EAMON LYNCH



The Journey Of Tom Doak

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Fifteen years ago this week—Thanksgiving, 2003—I spent a week in New Zealand and Australia with Tom Doak to write a profile of the course designer. This is the story that resulted. It's interesting now to re-read it, the courses he was building then that are now acclaimed, others that never got off the drawing board, and his generally outspoken attitude to the world of golf course architecture.

Thumbing through his dog-eared diary, Tom Doak is trying to figure out where the year went. Ireland. Texas. Scotland. Georgia. Australia. New York. Hardly a week seems to have

passed without a lengthy business trip, and just about any trip is lengthy if you live in Traverse City, Michigan. “I tell my son I travel for a living and design golf courses as a hobby,” he says.

Though just 43 years old, Doak has been a familiar figure in golf-architecture circles for 20 years. And since mentions of his name haven’t always been charitable, he would like you to know that he isn’t the jerk some people think he is.



His unflattering reputation is a hangover from the Young Tom Doak era when he was architecture’s enfant terrible, better known for his *GOLF Magazine* writings on the craft than for his practice of it. Old Tom Doak is still opinionated but far less brash. He has matured into golf’s equivalent of Jonathan Franzen, the novelist who spent years telling everyone how good he was—and how dreadful others were—before proving himself. Franzen wrote The Corrections. Doak built Pacific Dunes.

When it opened in 2001, Pacific Dunes eclipsed its superb sister course at Bandon Dunes and transformed Doak’s status from that of intemperate maverick to acclaimed purist. “Sure, I was aware of his reputation when I hired him,” says Mike Keiser, who owns the Oregon resort. “But it didn’t bother me because I see outspoken as equaling honest. I appreciated his design ethos.”

Doak’s much-ballyhooed minimalist style—allowing nature rather than a bulldozer to shape much of a course—is an increasingly popular throwback to the era of Doak’s idol, Dr. Alister Mackenzie. Pacific Dunes made Doak a brand-name architect, but he claims to be unfazed by the accolades. “The average golfer doesn’t know much about Pete Dye or Tom Fazio and will never know much about me,” he says. “If Tiger Woods designed a golf course, he’d be called the greatest architect ever because he’s the apex of the game for the average golfer. They don’t give a damn that I designed Pacific Dunes. They like it because it’s good.”

Julian Robertson—the Tiger Fund tycoon and owner of Kauri Cliffs in New Zealand—went to Bandon four days after Pacific Dunes opened. He planned to play 36 holes on David McLay Kidd's Bandon Dunes layout, but was shunted over to Pacific Dunes for his second 18. "I was furious. I played Pacific Dunes against my will," Robertson says. "But I loved it-Tom uses nature so well. That's when I decided I wanted him."

Doak was signed to design Robertson's new Kiwi course, Cape Kidnappers, on a 5,000-acre former sheep ranch perched on the cliffs above Hawke's Bay and the city of Napier. Cape Kidnappers is the first port of call on Doak's antipodean tour, a whirlwind visit to three courses that may mark him as the best architect of his generation.

The narrow, five-mile-long road that climbs to Cape Kidnappers is strewn with switchbacks and white-knuckle drops on either side. At the summit is New Zealand's finest gannet colony—bird watchers flock to the beach every day at low tide—and a spectacular course that its architect predicts will earn a place on any ranking of the world's best.

It's raining steadily, but after an hour of chatting with the maintenance crew and impatiently eyeing the sky, Doak braves a soaking to tour several holes. He pronounces himself mostly pleased. Mostly. Robertson has removed several ornate crenellations from the roof of the modest clubhouse, one of which Doak saw as a perfect aiming line for the approach to the 18th, which will be blind for shorter hitters. He shrugs it off; the clubhouse is Robertson's domain.

Soon after sunrise the following morning, Doak plays the course and explains how each hole was created. Cape Kidnappers is anchored around seven long fingers of land that stretch down toward the precipice and contain the most memorable holes. The 15th, a 650-yard par 5, is destined to become the signature hole; from the fairway, it appears to drop off the end of the earth.

Robertson wants to bring the New Zealand Open here. Meanwhile the USGA has selected Pacific Dunes for the 2006 Curtis Cup (co-hosting with Bandon Dunes) and the 2007 Mid-Amateur Championship, possible preludes to a professional major championship (though remote Bandon might lack the infrastructure necessary for that). Such thoughts make Doak uneasy.

"It's made my work different because I'm now thinking about it as a tournament course," he says. "Everything Pete Dye did was a potential tournament venue and he spent most of his time thinking about that. Twenty years ago it was, 'How would Greg Norman play this hole?' Designing tournament courses is a niche business: It's Dye or Jack Nicklaus. They

have a straightjacket on. Jack builds flat greens because he knows they'll be 13 on the Stimpmeter in a tournament. If you built greens like Augusta today, they'd kill you."

When he was a student at Cornell University, Doak spent two years writing letters to Dye before finally landing a construction job with the architect at Long Cove Club on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, in 1981. He worked on Dye projects for six years and drew the first plans for PGA West—the kind of stadium-style course that represents much of what he finds objectionable in today's design business. (His real pet peeve is cart paths, which he considers ugly concessions to lazy golfers, blights on his creations.)

"One thing I don't like about modern architecture is all the forward tees so everyone can reach a par 4 in two shots," he says, walking the 440 yards of fairway at Cape Kidnappers' par-4 17th hole, sinking into the soggy turf with each step. "The Road Hole at St. Andrews doesn't have forward tees up around the corner of the hotel. Sometimes a par 4 is better played as a three-shot hole."

Doak's philosophy was forged at St. Andrews. He caddied there for two months during a year spent in Britain on a scholarship from Cornell, where he earned a degree in landscape architecture in 1982. "Some people love St. Andrews as a monument. I love it as a golf course," he says. "With manmade courses, someone designed the best way to play a hole. At St. Andrews you figure that out yourself."

He cites the short, par-4 12th, with its blind tee shot to a fairway pocked with pot bunkers. As a caddie, he recalls, "I would explain to players what was out there and it would paralyze them with fear. There are so many options. Play out right or left? Smash it over all that? The green is a small shelf and it's almost impossible to stop a pitch shot up there. Of course, today Tiger's approach is to drive it to the back of the green and putt up. I never thought of that."

That year in Britain—during which he lived in $10-a-night hostels and visited more than 170 courses—was the professional education of Tom Doak. His personal education took longer.

Doak was born in New York and grew up in Stamford, Connecticut, with one younger brother, now an archeologist. ("I have two sons who dig dirt for a living," his mother used to say.) At age 10, Doak began tagging along on business trips with his father, who was a vice president of commodities at Lever Brothers. They visited Cypress Point, Pebble Beach and Pinehurst—a world away from Sterling Farms Golf Course, the Stamford muni where Young Tom learned the game. When he became obsessed by the design differences among

courses, his librarian mother tracked down obscure architecture books, which she then read with him.

Today, Doak's family life is a little more complicated. He shares custody of his 13-year-old son, Michael; his eight-year marriage to Dianna Johnson ended in divorce in 1998. Doak has four stepchildren from his 2002 marriage to Jennifer Florence, whom he met at a Traverse City ice-cream stand.

Though traces of gray fleck his temples, Doak is boyishly unkempt. He favors polo shirts and battered sneakers, and his idea of hair-styling ends at pulling on a baseball cap. His easy smile and wry sense of humor are wholly at odds with that lingering reputation of which he is growing weary.

Like a college of cardinals, golf course architects are a small fraternity governed by strict conventions. The public veneer is one of unstinting praise for each other's work, and criticism—when it is leveled at all—comes in hushed whispers. (In private, of course, they are ferocious gossips.) In this austere company, Doak stood out like a showboating televangelist.

His controversial book, *The Confidential Guide to Golf Courses*, was littered with withering appraisals of other architects. Fazio's White Columns course in Alpharetta, Georgia, was dismissed as "absolutely vapid." Of Desmond Muirhead's Stone Harbor in New Jersey, he wrote, "This is the most ridiculous course I have seen.... I came away convinced [Muirhead] is having LSD flashbacks." Stone Harbor scored zero on the Doak Scale, which rated courses from one to 10.

"I'm sure he was just being honest, although my mother always told me, 'If you can't say anything good about someone, don't say anything at all,' " says Kidd, a Scottish designer and Doak's close rival.

"I'm opinionated," Doak says with a shrug. "Working for Pete Dye taught me that being controversial was not a bad thing. The people most likely to be pissed off really didn't know who I was. I wrote the first edition of that book when I was 25." By then he had seen all the best courses in the United States and British Isles, a feat he managed mainly by sending polite requests to America's most exclusive clubs. "I started writing letters to the greens chairmen during my sophomore year in college. I got on Pine Valley, Merion, Oak Hill and Seminole that way. I did it instead of a summer job."

After six years of learning design from the dirt up—during which time he also managed *GOLF Magazine*'s Top 100 Courses in the World ranking, having peppered editor George Peper with letters until he got the assignment—Doak finally got a chance to prove himself when a friend recommended him to a property developer in Traverse City.

He was just 26 when he designed his first course, High Pointe Golf Club, from which he was later banned after a dispute with the owner. “They didn’t appreciate what they had,” he says. Later, Doak bailed on his second course at the Legends Resorts in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, after a dustup with a developer he considered a meddler. Later still he was asked to codesign a course with Ernie Els, but the developers balked when Doak demanded a $300,000 fee (his fee for High Pointe was $75,000). “So then I said I would take whatever they were paying Ernie,” he says, laughing. The developers’ answer: No deal.

“Pete Dye said to me once, ‘You have to be willing to walk away.’ I probably took that too much to heart,” he says. “Older architects competing with me weren’t shy about telling people I was difficult to work with. It’s not a good reputation to have. In this business it doesn’t take much to get typecast. It’s like high school.”

That’s probably why Old Tom is resisting pleas from his publisher to update the *Confidential Guide*(original price $45; now selling for more than $500 per copy). “When I wrote that book I was more critic than architect,” he says. “I don’t want to update it now because it would be perceived as an architect attacking other architects. I should have limited it to architects who were dead.” When asked who is the most overrated designer today, he laughs. “I wouldn’t touch that with a 100-foot pole,” he says before adding, “In truth, most are overrated.”

He will allow that he is no longer underrated himself, a fact reflected in his fee, which he initially describes as “halfway between Fazio and the complete amateurs.” When pressed he puts it in the ballpark of $500,000.

A few hours after playing his first full round at Cape Kidnappers—his handicap is “nine-point-something”—Doak settles into the corner of a quiet restaurant in the town of Havelock North and acknowledges that Pacific Dunes has raised expectations he feels pressured to meet. “The perception of me after Pacific Dunes is that I did a good job with a great piece of land. Who couldn’t? Now I feel a great weight to do it again in a hurry. That’s why we’re having this conversation 9,000 miles from home, because Cape Kidnappers is a great piece of land. The site does make you a genius.”

He is scornful of architects who grumble that all the great property has been taken: “They think Ross and Mackenzie stole it all 80 years ago,” he says. He ticks off his current projects, including a links course near Ballybunion and the private Sebonack Golf Club on a prized property wedged between Shinnecock Hills Golf Club and National Golf Links of America on Long Island, New York. “There are opportunities out there. I’ve seen seven great pieces of land in the past two years that could be top 100 courses in the world.”

At Cape Kidnappers, all but the final two holes are playable. Because Robertson wants to open soon, the bunkers are being filled by a helicopter equipped with a huge bucket at a

cost of $2,000 an hour. Doak's sole edit is to change a mowing line on the 16th fairway that he finds aesthetically displeasing. (He personally oversees construction of his designs.) And that evening—48 hours after arriving—he is taxying down the runway in Napier en route to Australia.

Early the next morning Doak is walking Royal Melbourne, the proving ground of Mackenzie, who went on to design Cypress Point and Augusta National. In 2001 Doak co-wrote an admiring biography of Mackenzie, and he seems to judge every architect by that imposing standard. To know Doak, know this: He is celebrated as an iconoclast, but he is actually a throwback. Like a modern-day Republican who pines for President Dwight Eisenhower, he is a tweedy traditionalist in a business dominated by tuxedo-clad smoothies.

Doak has visited Royal Melbourne, a Sandbelt masterpiece in the congested suburbs south of the city, many times. Yet he is still awestruck. "This course has an enormous influence on what people are building in the States right now-the scale, the sweeping bunkers. Of course it doesn't look half as good there as it does here. At Stonewall I built a hole like this," he says, standing beside the 4th green and referring to a 1993 track he built near Philadelphia. "Not a dead ringer, but if you'd been here you'd know the similarity. It's easy to get away with because not many people have been here."

He also tried to replicate Royal Melbourne's short 5th hole at The Rawls Course at Texas Tech University, which opened last year. "It's a poor imitation," he admits. "At some point you just abandon the idea because the hole in Texas had to fit with the bunkering there. If you built these bunkers in Lubbock, all the sand would blow out of them."

A few hours later, Doak wades through waist-high grass as he finalizes the routing of his own St. Andrews. If Cape Kidnappers proves to be his second top-ranked design—Pacific Dunes is ranked 19th on *GOLF Magazine*'s Top 100 Courses in the World—then his third might be The Golf Club St. Andrews Beach, two hours south of Melbourne on the Mornington Peninsula, near the unfortunately named Cape Schanck (so dubbed for an old seafarer). Doak's frequent visits to this corner of the world—this is his 11th trip in two years—has him reconsidering his itinerary.

"Sometimes I think I should do what Mackenzie did and do it all in one trip. He got 'em lined up and said 'Good luck. I'm a genius. Bye!' Of course, it took him four weeks to get here by boat and train."

The routing for St. Andrews Beach is hampered by dozens of 500-year-old moonah trees that the local council won't let Doak touch. He studies a tree bent in the wind on the

corner of the dogleg at the 18th. “It wouldn’t hurt my feelings if we accidentally backed over that tree,” he mutters. That afternoon he takes a short drive to see two courses at the National Golf Club, where he had once interviewed for a project. “I didn’t get it because I wasn’t Australian and I hadn’t won the Open Championship,” he says. One course went to Greg Norman, another to Peter Thomson.

Doak doesn’t see himself competing with Norman, Thomson or the other player-turned-architects. “If you had a good piece of land and you wanted minimalist,” he says, “you’d consider me, Bill Coore, Donald Steel and David Kidd. These are the guys I compete with more than the people who do those kind of courses.”

Those kinds of courses?

Doak smirks like a man holding four aces—a look that is usually a prelude to comments he thinks might bruise egos. “Norman is a very marketable name for real estate and resort-driven developments,” he says. “He’s going to get the big-budget, high-profile jobs.” Doak is underwhelmed by Norman’s best-regarded course, Doonbeg, on Ireland’s west coast. “There are some really great holes and a few I thought were terrible.”

Doak stands out in golf for several reasons. A liberal, he is no fan of President George W. Bush (“I’ve traveled six continents and I understand how people think George Bush is the embodiment of everything they hate. And he doesn’t have a clue”). But his candor on the work of others is what jars the most. After all, this is an industry flush with false camaraderie, big egos and small-mindedness.

“There are older architects who freely backstab young ones, saying, ‘This guy’s a miserable, unqualified SOB,’ ” he says. “It wasn’t like that in the ’20s. Donald Ross wasn’t slandering Mackenzie every chance he got.”

Given his own barbed comments, it might seem that Doak is becoming just that kind of architect, deploying sharp elbows to protect his territory. In reality, he mentors a staff of ambitious, young would-be designers who hope to outdo the boss one day, and you get the impression that Doak wouldn’t mind as long as the kids built courses in the Mackenzie-Doak style.

That style is simple, he explains. “We want to make a course playable for the amateur, challenging for good players, and it should look like it’s been there forever.” He pauses and then adds, “We also want the owner to make money. We don’t want to spend a million dollars when we don’t have to. I’ve had a lot of pieces of land where I didn’t move much dirt, and I suspect others would have.”

While his opinions are often punctuated with an infectious laugh, Doak obviously thinks some of his colleagues—notably Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer—are uninspired, drive-by

designers. “To his credit, Jack is a control freak,” he says. “He won’t put his name on something unless he’s 100 percent happy with it. But if you go back to his calendar over the years and take out the tournament days and all the days he was home being Father of the Year, he has only about five days left to worry about designing.”

Would Doak tell a friend to play Jack’s courses? “I’ve seen 98 of *GOLF Magazine*’s Top 100 Courses in the World and I would count a couple of Jack’s courses in there. Do I think they are in the top 10? No. But I do think he’s done some good work.” (In April, Doak and Nicklaus were announced as codesigners of the Sebonack course on Long Island, a property both men have long coveted.)

And Palmer? Doak offers that cheeky grin again. “The general impression in the business is that Arnie doesn’t spend much time on it at all,” he says. “From what I know about Arnie’s operation, he doesn’t.”

Doak does compete with Kidd, and their relationship is not warm and fuzzy. “When I started the second course at Bandon, he was sure of himself, he was on top of the world,” Doak says of Kidd. “But at the same time he was disappointed he didn’t get to do the second course. He’s realized that one really good course does not make you the best architect in the world.”

Kidd, who is currently at work on the seventh course at St. Andrews, doesn’t disagree. “I felt a little left out when the second course commenced without me,” he says. Then he adds, tongue-in-cheek, “The land of the raw sites was quite different. Bandon was covered in dense trees. Pacific was less vegetated, and was cleared by a fortuitously timed forest fire for which I still haven’t heard a good alibi from Messrs. Doak and Keiser.”

Not all of Doak’s relationships with fellow sculptors are strained. He is close friends with Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore, who are working on Bandon’s next track. Doak considers Coore among the finest and most underrated architects in the business. And Doak dreams of collaborating with one designing rookie. “I would love to work with Tiger in the same way Mackenzie worked with Bobby Jones,” he says. “I’d learn a lot bouncing ideas off him. ‘What can I do to make it difficult for you without killing the average golfer?’ But Tiger has priced himself out of the architecture business. He’d have to take a pay cut—his appearance fee is more than any architect makes.”

Each evening at St. Andrews Beach, Doak returns to a bare-bones room, furnished with only a mattress and a lamp. He picks straw thorns from his socks and feet—the residue of a day marching through brittle grass. His final day on the Mornington Peninsula is spent on a tractor mowing sites for tees and greens. He is caked in grime and loving it, but the clock is ticking again.

“You just saw how much time Mackenzie put into everything he built in Australia—three days, about what I did on this trip,” he says as we pull out of St. Andrews Beach for Melbourne’s Tullamarine Airport. “He drew up the plans then walked through it.” Mackenzie liked to toot his own horn, but he never claimed Royal Melbourne as one of his greatest achievements because he never saw it. He left before construction began.

Now Doak is driving through the moonlit countryside north of Launceston on the island of Tasmania, a short flight off the Australian coast. A road sign warns, fatigue can be fatal. But he was never one to fall asleep at the wheel.

Doak’s final stop on this trip is Barnbougle Dunes Golf Links, a breathtaking course on the rugged north shore of Tasmania, scheduled to open later this year. The owner is Richard Sattler, a potato farmer. “I don’t play golf, I know nothing about it,” Sattler says. “I just told Tom to build whatever he wants.”

Robertson spent more money building the road to Cape Kidnappers than Sattler will spend on the entire course. That’s why Doak is taking a cut of the future action rather than an up-front fee—the property is that good.

“At some point your fee becomes so high and your name so valuable that you only get certain projects,” he says. “Most of Nicklaus’s work is real-estate driven. But it’s hard to take a project where the primary focus is selling real estate and make a great golf course.”

Barnbougle’s shoestring budget is reflected in Doak’s accommodations: He bunks with his associate Brian Schneider and Schneider’s wife in a modest cabin. Lunch is either a ham sandwich in Sattler’s kitchen or fried fish wrapped in paper from a local chip shop.

Soon after daybreak, Doak is standing in a bunker on Barnbougle’s 1st hole, explaining his design theory as if to pre-empt criticism. “We dug a lot of bunkers here partly because it looks cool and also because you can find a ball in them,” he says. “It’s better than being in the marram grass.” He builds for the better player while average golfers barely notice his strategic features, like greens designed to favor draws or fades.

“Twenty percent of golfers should be able to play my courses from the tips. Not necessarily be able to shoot 70, but not to lose balls all over the place and shoot a million,” he says. “The reason some good golfers don’t like my courses is that all the scratch golfers I’ve ever met think that the game should be designed around them. They think if they hit two good shots they should be on the green.”

His concern for lesser players leads to a lengthy debate over a high mound on the right side of the fairway at the 540-yard, par-5 1st hole. It’s about 215 yards off the tee, right in the wheelhouse of the average golfer. Anyone landing near the mound would be forced to take a short iron to clear it and still face a third shot of more than 200 yards to the green.

Doak stands atop the knoll for several minutes, silently pondering his options. “There’s room over there to the left,” he says at last. The mound stays.

As he tours the course—watching out for copperhead and Tasmanian Tiger snakes in the long grass—more bricks are laid in the edifice of his Mackenzie complex. The 12th is a 285-yard par 4 loosely based on a short hole at Royal Melbourne; the motion-sickness-inducing 13th green imitates one Mackenzie built at England’s Sitwell Park Golf Club almost a century ago. “That green didn’t last five years before the owner blew it up,” Doak says. He is confident that Sattler will keep this one around a lot longer.

Cape Kidnappers, Doak’s 16th solo course design, opened in January to rave reviews. Its unveiling kicked off what promises to be a busy year. The Golf Club St. Andrews Beach and Barnbougle Dunes are slated to open this fall. Doak designs are under way in Colorado, Washington and California. His Irish links, Kilshannig Golf Club, awaits environmental permits. He and Nicklaus hope to break ground on Sebonack Golf Club in Southampton this summer as the U.S. Open unfolds a few yards away at Shinnecock.

“You pick from the best you get offered,” he says. “If you only did jobs that could be Top 100 Courses in the World, you wouldn’t work much.”

There’s that *GOLF Magazine* list again, which Doak seems to regard as a professional yardstick. “It’s not just that. It’s more that I want to build courses at that level rather than they get recognized,” he says, unconvincingly. “I want to build nines or 10s on my scale.”

It seems a modest enough proposal—at least until you read the list of courses that score a perfect 10 on the Doak Scale: The Old Course at St. Andrews, Muirfield, Ballybunion, Royal Melbourne, Pine Valley, Cypress Point, Pinehurst No. 2, Royal Dornoch, National Golf Links and Crystal Downs, a Mackenzie course in Michigan where Doak is a member.

“Pacific Dunes would be a nine or 10,” he says, “but I’m not sure I want all the flak I’ll get for rating it so high.”

Young Tom Doak would have displayed no such reticence, but he has grown up. He has prospered and learned about tact. Once you’re a big-name designer, there’s no percentage in ripping your inferiors. You might have to work with them someday. Still, the old swagger isn’t entirely gone. “In five years I’ll be disappointed if I haven’t built five of the Top 100 Courses in the World-if I don’t, I’ll have let myself down,” Doak says one day at St. Andrews Beach. “You know those seven great pieces of land I mentioned earlier?” he says, a cocksure grin tugging at his lip. “I’m doing five of them.”

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