THE INTERVIEW
with Tom Doak

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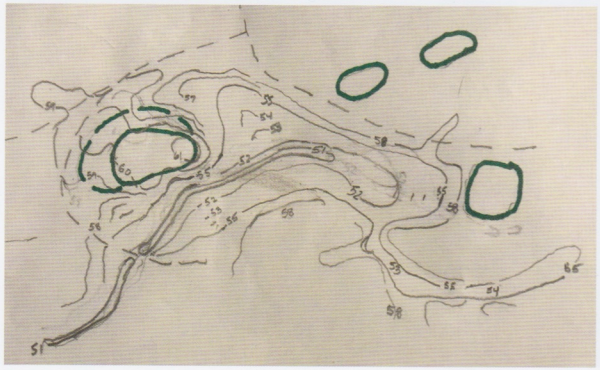
GCA spoke with Tom Doak about the renovation of Memorial Park golf course in Texas, which will host the PGA Tour's Houston Open



Tom Doak is working on a renovation of Memorial Park golf course in Houston, with a brief to make it an exciting venue for the PGA Tour's Houston Open, while keeping the course playable for the 60,000 residents who play annually.

What is the extent of the work?
Only the par-three second hole, and the tee for the third, are out of the original corridor. However, eight of the eighteen greens have shifted position; the par-five eighth is lengthened and the ninth changes from a par four to a par three; the par-five thirteenth – which lost ground at the tee for a road in the park – becomes a driveable par-four, and the next hole becomes the par five.

We have also tripled the size of the irrigation pond, to capture rainwater and reduce the use of city water for irrigation, using the excavated material [about 100,000 cubic yards] to improve surface drainage and add relief to the property.



Are there aspects of the existing course that you were keen to emphasise?
The two features of the property that were underutilised on the existing course were the ravines in between holes on the front nine, which were nearly all hidden in dense trees, and the many beautiful trees that had no influence on play. We have shifted tees and fairways to bring the ravines into play on holes two-to-seven, thinned out the trees and shifted greens so that key trees may be an obstacle for players who have driven in the rough.

What do you hope will be the outcomes for Houston's public golfers?
A lot of the money is being spent on drainage and sand capping, to make the course more playable through rainy weather. But we think many players will be shocked to see just how dramatic the ravines were underneath the trees on the front nine, now that we've brought the holes up against them.



Photo: Tom Doak

"If we were going to have it, we decided we might as well put it right in the players' faces." Tom Doak on water at Memorial Park

With the plan to host the Houston Open, do you approach the design much differently to other projects?
It's not often that I worry about players who can drive the ball 350 yards or making greens flat enough to handle speeds of 12-13 on the Stimpmeter. But we still have to handle the full range of golfers who play at Memorial, so the process isn't that different otherwise.

What do you expect Brooks Koepka to contribute to the design process?
He's shared a lot with me about what he does and doesn't like about the typical PGA Tour venue; what makes it interesting for a player of his calibre, and what sorts of skills aren't rewarded on other courses. Brooks has given me a lot of subtle ideas to make it harder for the professionals – like giving them awkward lies and stances in the rough – that the average player won't even notice. We both felt that many bunkers add difficulty for the average player but are superfluous for the Tour player. Plus, washouts on bunker faces are one of the main things that disrupt a tournament after heavy rains, so we are building radically fewer bunkers at Memorial Park than you're used to seeing. I think the final number will be around 25, but there are only nine bunkers on the back nine – and none at all on holes thirteen, fifteen, sixteen and seventeen!

What else would you highlight?
I'm not a big fan of water hazards on most of my courses, but the expansion of the irrigation pond meant that we would have water in the home stretch at Memorial, and if we were going to have it, we decided we might as well put it right in the players' faces. There's a small stream at the short fifteenth – balls that miss the left side of the green will bounce down a steep bank and may wind up wet.

The par-five sixteenth has water along the right all the way, and then across the front of the green and to both sides of the green, so there is no safe side to bail out for golfers who want to play for eagle. And then the short par-four seventeenth has water all along the right side and wrapping around the back right of the green, leaving a scary pitch when the flag is on the right, or a go-for-broke possibility if they move the tee up to 300 yards for one of the two weekend days.