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CASCAIS, Portugal — Oitavos Dunes, the seaside masterpiece located just north of Lisbon, has improved its standing among top courses on the planet, jumping up three places (to #65) on GOLF Magazine's World Top 100 list, newly issued as part of the September 2013 issue.

Not bad for a course that, according to its co-designer, isn't yet finished.

Crafted by architect J. Drew Rogers (then a partner with Arthur Hills), Oitavos Dunes opened in 2001, but the fine-tuning has been continual, as the owners first sought to make it a more challenging tournament test (Oitavos Dunes played host the European PGA Tour's Open of Portugal from 2004-06), then to better integrate it with an on-site hotel, The Oitavos, which took up residence beside the 18th fairway in 2008.

"I would never claim to understand the inner workings of these top 100 lists, but it seems many great, new designs debut on the back end of these lists, linger there for a cycle or two, then are replaced by the next new 'flavor of the month'," said Rogers, who formed his own practice, JDR Design Group, in 2010. "It's gratifying to see Oitavos Dunes arrive and not just hold its place, but improve that place. I daresay it's an acknowledgement of some of the minor work we've collectively done there to improve the course still further over the last several years.

"Oitavos Dunes is that rare and beautiful thing — a seaside golf experience built in the 21st Century — but in my opinion, we have only scratched the surface. Even the world's greatest courses around undergo a continuous process of evolution, formal and informal. Look at the changes being done at the Old Course in St. Andrews. You don't simply build a course like Oitavos and call it done — it's more dynamic than that. It's simply not yet evolved to its ideal state."

Rogers first encountered the raw Oitavos Dunes site in 1997, when he was still a partner with the firm of Hills & Forrest. Rogers would take this

stunning sweep of dunescape — located entirely within the Sintra-Cascais National Park and sporting long views over the Atlantic to the cliffs at Cabo da Rocha, the westernmost point in Continental Europe — and produce that rare thing, a modern links of real distinction (it first joined the GOLF Top 100 list in 2009).

“Arthur Hills will always have my respect for the incredible degree of autonomy he provided myself, and all the partners, on individual projects,” Rogers said. “He turned us loose to be a stylistic force for the firm and encouraged us to take ownership of projects like Oitavos Dunes, which required a great deal of delicate, on-site attentions — a fact that was confirmed by the owner’s decision to bring me in to consult on a continuing basis since the course opened.”

But there is work still to be done at Oitavos Dunes, and Rogers sees that work as an imperfect but still apt metaphor for the state of many courses elsewhere in Portugal, especially the Algarve region, where so much new course development took place in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of the country’s best resort tracks there have fallen into disrepair, hindering their ability to compete with newer courses, inside Portugal, but also next door in Spain and particularly in new warm-weather destinations like Turkey.

“Oitavos Dunes is clearly not in a state of disrepair, but there are opportunities to better merge the course into its surroundings, including much of the bunkering and several of the green surfaces. Twelve years on, we better understand how the course is being played, which naturally affects the placement and scale of features, in addition to playing widths, to some degree. The initial course installation was a challenging one, and the overall fit we achieved was appropriately sensitive, in an environmental sense. But it was not as artistically integrated as we would have preferred, with features more aggressively feathered into the natural dunes environment, which is both a strategic and aesthetic matter.

“With these refinements, the course will present better to the golfer’s eye. The playing experience will be heightened, as it will draw more power from the site’s inherent links qualities — which has always been a primary focus of course owner, Miguel Champalimaud. Of course, all this makes a course more attractive to golfers and more marketable — and in that way, this sort of renovation is directly applicable dozens of rapidly aging courses in Portugal, especially in the Algarve.”

Golf Digest Portugal recently profiled Rogers and these provocative views, which marry design savvy with sustainability and larger competitive realities.

“It’s a big subject, and if you don’t read Portuguese, you might not get a whole lot from that story! But basically, courses in the Algarve misjudged their need to compete with one another — and with competitors across the warm-weather destinations of Europe, which have grown to include places like Turkey and Morocco. Just look at the money being spent today on the Black Sea coast to attract golf holidaymakers from the UK and other northern European countries.

“I’ve been working and traveling in Portugal since the late 1990s and I’ve seen first-hand the deterioration of courses in the Algarve. You simply cannot hope to compete with newer destinations without reinvesting, through renovations (some of which can very practical) that improve playing strategies *and* course conditions. The conditioning aspect is crucial because making a course look and play better can and should be married to sustainability, the calls for which will only become more strident in the years to come. Recent advances in turfgrass and irrigation technology, for example, can greatly reduce water use — which reduces environmental impact and saves money, which enables competitive reinvestment.”

Based in Toledo, Ohio, in the American Midwest, JDR Design Group is at work across the U.S. and Europe in large part because of this nuanced approach to course renovation. A sampling of ongoing projects include:

- Old Elm Club just north of Chicago, where Rogers is painstakingly restoring the original H.S. Colt design;
- Royal Poinciana in Naples, Florida, where Rogers has undertaken a comprehensive redesign of the club’s Cypress course;
- Spring Lake CC in Grand Haven, Michigan, where Rogers is planning strategic improvements to a classic Tom Bendelow design;
- Cattail Creek CC in Glenwood, Maryland, an original Willard Byrd design where Rogers has been slowly picking away at a roster of course improvements over the last several years (a cost-efficient, piecemeal approach his firm now deploys at half a dozen different clubs); and
- Oitavos Dunes, where another lofty world ranking has done nothing to minimize its ambitions.

“There was time, not too long ago, when everyone was busy designing brand new golf courses for top dollar,” said Rogers, whose original design work includes the celebrated Club at Olde Stone in Kentucky, and Newport National Golf Club in Rhode Island. “But today, course renovation is what the industry needs, and it almost doesn’t matter where those courses are — most markets have been overbuilt, so competition is *always* part of the equation. There are enough courses. The problem is, courses aren’t attracting golfers and operating as efficiently as they should. That’s where we come in.”