

# Golf Designers & Architects

## The Golf That Exists...

By: Ronald Fream

Hole 3 at Bonari Kogen Golf Club in Japan offers a commanding view of Mt. Bandai. *Diamond Magazine* named this hole the "Best Par-5 in Japan". (Photo by: R. Fream)

**M**other Nature, climate and some sheep collaborated on the design of the first recognized golf course, the Links Course at St. Andrews in Scotland. From the late 1800s, local golf around Scotland was conceived and built under the design and construction efforts of club makers and teaching pros, often the same person. Ensuing design efforts radiating out of Scotland were often amateur or professional players who had knowledge of the game and the mental ability to visualize suitable arrangements of holes and greensites among desirable and favorable lands that were otherwise unused.

Beginning in the early 1900s, a few focused professional golf designers began to appear, both in the United Kingdom and via immigration into the United States. Construction companies such as Franks-Harris in England completed the construction for early British architects, like Harry Colt and player-turned-designer James Braid. The land was usually accommodating and favorably disposed without the adjacent burden of real estate development. Construction was of modest methods with mules pulling scrapers and handwork was primary. Costs were economical since only moving and shaping the soil was required. Specialized seedbeds, drainage and irrigation came much later.

In the U.S., after World War I, Toomy and Flynn, Tillinghast and Ross were making their mark. George Thomas was on the West Coast; MacKenzie had

designed courses in Argentina, Australia and New Zealand before coming to California. For MacKenzie, the best courses were yet to come, Cypress Point, Augusta and Pasatiempo.

These early creators of still significant courses had time, land, labor and talent, which combined to produce brilliance. In recent years, Pete Dye, along with Alice, has been successful customizing courses on sites that MacKenzie or Ross would have loved, in much their way. Only the budgets are larger and the expectations more demanding.

The explosion of golf in America, during the confluence of Eisenhower's presidency and Palmer's charisma, brought new demands and considerations to golf. The surge in municipal public courses and the beginnings of the daily-fee, pay-to-play golf exploitation of the 1960s overtook the private club, which pre-

dominated much of the early and mid-century construction worldwide.

Robert Trent Jones emerged in the late 1950s as the preeminent practitioner of golf architecture, following Colt, Simpson, Ross and MacKenzie without competing. Jones Inc. brought ambition to the design process and presented longer tees, limitless courses and stylized greensites. Expanding economies and rising lifestyle expectations started supporting the integration of golf with adjacent residential housing to expand the potential for profits and to help cover the ever more expensive cost of golf construction. Television coverage brought golf and winning players into the view of the upwardly affluent middle class.

The 1960s led to Jones Inc. expanding internationally, taking their American-style and sand-based greens seedbeds to the former haunts of Colt, Simpson, and

Harris et al.

In the mid 1960s, costs had risen. Cypress Point or Shinnecock Hills-type land was becoming scarce. The expected ability to irrigate a golf course, even in mid summer, was raising costs. Improved turfgrass maintenance equipment cut closer and more often, but at a price. By the end of the 1960s, the growing number of public courses across America had made golf affordable and player numbers rapidly expanded.

As the 1970s began, growth in residential golf projects was followed with an increased demand for more resort destinations like Pebble Beach, Pinehurst and the Greenbrier. Greater market demand led to the increase in resort destinations in various price ranges across Florida, Arizona and Palm Springs, California. Tourism golf began emerging in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean area and Southeast Asia.

By the 1970s, golf expansion for private clubs was active in numerous countries and regions - Japan, Australia, across the United States, and Southeast



Shore Gate Golf Club, Cape May County, NJ, is a challenging layout located in the Atlantic City tourist market. The course was recently named as one of *Golf Magazine's* "Top Ten New Places You Can Play in 2002." Pictured: Hole 9 (Photo by: R. Fream)

Asia. Exposing more people to golf resulted in further market demand and a growing number of courses.

Television and personality marketing created stars out of professional golf players. As image and prestige flowed from these successful players, golf development increased. The Masters was the premier television golfing event and led to an increase in golf growth.

Unfortunately, the sites naturally suitable for golf, which the early courses so

perfectly occupied, were becoming scarcer and land costs were rising. Large available land parcels were fewer as populations around the globe grew.

In some locations, such as Japan, local zoning and building regulations often restricted golf development to difficult, mountainous and costly sites. Deserts with water access, swamps, and marginal farmland and, occasionally, landfill sites became golfing destinations. Far from being the naturally endowed sites



The Club at Nine Bridges on Jeju Island, Korea, is considered one of the best courses in Asia and is well on its way to becoming one of the finest in the world. The inspiration for the course were the famous Scottish links. Pictured: View to Hole 18 island greensite with clubhouse beyond. (Photo by: M. Klemme)

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of Colt or MacKenzie, these sites were challenging and expensive to build on. Innovative and adaptive design solutions became the answer as the “already there” and natural sites rapidly disappeared.

Augusta National, home of the Masters, began to redefine what turfgrass maintenance could be, though even today its immaculate perfection should not be used as the practical maintenance objective for most courses due to the high costs involved.

Difficult sites, higher costs, expensive, elaborate and, of necessity, demanding design and turfgrass maintenance objectives were making golf architecture into, not only an art form, but also an engineering discipline and agronomic science. Implementing more elaborate conception objectives on less than ideal sites introduced the engineering aspect to the design process.

Concurrently, the managers of professional players were seeking endorsement fees and commercial tie-ins between players and new courses. Golf design could be another cash flow to occupy a pro's free hours between starting times at tournaments and public appearances.

As golf course creation became common, numerous individuals with varying handicaps sought out an occupation in the business of golf course creation, in part due to an elevated image of the profession.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, the number of golf courses created around the world grew rapidly, as did the number of aspiring designers and associated golf professionals. The golf course started to look like the pot of gold at the end of the fairway. Today, every golfer wants to become a golf architect seeking to reach instant fame and fortune.

The emergence of the television star player and escalating golf construction costs was a convergence that continues today. The fashion of the 1980s and 1990s was to equate golf playing ability with golf design skills. The professional golfer was automatically assumed to be an accomplished designer or architect. This perceived ability contributed to the increased costs of construction, more elaborate clubhouses, higher maintenance expectations and greater user-related costs.

The days of natural sites and easy design solutions are gone. Nowadays, technological factors undreamt of by James Baird or Harry Colt, let alone MacKenzie or Ross, must be continually considered. As restrictive zoning, bureaucratic ordinances, “no-growth” proponents, increasing populations, rising land costs, diminishing volumes of fresh water and concern for a chemical-free environment expand, creating golf courses becomes more challenging and

increasingly expensive.

The demands for a course planner to meet various challenges beyond the mere connection of tee to green have defined the distinction between designer and architect. The early creators of golf might not have the knowledge to achieve the expected results in today's market. Tying golf to real estate became a strong combination for essential financial gain.

The memorable and truly original products of the early 1900s are as much a product of the location, environment and limited construction budget as they are inspired creations. The last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw commercialism, copycat stereotyping and industrial design inspired by an image marketing focus and a large budget. The courses with truly lasting design are 50 years or more.

As professional players became designers and the numbers of average player, aspiring designers grew; more follow-the-trend and rubberstamp products out-



The Sparrebosch Country Club in South Africa offers exceptional views of the sea from many of the holes. Pictured: hole 18 from rear gives a hint of the Scottish links flavor in the course design, which utilized native plants and grasses. (Photo by: R. Fream)



Pictured: Hole 18 with the NordCenter clubhouse beyond. This course is located in Finland. (Photo by: R. Fream)

numbered the unconventional creations on the market. As the sites became less natural and traditional, the need for expanded technological expertise and original designs emerged.

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Golf architecture today is an amalgam of technological knowledge, normally from landscape architecture university programs and sometimes, a background in ornamental horticulture, soil science and turfgrass agronomics. Today, the applied horticultural knowledge makes the design functional.

Many available sites today, regardless of the country, are not God-given or environmentally suited to golf. Into the future, the sites for golf will become more restrictive, create increased design difficulties and need expanded technological expertise to execute a design. The name star player drops in via helicopter or limousine, passes judgment, dictates actions and departs for the next press conference or exhibition of hitting skill. Such momentary pronouncements

cannot be classified as golf architecture or meaningful contributions to the final product. Such comments are often superficial and spontaneous “photo-op” pronouncements.

Hanging the golf pro’s name on a course as “designed by” when in fact the contribution to the design is superficial stretches the term “golf architect”. In too many cases, the name pro never saw the site until the opening day. How well one hits a four-iron has no bearing on the selection of turfgrass varieties although poorly selected turfgrass can have a drastic impact on the success of a four-iron.

Travel visitations, name-brand attachment, or superficial overview pronouncements do not make a golf architect. Such transient involvement raises development costs and, in the long run, yields little or nothing to the final product. This excess often results in declining profits.

Education, experience, dedication, and intense involvement with planning, design, earthworks, drainage, construction implementation, turfgrass agronomy and landscape horticulture contribute to the final product in a variety of ways.

A pro designer’s explanation why a specific design is meaningful to his or her own game means nothing if the majority of players on a course are 15 or 24 handicappers. The average golfers,

who pay green fees, seldom experience, or understand, the shot making values of an accomplished pro. Few pros pay green fees and it is not the professional but the majority of average players who must be provided with enjoyable, affordable golf to ensure the longevity of the game.

Merely designing without full understanding of the many issues, actions and factors influencing the process of designing a golf course are beyond the comprehension of most golfers.

Sites where immense amounts of earth must be excavated, reformed, provisions for erosion control from monsoons and typhoons, environmental preservation is paramount and water may be from a sewage treatment station calls on ability beyond ones handicap.

Excessive cost is taking its toll on golf expansion worldwide. More open-to-the-public courses and teaching academies offering suitable turfgrass conditions at a reasonable price are required. Affordable golf is expanding golf. Excessive playing costs have already caused reductions of golf in some markets.

A majority of today’s courses, particularly those on uninspired ground, are mere representations of popular creations elsewhere. Flat and boring results are becoming too common products of

**D**esigners abound. Golf architects today are fewer and must have comprehensive vision, design creativity, and knowledge of botanic, agronomic, ecologic and horticultural aspects of each project. When construction efficiency and long-term economics are considered, truly exceptional golf courses are the result. Having exceptional creative talent and the ability to conceptualize a project in total, for resort, residential communities or daily-fee use is still a rarity.

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A "golf course" could be built anywhere, even on the moon, given enough money, time, labor and effort. However, it will become harder to produce truly original, or even a remarkably dissimilar, courses as social pressures and restrictions increase. Those producing the design solution and executing the work-

ing drawings have the ability to create what is essential, appropriate and reasonable to attain.

Overpricing and excess effort simply detract from the joy and availability of the game to the vast public. Selling an image rather than the quality of the content has yielded all too many repetitive courses.

Fewer aspiring designers and more capable architects will help preserve the challenge and accessibility of golf for more players now and in the future.



Reprinted from:  
Golf Architecture: A Worldwide Perspective  
Volume 2  
2003  
Editor: Paul Daley  
Melbourne, Australia

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Tabarka Golf located on the coast of Tunisia is another remarkable site where golf was created using the natural lay of the land. Golfplan worked hard fit the course gently onto the site without destroying the site's natural beauty. Pictured: Top photo: hole 4 from tee to greensite. Bottom photo: hole 3 green. (Photos by: R. Fream)