Tom Doak

Golf course designer • Age 44 • Traverse City, Michigan

Building a golf course involves heavy lifting, a conscience, empathy for the high-handicapper and a willingness to sweat the small stuff. Interviewed by Guy Yocom

"Signature" architects get the big bucks. Clients use their names to sell lots, memberships, everything. Of course, the famous architect might not have as much to do with the design of the golf course as the owners and promoters imply; some are very involved, but some just sign off on other people's work. But on the whole, I'm OK with these projects. We all have to eat.

But I do have standards. I recently was approached to build a course on a small, privately owned island. It's an unbelievable property; we're talking 12 holes along the ocean and six holes inland on gorgeous, tropical terrain. The problem is, the island is a natural bird habitat. There must be a million birds using the island as a natural breeding and nesting ground. The place is for birds, not birdies, and I can't bring myself to sign the deal.

The golf course is a living, breathing thing. Trees grow, mowing lines are altered, the irrigation changes, new grasses are planted. The course you designed as expansive, firm and fast might become, over 15 years, tight, tree-lined and soft. It might or might not evolve into something in keeping with the original concept. It's like raising a child—after a certain point they're on their own, and you hope you instilled the basics so strongly that it carries them through their lifetime.

Imagine a hole on which you've buried three land mines. The better player has been informed the land mines are there, but the hacker hasn't been told anything. Now, the poor player will traipse down the fairway without a thought. Given the laws of chance, he'll probably avoid the mines. The better player won't be able to take a step without fear. That's how I approach course design. My objective is to make it difficult for the better golfer by incorporating challenging but subtle features only the trained eye can see, while allowing the hacker to play his usual game. An example would be the collection areas around the greens at Pinehurst No. 2. The hacker might have only one way to play onto the green—maybe with a putter. The better player has the options of putting, flopping or pitching into the bank. He chooses knowing that option can blow up in his face.

I admire many of the old architects, but I'm especially partial to Alister Mackenzie, who did Cypress Point, Augusta National, Royal Melbourne and many others. Set aside his brilliance as an architect, and he was a fascinating, slightly eccentric man. He wore kilts but wasn't Scottish. He graduated from medical school but never made a living as a doctor. He once wrote, "I have always wanted to live where one could practice shots in one's pajamas before breakfast." After doing designs on many of his courses, he never saw them in completed form. When he designed Crystal Downs—a terrific course in Michigan—the story is, he forgot to include a ninth hole.

People say that Dr. Mackenzie would roll over in his grave if he saw Augusta National today, but I'm not so sure. Given the advances in equipment, he certainly would have designed something different from the Augusta of the early 1930s. He had tremendous imagination, great mental flexibility. He very well might design something very close to what Augusta National is now. Who can say?

The most overrated courses tend to be ones that host important tournaments and major championships. Invariably they're long, tight and repetitive, with virtually every hole offering similar shot values. Firestone and Medinah are classic examples, and I don't want to name more because, why insult the members? But you can guess the rest. Hosting championships is the worst thing for a golf course, because the ruling bodies are always in there tinkering with the design until it's no fun for the members. They have no idea how to leave well enough alone.

Looking at old photographs of some of the old courses under construction almost makes my hair stand on end. You see horses pulling out tree stumps, wagons hauling dirt, sweaty crews in long-sleeve shirts and suspenders doing everything by hand. The labor was arduous, the finished work usually stupendous. I thank the Lord for heavy equipment, because it lets me see the work get done quicker.

You've got to design a course with the 18-handicapper in mind. I learned that caddieing at St. Andrews for two months in 1982. Too many architects design courses as though everyone is a 4. Some of us have no idea how the average golfer gets around.

There's no such thing as a green with too much slope. You can build slopes that are too severe for a super-fast Stimpmeter rating, but the answer is to slow down the speeds, not modify the slopes. Unfortunately, greens committees can't find the nerve

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOEY TERRILL

MyShot



Tom Doak, photographed July 20, 2005, while at work on Ballyneal in Holyoke, Colo.



'Cartpaths are a barrier to good design because they're so ugly you can't help but try to hide them.'

to do that. Like sheep, they follow what other courses are doing.

My favorite hazard is short grass. Not water, bunkers or out-of-bounds. Short grass is always subtle and sometimes diabolical. The mowed bank of a green, like we saw at Pinehurst No. 2 at the U.S. Open, is wonderful. A steeply banked fairway that repels a slightly errant drive into an area where the approach shot is more difficult. Wide expanses of fairway that lull the player to sleep so he doesn't pay attention to the best position for his tee shot, and which makes it hard to determine the distance of a fairway bunker he's tempted to carry. An open but steep approach to a green, like the ninth at Augusta National, that makes you pay a price for a failed approach to a front pin. I like short grass because it challenges the imagination of the designer and, when done properly, confounds the golfer.

Starting out, I begged for advice and, needless to say, any kind of job. I wrote many letters to all the top architects. Only Geoff Cornish and Pete Dye answered, and Pete, bless him, hired me as a laborer, using a shovel and rake for $5 an hour, six days a week.

What I learned from Pete was the importance of devoting the time. If the island green at the TPC at Sawgrass were too shallow, the mounds a foot too high, the pot bunkers a bit too deep, the course would have been a circus. Some features were softened later, but Pete was there to make sure things were done close to right at the outset. I can't understand designers who make one-day trips to their projects every week or two. They spend half their time in the airport and are never on site long enough to sleep on a problem and make it right.

During my college years at Cornell, I decided to try for a scholarship to spend a year studying golf courses overseas. Ben Crenshaw wrote a long letter of recommendation for me. He wrote that if they sent me to Great Britain and Ireland to study golf course architecture, the future of golf would benefit from it. I've spent my adult life trying to live up to that.

I think Sand Hills in Nebraska is one of the best courses ever built. Bill Coore and Ben are both friends of mine, so I was happy for them, but I did wonder if I would ever get a piece of property that good, because Bill and Ben obviously would be in line ahead of me. But when Pacific Dunes came along, it turned out they had all the work they wanted. So I got Pacific Dunes, and the result is probably my best design to date. I'm very aware that getting the job came down to my getting a lucky break. In the end, Sand Hills was great for me, because it inspired other developers to seek out great property in remote locations.

A great piece of land makes an architect look like a genius. I mean, if I couldn't build something special on the land I was given at Pacific Dunes, I should find another job.