COURSE WORK BY TOM DOAK



Finding Your Voice

Never underestimate the value of a good mentor

Many of the articles about my career have made a great deal out of my Cornell education, and perhaps some of my clients have been impressed as well. But you don't learn about golf course architecture in school: it's such a small and specialized profession that any steady stream of graduates would have a very high unemployment rate.

Instead, golf course architecture should be thought of as a craft or a trade. You learn those through apprenticeship, and to do so you have to find a willing mentor. Luckily, I've had a few along the way. Before he was a designer himself, Ben Crenshaw used to let me tag along with him in practice rounds on Tour, talking about the golf courses and observing the best players in the world from ten feet away. Walter Woods, the head greenkeeper at St. Andrews, let me ask him questions day and night for the two months I lived in town after college.

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Above all, Pete and Alice Dye and their sons let me work on course sites from the time I was a skinny 20-year-old with zero experience of construction until I felt ready to build one by myself. I learned pretty fast that Mr. Dye didn't really need much help designing things, he needed help building them – and that's where one could contribute something to the finished product and help make the course even better. They didn't keep any trade secrets: Pete was happy to tell the skinniest kid on the crew what he was trying to do and why he worked the way he did.

No one who worked for the Dyes ever had much job security. If you did a good job on the last project and were willing to pack up and move at a moment's notice (or go home for a couple of months in between), you might get a job on the next one. That harsh reality weeded out a lot of people, but it prepared those of us who remained for the reality of running our own business and never knowing for sure when (or if) the next job would come. The guys drawing plans for other architects had a much more comfortable lifestyle, but most were too comfortable to go out on their own, and they couldn't tell a potential client they could get the course built and how much it would cost.

From the very first course I designed on my own, I tried to build a similar crew, both to make my work better and to pass on all of the things I'd been taught. My first intern (and later first associate) was Gil Hanse, who worked on the construction of High Pointe during his summer break from college; next up was Mike DeVries, who came aboard to run the drainage crew at The Legends, and after that ran the project at Black Forest in Michigan before going back to grad school. Jim Urbina, whom I'd worked with for Perry Dye, joined us when we had two jobs going at once; Bruce Hepner followed a year later, after Gil had gone out on his own. Nowadays, all four of them compete with me for jobs.

There have been a couple dozen other talented people who have contributed to our best projects; the only reason you don't know their names yet is timing. They started a bit later, and the financial crisis of 2008 meant fewer opportunities for them to build a successful business on their own. Four of them – Eric Iverson, Don Placek, Brian Schneider, and Brian Slawnik – are still on my payroll, taking turns running my projects and shaping the greens and bunkers for which I get all the credit. I'd love to keep the others employed too, but if I tried to stay busy enough to pay them all I would have to leave all the creative work to them, and I love the work too much to delegate it all.

So the others are independent, working with us occasionally, but also working with other designers in order to stay busy. There is hardly a great course built anymore where you won't find one or two of my former interns on the crew, no matter who designed it. A few of them have the stuff to become famous someday, but only if they can find clients of their own to serve as their next mentors.



Don Placek, Eric Iverson, Brian Schneider, and Brian Slawnik at Tara Iti in New Zealand.

It hadn't occurred to me at the start, but my clients have also been mentors to me. If Don Hayden hadn't taken a chance on me when I was 25 and trusted me to spend his money to build High Pointe, there's no way I'd be where I am today. Jack May, at Stonewall, taught me more than anyone about how hard it is to build the membership of a private club, and how to run one efficiently. Ultimately it's the client who sets the agenda for a new project, and clients who really have golf as their first priority are worth their weight in gold.

As I get older, I'm starting to cut back on my commitments, and trying to pass on those opportunities to the people I've taught. Consulting at famous courses was a great learning experience for me, and a great value to those clubs, but it pulls too much time away from building new courses.

Writing these columns is a terrific podium, and the younger designers with whom I work and share ideas deserve the chance to tell their own stories, so I intend to share this space with some of them in future issues. Eric, Don, Brian, and Brian may have learned from me, but they've also had their own experiences with clients and courses (classic and new); I value their vision and I learn from them all the time as well. I can't gift them the kind of opportunities I had at such an early age—the golf landscape has changed so vastly since then—but I enjoy watching them find their own answers to the kind of issues we've all faced.

Whenever the day comes that I don't feel like flying around the world to look at a new site, I know I'll be able to pass it on to someone who is ready to make the most of the opportunity. And when you see their views in this space from time to time, you'll understand why I can say that with confidence. The best and only way I can repay Pete and Alice and all the rest is to do for my crew what those folks did for me. ■

