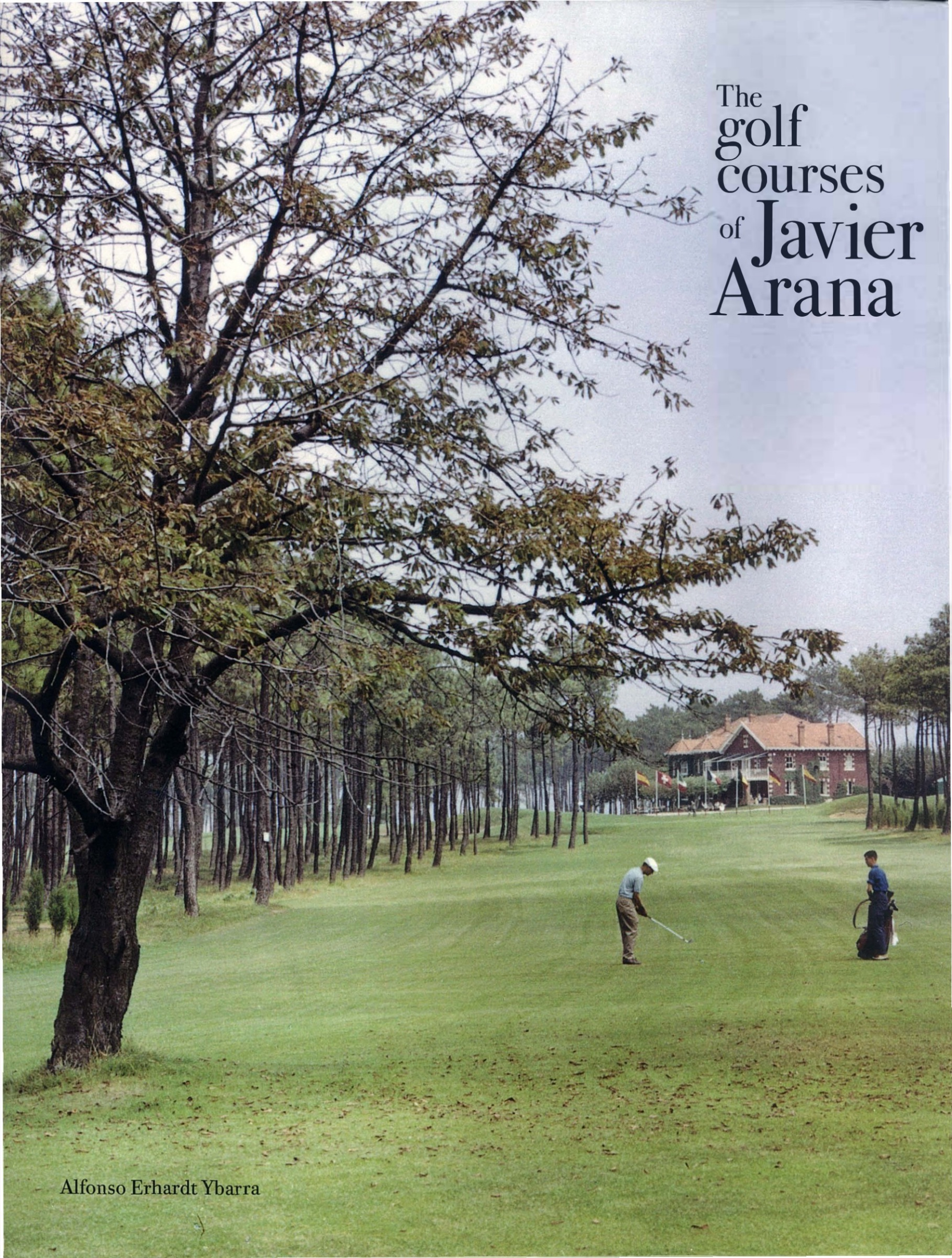


The golf courses of Javier Arana

Alfonso Erhardt Ybarra

I first saw the name of Javier Arana while thumbing through *The World Atlas of Golf* - a book about the world's great courses that I practically memorised as a teenager. He got only a brief mention for having designed El Prat, a small map of which was featured as one of the secondary courses profiled in the back of the book.

The next time I saw his name was a brief biography published in *The Golf Course*, written by golf architect Geoffrey Cornish and golf architecture historian Ron Whitten in 1982, just as I was graduating from college. It is short enough that I quote it in full:

> Renowned golfer Javier Arana began designing courses in 1936. Although his work has been confined to his native Spain, he is recognised as a leading contemporary golf course architect. His characteristic trademarks were an isolated tree in one or more fairways of nearly every course he built and a par three as the seventeenth hole on each of his designs.As far as I know, that is the sum total of information published about Javier Arana before this book, but it was enough to pique my interest in his work and puzzle me at the same time. What sort of fellow would insist that his seventeenth hole be a par three, no matter what the circumstances of the property? As someone who firmly believes that the architect should be open to every possible design solution, in order to identify the best one, I was not sure what I might think of Sr. Arana's courses.

A couple of years later, *Golf* Magazine published its first ranking of the 100 Best Courses in the World, and Arana's El Saler course in Valencia debuted on the list at number twenty-two in the world. This result was a bit of a shock - all of the courses listed above it were quite well-known and had well-chronicled design pedigrees, but Americans knew nothing at all about El Saler. Its sudden rise was occasioned by the impression it made on the golfers and golf writers who attended the 1984 Benson & Hedges Spanish Open, where Bernhard Langer's course record final round of 62 carried him to victory. As a result, El Saler vaulted near the top of the list of courses I wanted to see someday, and my curiosity about Javier Arana's work grew.

It was years and years before I would find out anything more about Arana; I had courses of my own to build and my travels seldom brought me in the direction of Europe. However, in 2008 I was contacted by a friend of a friend about a possible project in Madrid, and if I was going to go that far I thought maybe I could get to El Saler. I inquired more about the course and where it was on the internet discussion group, *Golf Club Atlas*, and was quickly in correspondence with Alfonso Erhardt, who participated there occasionally and spoke highly of Arana's work. When

I visited in Madrid two months later, Alfonso picked me up from my hotel early in the morning, and drove us to Valencia to play El Saler.

Having never seen a map of the course and few photos before we set out to play, I was prepared to learn about Javier Arana by observation; you can usually tell a lot about a man's personality and golf game by the types of holes he designs. The approach to the first green was quite tight, with a bunker just short and a long, narrow plateau green. The long second hole featured a narrow green bisected lengthwise into two tiers, higher on the right, lower on the left - a feature I had seldom seen before - and there were no less than three similar greens to follow on the front nine! There was no question by then that Sr. Arana was clearly a very skilled golfer. Only the very best players would ask the golfer to hit an approach shot to a hole location less than thirty feet across. Or to recover from an errant shot so precisely in order to save par.

The day was windy, my golf a bit rusty, and the round was over much too quickly. On the way back to Madrid we dissected the course and Alfonso shared his knowledge of Arana's life - I hadn't known of his partnership with the English designer Tom Simpson and I had only heard of two others among Arana's ten designs. Alfonso had grown up near Bilbao, like Arana before him, and suggested that Neguri was perhaps the architect's best other surviving work. We both lamented that there was not a book to document Arana's fine career - and at last, here it is!

I hoped that my potential project near Madrid would come to fruition so that I might have more opportunities of seeing Arana's surviving courses - but alas, that project like so many of Arana's never was built, a victim of the banking crisis. I did get to play Neguri while working on a new course in Bordeaux, and thought it was wonderful; but now here is Alfonso to pick us up and take us to Puigcerda and Aloha and the rest, in words and pictures, if not in his own car.

It is sad that Javier Arana saw so few courses of his own born into reality, but we architects know that it's a miracle when any of them do get built. Hopefully, this book will allow all the golfers in Spain to better appreciate the surviving designs of Arana, and to protect them as faithfully as he tried to protect the traditions of the game.

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