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BY DESIGN



Excellence in Golf Design from the American Society of Golf Course Architects

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Getting better

Renovation | Adam Lawrence

Golf clubs around the world are realizing the need to keep working on their courses, and ASGCA members are helping them do so.



Nothing stands still in golf. However carefully we maintain our courses, Mother Nature always wins out: trees grow, then die, grasses we didn't plant and don't want invade our fairways and greens, bunkers change their shape.

The best golf courses are planned in the full knowledge that they will change. Architects create elasticity, allowing for new tees to be built. Bunkers are added or removed—take a look at some of the writing of past architects like Harry Colt, who would often advise clubs that they should wait and see how courses played before adding more bunkers.

Every now and again, though, it's necessary to create a new paradigm. Maybe the evolution of a course has taken it in a direction that, eventually, has made it less interesting, and the club wants to go back to something close to what they had before. Maybe a new course has opened down the street, drawing players away, and more bells and whistles are needed to compete. Or maybe the course has changed hands, the new owners have a different business model in mind, and need to make it fit their goals.

This last imperative is a particularly strong trend in the current golf market. "I think a key trend in the US for the next few years will be repositioning," says architect Steve Smyers, ASGCA. "There are a lot of properties that have closed down and been picked up by new owners at very good prices. As they were built, these courses aren't always suitable for the business models the new owners have in mind, and so they'll need to rebuild them to a greater or lesser extent. We are involved in a number of such projects at the moment—in some cases, building an entirely new course on top of the old infrastructure, as we did at Isleworth."



Recapturing the Colt style at Old Elm (above). Vasatorps Old course, before (top right) and after renovation

Another large-scale repurposing project opened recently in Portugal. Originally designed by Anglo-Dutch architect Frank Pennink and located near the city of Lagos in the west of the Algarve, Palmares opened in 1975. The course was best known for the stretch of five holes set right next to the Atlantic Ocean, the nearest thing to links golf that existed in the Algarve.

Onyria, owned by the Pinto Coelho family which developed Quinta da Marinha in the 1980s in association with Robert Trent Jones Sr, bought Palmares back in 2003. To bring about its desired transformation at Palmares, the company chose the design practice of Robert Trent Jones II, continuing its 30 year association with the Jones family. ASGCA Past President Robert Trent Jones Jr himself, and Mark Voss, ASGCA Associate, led the project.

The new-look Palmares resort—which will include a hotel, currently in the early stages of construction

and planned for a 2012 opening, and associated real estate—has 27 holes, divided into three nines, named Lagos, Alvor and Praia.

The Praia, or beach, nine includes four holes on the seafront land always occupied by the course. On the inland side of the Tunes to Lagos railway line, though, several holes, including two clever short par fours, occupy newly-purchased land, which has been shaped to resemble a links. This part of the site incorporates a double green modelled after the seventh and eleventh on the Old course at St Andrews, including an interesting replica of the famous Eden par three.

The Alvor nine is mostly inland, and includes some steeper terrain, along with the course's most severe greens. The first three Alvor holes occupy the least interesting land on the property (although the third green is excellent) but after a road crossing, the course enters a beautiful natural valley, the location for three holes. A pretty par

three near the water is the highlight of this nine, which concludes with a stiff climb up the eighth and ninth back to the clubhouse.

Other courses want to make the most of their historic legacy. At the famous Old Elm club in Chicago, originally designed by the legendary Harry Colt in 1913 and constructed on his behalf by ASGCA founder Donald Ross, architect Drew Rogers, ASGCA has been working to return the golf course to something that more closely resembles Colt's work. "The seventh at Old Elm is a par three with a subtle ridge between the tees and the green," says Rogers. "The green was nearly obscured due to a long, trench-like cross bunker that was cropped up along the ridge, running completely across the hole. At some point, the cross bunker had been removed, and the green had become wholly visible. In addressing the desire by the club here and on other holes, we restored the original cross bunker designed by Colt and



constructed by Ross. The green is still visible, particularly on the left side, and also opens to allow play from a modern forward tee on the left side on the ridge. This is a case where we can restore original design intent while adapting to modern day member desires and needs.”

At Vasatorps Golfklubb in Sweden, the opening of the new Tournament course, designed by ASGCA Past President Steve Forrest a few years ago, meant the club’s Old course had been relegated to secondary status. “The Old course at Vasatorps has a wonderful history, but it had clearly become the ‘members’ course since the opening of our Tournament course,” Forrest says. “The members have seen all these new courses in Sweden—they’ve seen one at their own club! They understand better than anyone perhaps that the Old course was lacking in several respects. Naturally they wanted to restore it to a position of prominence and respect.”

So Forrest is launching a major

renovation of the Old course. Several holes will be repositioned or rerouted, and virtually every green will be moved. The layout’s bunkering scheme will be totally reimagined (Forrest foresees a style that is flat-bottomed, grass-faced and rough-hewn around the edges). Plans also call for a major increase in the size, impact and visibility of the layout’s water hazards.

“Nearly every green on the Old course will be brand new and has been re-sited,” said Forrest. “If we’re going to renovate, we may as well put the greens and bunkers where they should be, to maximize strategy, challenge, aesthetic interest, safety and playability.”

Many design improvements stem from the effort to improve drainage: the course occupies a very flat piece of terrain that always drained poorly. “When you expand water features, it generates dirt—dirt you can employ to raise up and better contour fairways,” Forrest explained. “We’ve done this strategically on the Old course, so fairways surface drain more efficiently

into the ponds. And, of course, when you replace soggy land with ponds, you don’t have to drain that land. What’s more, by expanding water features, we create more visible hazards that can be deployed more strategically.”

He cites the mid-length par four third as one example. The dogleg left hole is so flat that a small water hazard on the left is invisible from the tee. Forrest will expand the pond’s footprint fivefold and use the fill to recontour the fairway, then move the tees forward to improve safety relationships and create a driveable par four with water guarding the entire left side.

An ownership change was at the heart of the need for renovation at the Ironwood Golf Course in Gainesville, Fla., although only after an extended period. The city bought the course, originally built in the 1960s, out of bankruptcy in 1992, and, by 2008, had realized it was tired and needed a makeover. Michael Beebe, ASGCA, was employed to manage a renovation project that included tree removal, new greens, tees, bunkers, cart paths, irrigation and extensive fairway drainage. “The city formed a visioning team in 2008 to make recommendations on the golf course,” says Beebe. “The visioning team recognized the important role that Ironwood played in the local golfing community and recommended a \$1.3 million capital improvement program to be implemented in 2010. Following a fast-track design process, we closed the course on April 1 so that the construction work could be completed in time for a November re-opening. The immediate response following the re-opening has been outstanding with revenues for both November and December being double the revenues from the same months in 2008 and 2009. Although the course has only been open for six months, early indications are the renovation has been a huge success with increased play, golfer satisfaction and great publicity for the city.” ●

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