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BY DESIGN



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

Growing together

How long-term relationships
with architects benefit golf clubs

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Growing together

For golf clubs and owners, building a long-term relationship with an architect is a smart move, says Adam Lawrence

Golf, as the ‘mind game’ coach Bob Rotella tells us, is not a game of perfect. What is true of the game is equally true of its courses: it is hard to imagine that there is a single golf course in the world that is entirely without flaws, and thus could not, at least in theory, be improved. Think of your favorite course, and try to come up with ways in which it could be made better still: I bet you can come up with several ideas for any course in just a few minutes.

But it is a slippery slope. Sensitive, well thought out alterations—whether small or large—may improve even the finest course, but ill-planned changes can just as easily eliminate what little charm a poor track has.

That’s why an ongoing relationship with a consulting golf course architect is of such great value to clubs. The original designer of record is the obvious choice, but this is of secondary importance. What matters most is that course



development decisions are taken in conjunction with a qualified architect.

At Golf du Médoc in Bordeaux, France, the virtues of a long-term relationship with an architect are very clear. Original designer Bill Coore, ASGCA, who laid out the course more than twenty years ago, has returned on a regular basis to tweak the design, and, more recently to undertake a significant refresh. Golf du Médoc hosted the French Open on Coore’s Chateau course in 1999—Retief Goosen was the winner. But time

has taken its toll on both courses, with turf conditions in particular not being as they should be on such a well-draining property. So the resort’s owners, who have invested heavily in the hotel recently, brought the original designers back to Bordeaux to lead a slow but steady process of renovation.

Coore & Crenshaw bunker specialist Quinn Thompson, under Coore’s supervision, has spent several weeks at the resort over each of the last few winters, rebuilding many of the bunkers on the Chateau course.



Golf du Médoc in France, has had a major bunker refresh

The project is concerned both with improving drainage from the bunkers—many of which have a puddling problem at the moment—and returning their aesthetic values to a more typical Coore style. Regeneration of the site's native heather is next on the menu for the resort.

A great example is at the par five second hole. The tee shot on the hole is uphill, though not dramatically, and Coore built a big bunker at the crest of the rise. Thompson has delicately rebuilt this

bunker into a complex and elegant scar on the landscape.

What's most significant about the works at Golf du Médoc is that they represent a carefully paced, evolutionary project. Both Coore and the owners know they are working together for the long haul, and thus there is less pressure to get everything done in a hurry. This thoughtful approach is paying dividends.

Golf courses do not, in general, change overnight, and thus this long-term approach—which is

best manifested through a course masterplan drawn up by the consulting architect and embodied in the club's statutes, thus preventing short-range fiddling by green committees—is the right fit for most.

There is, of course, a long history of golf architects maintaining extended relationships with their courses and tweaking them over time. CB Macdonald, the father of American golf, continued to adjust his masterpiece, the National Golf Links of America, for much of his life, and ASGCA founder

Donald Ross made repeated changes to Pinehurst Number Two. Who is better, after all, at spotting the flaws in a course than its original designer? Who is best placed to understand how the effects of time have impacted on the way a course was intended to play?

A good example of this is the upmarket Wisley club south of London. Wisley, which was opened in the early nineties and designed by ASGCA Past President Robert Trent Jones, Jr, and his then-associate, Kyle Phillips, ASGCA, has a demanding membership including many top European Tour professionals.

Over several years, Jones, along with his design partner, ASGCA Past President Bruce Charlton, are renovating Wisley's three nine hole loops, fixing some of the issues—especially related to turf conditions—that had come about as a result of twenty years' play, and helping to make the club more sustainable in the process.

A quick stroll on the Church nine before the project showed the need for the work. The irrigation sprinklers were several inches below the level of the grass, a sure sign of a major thatch problem, and the holes had significant drainage issues as well. Testing revealed that the depth of thatch on the holes was more than two inches; post the renovation, this has been reduced to one quarter of an inch. Playing the new-look Church holes, it's easy to see the impact of the renovation work; the fairway surfaces are impeccable, and the switch to a traditional British fescue/bent grass mix means that head greenkeeper Steve Byrne should be able to embrace more sustainable maintenance methods, while still ensuring the high end conditions the club's members expect.

The trust that is built when people partner over an extended period of time is priceless. The development of the two giant Mission Hills resorts in China illustrates this clearly. Design firm Schmidt-Curley, run by Brian

Photo: C. Sheffield



Clockwise from left: Wisley's Church nine, Mission Hills Haikou and Pinehurst No. 2

Curley, ASGCA and current ASGCA Secretary Lee Schmidt (and including several other ASGCA member architects) has been closely partnered with the Chu family, the owners of Mission Hills, for many years.

The role played by Schmidt and Curley in the growth of Mission Hills can't be overstated. Curley, in particular, was central to the birth of the group's second project, near the city of Haikou on Hainan Island.

"When we were doing Mission Hills Shenzhen, we hired a shaper who showed up to shape with five surfboards—and every chance he had he'd go down to Hainan, and he'd come back telling me how great

it was," says Curley. "So I kept saying to David Chu, the chairman, that we should do something down here.

"When the chairman decided to go with Hainan, we took a big tour round the island—I think I've seen every piece of property there is round here," Curley goes on. "Architects are always beefing about not being involved in site selection, but we were totally involved in this one. For us, there were two main limiting factors. Lots of developers are happy to find enough property for eighteen holes and some houses, but we had to find a much larger piece and one where someone was prepared to make a commitment to go ahead straight away." ●

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Brian Curley, ASGCA



LONG-TERM FLEXIBILITY

At Island Hills in Michigan, original architect Ray Hearn, ASGCA has made the course more accessible to beginners and time-poor golfers

Another example of a long-term relationship between club and architect paying dividends can be seen at the newly renovated Island Hills course in southwest Michigan, which has revamped its facilities to provide more flexibility for players.

Architect Ray Hearn, ASGCA, who designed Island Hills in the late nineties, returned to the course and has created a new, flexible routing that is intended to attract time-short players and beginners by offering fewer holes than the standard 18-hole option. These include a five-hole short course, two seven-hole loops—east and west—along with a 12-hole ‘premier’ routing.

Hearn says: “There’s a lot of rhetoric about growing the game and making it more attractive to people to bring them back to the game, but Island Hills is doing much more than talking about it.”

Club owner Bob Griffioen believes time, cost and difficulty of the game are challenges for prospective players and hopes to grow the club’s customer base by eliminating these, while recognizing that round timings and communication with golfers will be essential. He says: “We are not going to put a group of golfers playing seven holes out in the middle of a weekend day in which the course is already filled with golfers playing 18 holes. We are going to get this right. We have new cart and walking paths being created, and signs will be posted to communicate to the golfer to lessen confusion. We’re committed to it. We want feedback because we want to make it right.”

Working from the original 18 holes, Hearn has ensured golf in the new routings is comparable to the 18-hole experience in terms of shot quality, selection of holes

to be played and views of Island Hills. Six sets of tees, including new positions that are part of the redesign, also give golfers multiple challenge options.

“Island Hills wants the golfer to feel it was a great 12-hole, seven-hole or even five-hole experience,” says course superintendent Joe Jehnsen.

Special scorecards for each layout have been created with carefully designed mapping, measured yardages and color photos. “The golfer will not have to take one of our 18-hole scorecards and try to figure out where to go,” Griffioen says. “That would defeat the purpose. We are taking away the time element. Play the amount of time you have by picking the course you want to play, and know it will be a very organized and great round that will feel complete in the end.”