



# THE WALKING GOLFER

The Walking Golfers Society is dedicated to providing information about the many benefits of walking when you golf, which is how the game was intended to be played. If you are a passionate walking golfer then please join our growing Society and help us advocate for the enjoyment of golf as a walking game.

## Q&A with Golf Course Architect Drew Rogers

*Posted by Ben Cowan - April 2018*

Drew, considering you have lived in my hometown, the “Glass City” for over 20 years now, it’s extra special to be able to do this interview. I am excited to ask you a few questions about the Sylvania CC restoration/renovation. I started caddying there at the age of 12 and it enabled me to get my first car at 16 (Freedom)!

Drew has been traveling all over the globe the last 20+ years working outside the US as far as Portugal. Currently he works frequently in the Midwest and Florida. In 2010, Drew formed his solo design business by the name of JDR ([www.jdrewrogers.com](http://www.jdrewrogers.com)). Prior to that, Drew spent 19 years working for Arthur Hills, collaborating on 30 new designs and 20 renovations.

I have played two courses that Drew has renovated (Old Elm & Sylvania). What has impressed me, is his ability to prioritize what’s most important depending on the budget he is given. Drew’s work seems practical from a maintenance perspective while using different textures such as grass types in his presentation to achieve a pleasant artistic finish to his work. I suppose it’s time to hear from Drew...



Old Elm #4

Thank you, Ben. Yes, 26 years in Toledo already! I’m pleased to have this connection to your group and appreciate the opportunity to field your questions.

**TWG- I have a question for you from one of our fellow Walkers. “Have you been over to Askernish Golf Course on South Uist Scotland to experience a course that is close to nature? I ask because to encourage walking I believe we need to address current designs and finishes and make a serious effort to return more to Nature and the Natural. “ If you have played Askernish, what is your opinion?**

I regret that I have not journeyed to Askernish just yet though I have ventured to Scotland quite a few times. Like most architects, I certainly have a pretty extensive ‘bucket list’, and Askernish has a prominent place on that list. However, I have had the opportunity to see/play a number of other courses throughout the world that likely fit in that same ‘back to nature’ group. Those simplistic layouts have a soft spot for me, because aside from being so fun to play, they also represent a definitive ‘less is more’ approach to golf, and they’re living proof that we CAN have a perfectly appropriate test and experience without all of the ‘excess’ that we have otherwise become so accustomed to in golf. One such course that comes to mind is one that is a little closer to home than Scotland... the Lake Zurich Golf Club in suburban Chicago – one that not many folks get to see, or even know exists. It’s highly private (only about 30 members) and only nine holes, but the members actually care for it and do all the work to keep the club in operation. As a result, the conditions are a little rough, but still, it’s just as fine an experience as you’ll ever find... a fun and memorable stroll and a place with a ton of history as well. But if you’re looking for tight, manicured conditions, flamboyant bunkering and obscene length, this place will unfortunately disappoint. But that’s part of what makes it special to me... and also why Askernish apparently appeals to so many as well. Another one, and this one IS across the pond, is Royal North Devon on England’s western coast, also known as Westward Ho! It is sort of an ancient layout, touted as England’s oldest links, produced by Old Tom Morris, with later touches by Herbert Fowler – it is largely maintained by several flocks of sheep... a brilliant place.

**TWG- You decided to head out on your own in 2010 with JDR, tell us about that leap? Do you regret not doing it prior to the financial crises of 08'?**

Those were very tough times, especially for a larger sized firm like we were throughout the '90's and early '00's. Many tough decisions had to be made... hard business decisions. It was a turning point in all of our careers. The end goal was to find a way for the firm to survive, but there were just too many chefs in the kitchen. So, we were much better off to break apart and have a go at it alone at that point... and I think those of us who did have fortunately been pretty successful. It may have seemed like an awful time to venture out alone, but I embraced it as a perfect time.

**TWG- How can Architects influence course developers/owners into allowing walking and creating routings that are conducive to walking? Does it bother you that there are certain courses that do NOT allow walking?**



Newport National #17

To me, walking is a huge part of the game... the purest form. I personally prefer to walk every round I play – it's the best way to play. I like the pace set when walking and the exercise, as well as the natural flow from shot to shot. I also enjoy having the ability to have camaraderie with the entire group (not just your cart partner). Still though, it's not at all unusual to play courses where walking is hardly possible (due to terrain or distances between holes). And while that brand of golf doesn't necessarily appeal to me, I also understand that it has a place in golf, and I'm OK with that – resigned to it under certain circumstances. However, I've never quite accepted why some courses don't ALLOW walking though. Sadly, some have become much too dependent on the revenues from cart rentals and the perception that carts are a necessity when it comes to keeping up the pace of play.

A course that is walkable is always the preferred approach... and always the objective when we set out a new course. But owner developers sometimes have other goals that must be met, most of which tend to be completely economics driven. I recall most of the courses we built in the last golf boom ('late 90's, early '00's) were completely developer/real estate driven ventures. Few of them had little if any concern for the brand of golf or the experience that was being created – they just wanted golf to help sell real estate and sell memberships and wanted us to make it green as quickly as possible. Their marketing people were obsessed with length and difficulty, and gimmicks like signature holes- buzzwords that they could use in their sales pitches. Sadly, many of those courses weren't built at all for golfers – they were built for developers (despite all of our collective efforts to push them in a different direction). But that was the business. I suppose the only real benefit coming from that period is that many of those courses are going back today to renovate – to make them as player and maintenance friendly as possible. But in many cases, even those improvements do little to promote increased walking, as we're typically working with the existing course skeleton, a fixed land plan that renders walking a major challenge.



Miromar #7

**TWG- I have a bit of contention with Irrigation ponds being put on Golden Age courses in recent years. Why does a course that survives 80-100 years without one, suddenly need one? I wish in the US, that we could maintain more courses similar to Australia, by focusing on Greens and Fairways and let the rough be rough.**

I wish your preference was met with that of the majority! It is certainly a sensible approach. Honestly, though, most courses we all see and play here in the US really do need water (in some varying supply) to sustain... and, of course, we're always fighting the perception that we must be green. Australia really represents a very special climate, and certainly the sand belt courses have

conditions and mediums that are almost unique in the world – so to compare much of anything here to those courses really isn't an 'apples to apples' correlation. Obviously though, water is a huge issue in golf today due to its scarcity and in some cases, its expense – perhaps our most valuable resource. I think very few architects today have the goal in mind to build irrigation ponds on older, classic courses... but sometimes a need is born when city water becomes too expensive or when deep wells no longer

yield the volumes of water that they once produced due to aquifer depletion. The main alternative to buying water is to impound your own, and that's when a pond becomes a vital necessity rather than any sort of vain feature... it's a last resort in my book, but sometimes necessary to the livelihood of a course. To just turn off the water at some established clubs would be unthinkable to them, and that's when ponds become a necessary evil. I've had clients who were fortunate enough to have enough spacious acreage on their properties that allowed us to locate a new pond in an out of play/out of view location – and that is certainly preferred where possible. But so many older courses we see are already landlocked with little or no available space... so when the need for a water impoundment is born, many times the only option is to find a way to fit it strategically into the course in some way – usually in a low area that naturally collects water and will work in concert with the drainage systems in a reasonable way.

**TWG- Please tell us about your early days playing Golf. How did you catch the Golf bug? Did your parents play the game? How do we as a Golf Society expect children to become future walkers, when we see so many local Golf Professionals in Golf Carts?**

Like so many, I started watching golf on TV at a young age. Watching Palmer, Trevino and Nicklaus put the hooks in me. Initially, I just pretended to play, like the pros, in my backyard. Then I recall that one of our neighbors was a member at the country club, so one day I just went up and boldly asked him if he would take me to play at his course some time! He did! And by age eight, I was playing more regularly – and that really forced the hand of my parents (who didn't play) to get a membership at the club (the only course in town) so I could keep playing. Back then, we always walked...sometimes 36



Oitavos Dunes #1 green

or even 54 holes a day – and we loved it – couldn't get enough. I rode my bike to the course in the morning, played all day, and rode back home in the evening if there was enough light! Obviously, carts were expensive to rent then, they were always in very short supply and they were mostly utilized by elderly players who didn't otherwise get around very well. As a result, carts weren't really a consideration. Today, kids seem infatuated with golf carts as if the cart is the highlight of the experience. And carts today are sleek, speedy and comfortable unlike the old Pargo 3-wheelers we had! So it's a challenge today with kids and carts. I think we can only lead by example – as parents who introduce their children to golf, we have a responsibility to teach them the values and etiquette associated with golf and walking together is very much part of that value system, as is caddying (another endangered craft). But WE have to be the ones to take that lead, regardless of what they might see others do. I was shocked last summer to see parents carrying their kids bags during a junior tournament – so the boundaries are certainly broad and challenging today. My children are now approaching an age where I can spend more time on the course with them, and start to take father/child golf trips. I'm looking forward to those times with them, both boy and girl, so I can hopefully instill in both of them the values that I hold most dearly in golf.

**TWG- Have you implemented any design elements and ideas from Willie Park Jr since working on one of his courses? I'm excited for you to one day restore Sylvania CC to its full potential. Any possibility of re-claiming the lost greens space and just let golfers putt over the irrigation heads until those get moved?**

The thing about WPJ is that he was very much like many of his contemporaries of the Golden Age in terms of laying out a course to achieve a very natural fit. Architects during that period had to be very adept as capable designers just so the courses could be reasonably built and maintained. Additionally, you'll see many similar design strategies and elements applied among those architects – many of whom came to us from Scotland and England just after the turn of the century. After all, they had been at it for a good while before golf emerged here in the US. Their understanding of shot values, playing angles and hazard placement was so strong, and also the reason why so many of the older courses here have stood the test of time. So I really haven't dialed in on anything specific to Park, because his approach is really very similar to so many others from that time (Ross, Raynor, Flynn, MacDonald, Alison, Tillinghast, etc.).

Park's effort here in Sylvania is a real testament to that era of golf design and we see that in the way he arranged the holes and used the site elements... how he chose green and tee sites and how he used the sand ridges to make the holes distinctive and strategic and how he used bunkers sparingly on what was already a layout defined and framed by a mature stand of oaks. Today at Sylvania, the greens are merely a shadow of their original limits, which is to say that their edges have encroached inward over the many decades since their original construction – and that is a whole other topic. This is common to all golf courses, but particularly prevalent at SCC. We have

plans to recover those original perimeters (they're very distinguishable still today), but that work has not yet reached the pinnacle of priority in the overall hierarchy of improvements that need to be made there. No matter how you cut it, that work is just as time-consuming and costly as many other needed treatments – and today, that is still a hump that SCC and so many other clubs have just not been able to get over. When we are able to go forward though, we'll go about it wholeheartedly, not haphazardly – it will be done properly, and that means getting the irrigation repositioned and the turf transitions in order, among other important details. I'm as eager as anyone to execute that work!

**TWG- You do a lot a work down in the state of Florida. They seem to be anti-walking down there for the most part. With Winters offering very pleasant walking days and courses relatively flat in most of the state, how could this be? Have you been able to convince courses/clubs that you renovate to consider allowing walking that otherwise wouldn't?**

I think it's important to first understand what Florida golf is all about. The vast majority of the golf courses in Florida are enjoyed and frequented by mostly retirees and sun-thirsty vacationers. And most of the courses down there are in golf communities – they were built to help sell real estate and memberships. Therefore, walking is rarely achievable from



Royal Poinciana Cypress #8

the overall land planning approach and perspective, as holes corridors are typically separated by long rows of homes with frontage on golf and distances between these typically individual corridors are lengthy. Those who buy property in Florida want a golf course view... and developers look to maximize their profits by trying to place as many homes on golf as they can. It's a supply and demand market in terms of real estate. And then, at the end of the day, these older players really have no interest in walking anyway – as they don't typically get around that well, and its hot as hell on top of that! Florida golf, in the typical sense, is very repetitive and consistent in this way. I understand that many don't favor that type of golf, but as club management and real estate developers will tell you, there are more than enough that DO! We don't have to favor this brand of golf, but it is the way in Florida – and it won't be changing. I have a great client in Naples where I've renovated all 36 of their golf holes, and they're a bit of an anomaly in Florida. They're not a community; there are no homes or breaks in the flow of the course(s). It's a core layout of solid golf that's VERY walkable. Even with that quality, the majority of golfers there still play from carts – and they're average age exceeds 75! If that same course had a younger membership, maybe an average age closer to 60, I think walking would be the norm rather than the exception. And that's why places like Streamsong and Calusa Pines were built – as a departure from the norms, and to attract a different brand of golfer. But that brand of golfer does not predominate in Florida.



Club at Olde Stone #18

**TWG- I would like to see a Drew Rogers course in the State of Ohio. If given the opportunity, do you have any fresh design ideas that you have been itching to implement? Feel free to share with us any out of the box ideas you have.**

Well, thank you – I agree! The way things have been going in our business, it's rare that a new course is built today and I'm sure you've all heard about pretty much all of them. So there are a few, but mainly our work today is concentrated in the area of course renovation. That being said, I do have a rather self-serving goal to design and build a new course at some point that would be entirely rare in character. This course would be entirely void of water, sand, trees and

maintained rough. Course strategies would be solely dependent on ground contours that feature only two grass types and two heights of cut – for fairways and for greens. I've always contended that a proper test could be created without all of that clutter and artifice that we have come to see so much of – that everyone could experience enjoyment on a course with such a simple application of elements. I'm also not hung up on a mandated par of 72 or with any overall length. We've seen what happens when people become obsessed with length. As such, I firmly believe our game would benefit greatly, especially in terms of enjoyment and manageability, if shorter holes and shorter, more strategic courses were promoted. I guess that idea was sparked one day

after I grew tired of yet another committee member telling me that tree removals on his course would render it defenseless – too easy. That same guy wanted to lengthen the shortest hole on the course as well! Hopefully I'll get a shot someday to implement this concept, in Ohio or anywhere else I can find willing investors! If I do, you can bet that it will likely be no longer than 6500 yards and there will be a few short 3's and short 4's in the mix – I even like the idea of 6-3's, 6-4's and 6-5's, just like at Herbert Fowler's Red Course at The Berkshire in Surrey – what great fun. Consider also a course like Swinley Forest in that same neighborhood outside London. Swinley is a par 69 that comes in at just under 6400 yards... but also has 8 par fours hovering around or exceeding 400 yards. To say it was a challenge would be a gross understatement! So dare to break the norms!

**TWG- Which Golden Age Architect(s) have influenced you the most? Old Town GC in North Carolina has opened up my mind the most in recent years regarding shared space and maximizing natural features. Is there any course(s) that have had a large impact on your design philosophy?**

I'm pretty sure I've been influenced by most, if not all of them at some point, not just one. I've spent my entire career studying the works of others and how they've solved problems and created unique experiences. Traveling plays a huge part in that initiative – to see and experience a breadth of great, diverse work. Truthfully, I really enjoy, and prefer, the brand of golf that can be enjoyed in the British Isles... and that includes links golf as



Quail West Preserve #10

well as some really great heathland and parkland golf as well. So with that, there are names like Colt, Simpson, Braid, Morris, Park, Mackenzie, Fowler and also the works of Ross, Alison, Langford, Raynor and so on here in the US. What strikes me about golf in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, etc. is the sheer whimsy in which golf holes were derived (North Berwick, Prestwick, Royal Dornoch, Cruden Bay, Old Course, etc.) – so many holes offer shots or challenges that are really fun to take on; really imaginative stuff – almost in the spirit of what we did as kids with wiffle golf balls in our back yards. We just dreamed up the most ridiculous holes and shots – crazy stuff, and then we'd just tee it up and see what happens, just to try to solve the puzzle. I often feel that way when playing golf over there... as golfers are really rewarded when they are able to visualize, adapt and create... and the architecture is typically promoting of this brand of golf – even though it was very purposely designed. On top of that, most courses are spacious, with an absence of tall turf and trees (hard to lose balls)... the turf is firm and running, greens are far from fast and the game is all about what happens to the ball on the ground – and EVERYBODY walks! I would venture to say that most golfers in the US have never experienced this game. By far, this is the most fun I have ever had playing golf – just having the freedom to be creative as a player. And that's a big reason, I think, why we've seen such a magnetism towards newer courses at places like Bandon Dunes, Streamsong and Sand Valley, for example – where the architecture is very much influenced by this pure approach to golf. However, I also think it's important to understand that these course types are unique to certain sites and conditions... you can't build them everywhere... and that's why I have become so amazed and almost infatuated by the great Heathland courses around London – the works of Colt, Fowler and Simpson – simply amazing on those more typical, imperfect grounds – and architecturally, more challenging to design than those built on sandy sites. I suppose that's why I've been influenced as I have.

**Drew, thanks again for your time!**