pay green fees. The drive to be bigger and better – it all raises the price of golf and makes it more exclusive when it should be more inclusive."

"The Masters is an example of people with unlimited egos and unlimited money," he added.

Fream is also adamant that golf can be a viable way to help boost the economies of developing countries.

"Every new course creates some 1,000 new players," he said. "We built the first course in Tunisia in

1973 and now there are eight courses – in 1999, those courses accounted for some 10 percent of the foreign exchange for the entire country."

"We helped create a winter golf base there with 350,000 rounds of golf a year. A lot of times, golf is looked at as a snob sport but, if done well, it can be accessible to anybody and can have a lot of peripheral benefits."

Golf in the private country club context is typically a break-even proposition, Fream said, but by building and managing economically - what he calls – "pay-for-play" tourism-focused courses in Asia – similar to many courses in the US – that feature nice layouts, reasonable green fees and are open to players in search of an escape from northern winters, golf could be a very profitable business.

The concept may not work in Singapore, he said, where courses are private and predominately the preserve of club members, but it has been successful in countries like Thailand, Indonesia and (to a certain extent) Malaysia. He would like to see more courses designed for the Everyman golfer.

"When you start looking at daily-fee resort courses, you don't need fancy clubhouses and the bells and whistles to run up the prices. You just need to offer a bargain when it's minus-10 degrees in Seoul," he said. "It makes more golf more available to more people."

Fream, who hasn't swung a golf club in more than 20 years, considers himself the antithesis of the brand name designer.

"Developers think they need Arnold Palmer to make the business work," he said. "Baloney – just give the people a good golf course."



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