

An interview with Golf Digest's Architect Editor, Ron Whitten.

**By
Jim Healey**

Ron is a native of Petersburg, Nebraska. He attended the University of Nebraska and then Law School at Washburn University in Topeka, KS. He was the City Attorney for Topeka for several years before getting the opportunity to make golf writing, and architecture in particular, his career. In conjunction with Massachusetts architect Geoffrey Cornish, they have published two books which are considered the definitive works on Golf Course Architecture. The first is "The Golf Course" published in 1985, and the second "Architects of Golf" was published in 1993. He continues to reside in Topeka, as he traverses the country reviewing courses, and writes about golf architecture for Golf Digest and Golf World. Ron was in St. Louis recently as he visited Fox Run and St. Albans with their respective architects, Gary Kern and Michael Hurdzan.

How did you get interested in Golf Architecture?

When I was in college I often played a short, flat course near Omaha. It was a typical country layout, 9 out one side, with 9 back the other. It was about a 4,000 yard par 60. We thought it was great. My roommate's parents took us to Chicago one weekend where I had the opportunity to play the Chicago GC and Beverly CC, two outstanding courses. This was golf like I had never experienced. But I was instantly hooked.

What happened after that?

After graduating I tried to get into the architecture business, but, fortunately was dissuaded by responses I received that told me it was a bad idea, that I would starve. So I went to law school instead, but I never lost my love for architecture nor golf.

One of the most successful promotions was the "Armchair Architects" articles which appeared in 1988 and 1990. What do you recall about them?

We had over 22,000 send in their responses to the 1987 article. My editors thought we would get maybe 500! First prize for this was a trip to Bermuda, and I'm sure this spurred many to respond. When we ran the second contest in 1990 we attracted only 8,000 responses. I was puzzled, until I had a chance to talk to some of my friends. The top prize for the second contest was to actually build the golf hole that was selected! My friends told me they didn't respond, because they felt that since the hole would actually be built, they didn't feel that they were capable of designing a "real" hole! I guess the moral here is, when given the choice between immortality, having your name on a golf hole, or a trip to Bermuda; Bermuda wins!

Who are some of the up-and-coming stars in Course Architecture today?

Steve Smyers, Mike Stranz, Dana Fry, Kevin Aldrich, Tom Doak, and one of your local architects, Keith Foster. You probably should also include the Crenshaw-Coore team as well. Michael Hurdzan may be in the "already made-it" stage as well. He has assembled a team of people who do wonderful work. I think he is bringing golf architecture to new heights.

Steve played on the Florida golf team and has done a lot of low budget work in Florida. I have kidded Steve a lot that he never uses one bunker if 6 or 7 will do as well! But when you play his courses, the traps do a great job of defining the course on the flat Florida lands. It's just like Mackenzie courses. You don't say it is over bunkered, its that they all look great! Mike Stranz, along with Dana Fry, both worked for Tom Fazio at one time. Both are very competitive guys, and have this ideal of bringing golf architecture to new and spectacular heights. Heights we haven't seen since the days of Pete Dye! Tom Doak is the antithesis of Stranz and Fry. He takes what the land gives you. Very simplistic in style. He is very low profile, but does great work. Kevin Aldrich has done, I believe, the best imitation golf links course in

America. His dad owns Indian Woods GC [near Detroit] and hired Bob Cupp to route the course, then Kevin built it. The course is located about a mile from Lake Huron. Kevin cleared the pines and what's left is just terrific. The area has the same climate as most of the Scottish courses, and, like I said, is the best imitation links course in America.

Will we continue to see architects such as Nicklaus, Fazio, Palmer and Dye? Will they continue to design?

Sure they will. Nicklaus and Fazio are both relatively young. Palmer and Dye have built such an organization and staff that they will continue for years. Palmer's group alone has over 45 projects in the works right now! Nicklaus is doing a series of "Trail" courses [similar to the Robert Trent Jones Trail in Alabama] in Tennessee. They are calling it the "Bear Trail". Arnie is doing a similar concept in California.

We have three talented area architects, Gary Kern, Hale Irwin and Keith Foster. How would you describe their work?

No offense to Hale, he is having a terrific senior career, but I don't believe you can do both. He has a talented associate in Stan Gentry, but I have to believe that Hale's involvement is limited. There's nothing wrong with that. Nicklaus, Palmer and others found out the same thing. You just can't do both. Right now Hale's winning everything in sight on the Senior Tour. I'm certain that's where his focus is. Gary has done terrific work; Fox Run is a very strong layout. He does some great work, and is technically very good. Keith has done some great work; "The Quarry" in San Antonio, and he has new courses such as "The Bandit" (also in San Antonio) and "Cypresswood" in Houston. [Editors note: The Quarry is the #1 rated public course in Texas. Keith has also had projects in St. Louis at Forest Hills, Meadowbrook, Far Oaks, and is completing Persimmon Woods and Gateway National Links. Gary Kern is working on Bear Creek, a complete redesign of Wentzville GC. Hale and his top associate, Stan Gentry are working on]

What's wrong with Golf Architecture today?

It's not so much as what's wrong with architecture, as what's wrong with golf today. Think about it, an architect spends hours, days laying out a course. What do we do? We get in a cart, ride along a path on the side of the fairway at 15 mph sipping a drink, looking for yardage signs. Then we hop out, grab three clubs and go across the fairway to hit the shot. What we missed was the feeling of the fairway under foot. The look and shape of the hole, as the architect designed it, as you walk to your ball. From the cart, you don't have time to think about the shape of your shot, where the architect has positioned trouble and where it is safe to hit. A good example is the par 5, 15th at Stonewolf. Nicklaus designed it so you have a fairway bunker to the right off the tee and bunkers left at the green. If you place your tee shot left off the tee, so as to avoid the fairway bunker, you want your second shot to play to the top of the hill to the right, which leaves you a great angle to approach the pin. This hole should be an easy par with a great opportunity for a birdie, if played as Jack designed it. The same is true of the next hole, the 16th. A great short hole with a demanding tee shot to the right side of the fairway that leaves you a straight-forward short iron approach. But go left and the trees block your approach. Great design. You can miss that in a cart. I'm also not a fan of the satellite systems. I believe they slow down play. To me, anything that summons the beer cart, doesn't speed up play! People begin to want the exact yardage...as though most of us could actually hit is 163 yards if we had to! People are going to want to have the cart where their ball is to get the exact yardage. So they'll wait until their partner hits, then drive to their ball, then hit. In the past they would drop their partner at their ball then drive to theirs. Do you think either player will give up knowing their exact distance if the other player does?

The other problem is with the players and club members. Public players want country club-type grooming and club members want their to look like Augusta! It just doesn't work that way. You can only grow grass so high and cut grass so low. Course superintendents are having nightmares responding to player and member demands. If you go to Scotland or Ireland you see what a delightful time they have on courses watered by nature. Dry in summer and wet in winter. They just accept that. It used to be accepted, and in some places it still is. It baffles me why members feel that they should have uniform conditioning all year

round. To me if you want uniformity conditioning, play billiards. Part of the beauty of a golf course is the variety. Most of the issues players have with a course have nothing to do with the architecture, but with grooming. What all this leads to is expensive courses, with expensive maintenance costs and high greens fees or membership fees. The net result is that players paying \$150 a round [or \$500 per month] are making more and more demands, which drives the cost up again. It's virtually self-perpetuating!

And in the desire to raise money, we have developed carts that serve as caddies, ball washers, drinking fountains, trash cans and have buttons to call the beverage cart. At some courses, you can't even use the restroom if you're walking since only the golf cart key opens the door. I can't blame the owners, they have to make their money to stay in business. I'm a walker. I carry my bag. I've only been to one course where I couldn't pay my greens fee and cart fee and still walk. That was Pinehurst #2 where you either have to have a cart or take a caddie. At Golf Digest, we don't want to penalize a player for using a cart, we just want the course to give us the option of walking if we want.

Another issue is architects trying to outdo each other, in part to win favor with magazines like Golf Digest, and get their course in the rankings. Some brag about moving a million yards of earth. I believe more time should be spent on site selection. The architects should help the developer select the correct piece of land. Pete Dye made his reputation building courses by taking lousy pieces of property and doing whatever it took to make a great course. Today, whatever it takes means money. Then there is the new layer of sodding everything. You can instantly open a course without worrying about rain washing away your shaping...but its another layer of costs.

What about the low end of the market. We seem to always hear about the Upscale courses. Is anyone doing low budget or municipal courses?

Nobody is really working the low end of the market. In some respects, municipalities cause their own problems. They take the lowest bidder, make you go through all sorts of hoops and committees and only have a budget of 800K for 18 holes! An architect would have to think real hard before tackling such a project. Most communities, don't recognize golf as being a benefit to the citizenry, like parks or parking lots or other public facilities. A few years back Topeka was considering a race track near our airport. All the city council could think about was the money that would be coming in from the taxes. When the airport nixed the idea, I suggested a golf course. Airports love golf courses nearby. But it was vetoed mainly because of their desire to get something that would bring in large tax revenues. The benefit to the community was of little consequence to them! To me this was very short sighted!

My goal would be for inter-city councilmen to start demanding courses. Probably can't build 18 holes, and probably not 9 holes. But they can build pitch 'n put courses. These are great training grounds for the next generation of golfers, and they meet a variety of needs of their constituents, usually at a budget most cities can afford. [Note: St. Louis just announced the formation of the Bogey Man Junior Golf Association in conjunction with Dale Boggs at Creve Coeur Recreation Complex and Dan O'Neill of the Post-Dispatch. St. Ann GC and Ruth Park GC are also joining in the program.]

Are there any upcoming articles on architects that we should look for in the future?

I am doing research for an article which will appear next year that highlights female architects. One of them will be Paula Eger. [Paula grew up in Kirkwood, attended Kirkwood High School and played out of Greenbriar Hills CC. She is a 4 time National Pee Wee Champion and won the Missouri Women's Amateur in 1971] Paula works with Carol Mann, Jim Hardy and Peter Jacobsen out of Houston. She is one of many I will be profiling.

One of your recent articles in was on A.W. Tillinghast, the designer of Winged Foot. The article sounded like you were passionate about his work.

Tillie was one of the great architects in the early days, before and during the depression. But there have also been many mis-conceptions about him. He was never a millionaire as was previously reported. But his work on Winged Foot, Bethpage, and others was simply outstanding. Many of the early architects

never got the credit for their work as they died penniless or their courses were abandoned. But, thankfully, Tillie's work remains for all to see.

You mentioned Pinehurst earlier. How would you describe the #2 course.

Pinehurst is one of the great second shot courses in the country. Sure you have to hit a good drive, but the key to Pinehurst is your approach. Many people say the greens are tough; but if your approach is in the right position on the green, you can score well. I believe it is just like St. Andrews. The more you study it, the more you appreciate it, and you realize just how good it is.

What's your position on greens? Are big greens here to stay?

Big greens are still here to stay. The biggest factor is the speed of greens. Architects are afraid to build large greens because they can't control what a superintendent is going to do with them, or is required to do with them. Small flat greens are boring. Big gently undulating greens are very interesting, and you can't compress that on small greens. Another factor is the new clubs today. We are all hitting oversize clubs, and we hit them further. But when we mis-hit them we mis-hit them off-line further. So where the spray pattern used to be 30 yards, now it's 50 yards. So you are seeing greens deeper and wider. Some of these also go back to the days of Robert Trent Jones. He said he built big greens to spread the wear and tear on them. When you are paying \$150 for a round of golf, you want good green conditions. You don't want to see greens pitted up. So even if the entire green is not perfect, where the pin is cut can be! Plus it gives the greens time to heal.

There are two issues most of us look forward to. One is the ranking of the 100 Greatest Courses and the other is for the Best New Courses. How does the process work on each?

My role is counting ballots and writing the article. Actually, my wife counts most of the ballots for me today! The process initially began in 1966 with the ***200 toughest Courses*** then in 1971 it evolved into the ***100 Greatest Courses***. For the ***100 Greatest Courses***, we solicit nominations from architects, review prior surveys and poll our panelists. Once we have an initial list we contact the courses and go over the rules of what we expect. I then tabulate the results and write the article. We have almost two surveys going at any time now. I believe we do it because people like it and they look forward to it. We don't do it as some sort of 'Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval'. Twenty-five of our panelists must play a course over a ten year period for it to be ranked in the ***Top 100*** courses. As you might expect, I don't need a ballot for Pebble Beach, Augusta or Pine Valley, I want people to play Bethpage, which always received high ballots, but never enough panelists played it for it to be ranked. There are 15-16,000 courses in the country. It's no great sin to never have been on the elite 100 or to have been on it and fallen off. With 300 courses being built each year, there are going to be changes.

For the ***Best New Courses***, it takes only 10 panelists to have played it. This is because we are working in a much shorter time frame. We have about 120-140 courses nominated each year for the panel to review. Architects are going to offer us their best new work, and developers will push for it as well, though if the architect won't recommend it, it would have a very tough time being selected. We select two Public courses [Upscale and Affordable], best new Private course and best new Canadian course. When we initiated the affordable category a few years ago, more of the modest budget courses are being submitted, which I think is very healthy for the game. I don't want us to lose sight of the fact that there are good low budget courses being built. One disturbing trend I have seen is that when a course wins one of our categories, they invariably raise their greens fee. I think this is a disturbing trend!

What kind of players comprise your panelists. How many of them do you have?

First, let me say that being a panelist will not get you on Augusta National or Pine Valley! These are unpaid individuals, and go without recognition. We have 750 panelists throughout the country. We give them an evaluation sheet with the categories for a rating of 1-10, with 1 being poor and 10 being *absolutely perfect*. The categories are; *Shot values, resistance to scoring, memorability, play-ability, design variety, aesthetics* and *conditioning*. We don't necessarily use every category for every survey. Some of the local

players who are our panelists are Bob Little, Jim Holtgrieve, Bob Ross and Terry Ensley [there are others]. I'm looking for the low handicap golfer who want to play a variety of courses in their area. I want players to play Fox Run more that I need for them to play Bellerive or Old Warson!

What are your future goals? What type of articles might we see in the future?

Some day I would like to design a course. I think if you love golf architecture and have played a variety of courses, one of your dreams would be to design your own course! I always wanted to do a *Sand Hills* in Nebraska or the Dakotas, but Crenshaw-Coore beat me to it! Since I wrote a book called "*The Golf Course*" I would like to design a course called "*The Golf Course*". Each hole would encompass the work of a different architect or period. I'd take it from Willie Park, to Willie Dunn, to Alister Mackenzie, to Tillinghast to Donald Ross and up to the modern era. And I'd probably have to do a second 18 to cover all the different types of architecture styles. If anybody could do this, I think I could.

One article I would like to do would be on the "Most walkable courses". I firmly believe that we need to encourage players to walk and architects to design courses that are "walker friendly". We also need to have developers and owners recognize the importance of this to the game!

Finally I want to publish a third edition of the *Architects of Golf*. I have five years worth of research to update the back of the book [the back is a complete cross-reference which lists almost every course throughout the world, both current and those that no longer exist, who the architect(s) were, what remodeling was done, the year and by whom], and I want to make it more of an almanac, where it can be updated easier and make it more affordable. It would probably be a soft-cover book. I have been collecting information on this for over 30 years, since I was 17 years old. I believe each books gets better. The next one should be better than the last one.