

# GOLF ENTERPRISE

E U R O P E



**Autumn Shows Preview**

**How to be a good client**

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# "Great Expectations"

## The golf course architect, the client and the golf course.

Successful golf course architecture, like most forms of paid activity, depends, in the long run, on satisfying the client. The architect's clients vary greatly from project to project. They may be private individuals, golf clubs, local authorities, hoteliers, builders and developers and each may have very different objectives in mind. The real clients, however, are the golfers. So we should address ourselves to them by creating user friendly courses that encourage the weak and challenge the strong.

Over the last few years there has been a considerable increase in the number of courses built in Europe. This trend has brought with it several difficulties peculiar to this rapidly expanding, televised sport.

Many projects are being promoted by people who are unaware of the long term management implications of golf course developments and of low consumer tolerance of highly personalised schemes. Many developers, be they golf clubs, private individuals or public organisations, find themselves committed to horrendous projects, having made promises to their backers that are impossible to keep. Without consulting someone capable of giving advice based on successfully completed projects, or if having done so, ignoring it completely, it is small wonder that some appalling mistakes have been made which can affect all who are involved in golf.

It is frequently assumed by participants that the client is creating a new golf course project following extensive market research proving the economic viability of the scheme. More often than not the market research consists of a wet finger held aloft.

by **Jeremy Pern**

***There are good clients and bad ones, the good ones listen, the bad ones don't. Team leaders with hearing problems (Hitler, King Canute etc.) generally end up relegated.***

What is the course architect's role and how far should it extend into the non-design aspects of a golf course project? The conventional wisdom is that the designer is responsible for the course route plan, the feature design (greens, tees and bunkers), the specification preparation and construction supervision. The latter ranges from a permanent presence on site, to weekly or monthly visits, or to a simple invitation to opening day; depending on the fees, commitment and/or professionalism of the architect. Providing the client has a professional team of specialists around him then the architect can stick to that conventional role. (For specialists read: market researchers, bankers, surveyors, greenkeepers, contractors, golf pros, hydrologists, agronomists, accountants, lawyers, management specialists, clubhouse architects, interior designers, landscape architects,

consulting engineers, planning consultants, marketing and advertising consultants, salesmen, hotel and catering consultants).

Usually it's just you and him – full stop.

The reputation of an architect is based on the number of successful projects he has participated in and the quality of those courses. However a successful project should not be confused with the quality of the course. There are many very well known clubs that are, from the design viewpoint, less than satisfactory but they have a reputation for other things which largely makes up for any conceptual or technical fault. Equally, many well designed courses can be found on unsuccessful projects.

The modern course architect may have to play a much wider role in his projects if he wants them to be really successful.

A well designed and constructed golf course that is poorly maintained, due to lack of funds caused by over-optimistic financial provisions, will soon become unplayable and then bankrupt – an unsuccessful project.

Experienced architects will be able to give the client advice on aspects of project development in order to avoid many of the pitfalls. This is not to say that the designer should turn himself into a jack of all trades but that he should give to his client the benefit of his experience for the good of the course and the long term satisfaction of the golfers.

The architect is generally in a position to be heard, unlike many of the other essential participants in this period up to opening: the contractors, golfers, greenkeeping staff and so on.

Golfers are more and more familiar with the architects' names. This is a natural extension of the American marketing strategy used by golf course real estate promoters to sell their housing by the incorporation of a 'name' as an 'associate designer' or 'course design consultant'. In the same way the private golf club is every bit as keen to sell its shares to members or the local authority to ensure credibility for its grant applications. The use of an architect with a track record of successful projects goes a very long way to reassure investors, viz: merchant banks or other funding bodies or indeed golfers themselves. Clearly then, the architect must be prepared to involve himself at a very early stage in the project if only to reassure himself that it is on a sound footing and that his client has the funds necessary to build, maintain and exploit his project successfully.

So much for the theory. The reality is rather different. The quality of a new golf course depends on three main factors:



18th green, Dartmouth Park Golf Club.



### • The selection of the architect

Each designer has his own distinct style. By choosing one rather than another, the client establishes at this stage the indelible stamp that will become the character of the course. It is impossible for one designer to do the work of another, however much the client may wish it. The client should visit courses designed by his chosen architect so that he can fully appreciate the style of course he will be getting, also that the architect can fully understand what his client requires of him and accept those parameters.

### • Site selection

The raw material of the project is the site. No matter who the designer is, a bad choice of terrain will never produce a magnificent course. Soil type, topography, climate, availability of water, vegetation, geology, location, boundary shape and so on; all are beyond the architect's power to alter. They represent the fixed points from which the quality of his work must be drawn. The client has to acknowledge that there are limits that have to be accepted in this respect and that these have to be well analysed before the site is chosen.

### • The Budget

Having chosen the architect and the site, the budget required for the project must be available from the word go. It is imperative that there are sufficient resources to enable the architect's design and specification to be carried through with the quality required.

The client usually has an expectation of what he wants. These ideas are sometimes either poorly thought out or unrealisable due to lack of funds, poor market research or inappropriate terrain. The architect often arrives on the scene too late to take effective remedial action. His project then becomes a series of compromises and rearguard holding actions. But that is what life is about, things are seldom perfect.

The client will, in all probability, only ever be involved in one single golf project. The learning curve is vertical for the whole of the life of that project. Easy to learn from mistakes, but if everything is a one-off event this new found knowledge is pretty useless. There are good clients and bad ones, the good ones listen, the bad ones don't. Team leaders with hearing problems (Hitler, King Canute etc.) generally end up relegated.

The solution is simple. The client has to be educated. He has to know what is going to happen before it happens and has to know what he will be getting at the end of the day. His expectations must be realistically defined and subsequently realised by the architect.

This educational process goes through three phases.

### • Design to Construction

The site must be analysed objectively and the client informed of all its negative characteristics. (He will be all too aware of its positive features, otherwise he wouldn't be

there). It is sometimes very difficult to inform someone tactfully that his latest mega-investment is not suitable for conversion into Augusta Mk II but brutal honesty early on may save disappointment later.

***Good greenkeepers are both difficult to find and very costly. Bad greenkeepers are even more expensive.***

It is at this stage that the client's requirements must be analysed. Public courses require different design strategies from private clubs. Tourist courses differ from residential operations. Often the client may not be aware of what this really means in terms of effective land use and budget. Maintenance budgets must be established and personnel discussed. At present good greenkeepers are both difficult to find and very costly. Bad greenkeepers are even more expensive.

There will be planning consents to obtain and liaison with local authorities representing planners, agriculture, forestry, highways and of course the local community. Let's add ecological groups to placate, opponents to pacify and golfers to satisfy. If done with an experienced architect all these tasks can be effectively controlled. If not, mistakes can be made that are irredeemable. Communication skills and competence are both required.

### • Construction to Seeding

The construction of a golf course goes through a number of distinct operations. Initially the most dramatic and often the most rewarding is the earth-moving and shaping. Once this is finished the client can begin to imagine what the final course will look like. Hopes are raised and morale is high, the muck shift generally runs smoothly and seldom gets behind; if it does then there will be a feeling that any delays can be retrieved in subsequent operations. This is most definitely not the case.

The irrigation and seeding follow on and for some time things slow down. There appears to be a hiatus, the client will start to wonder if he has chosen the right contractor and architect, he will be prey to all sorts of doubts, many coming from the 'golfies' that hang on to the coat tails of every project. Anyone who has ever played a round of golf will suddenly become an expert in design strategy, drainage, irrigation etc.

It is here that the time-table usually goes awry. Things go wrong: no water or electricity for the irrigation system; seeding delayed; washouts; payment problems; lack of trust and co-operation between the various contractors on site, each blaming the other for the slightest problem; work being rushed and not correctly carried out; subsequent refusal of substandard work by the architect; all this is fairly common.

The architect's job is to pull it all together and deliver on time and within budget the quality product that only he can provide. For him to do this he needs the full support of the client. This support must be based upon the mutual respect that a professional relationship creates.

### • Seeding to Opening

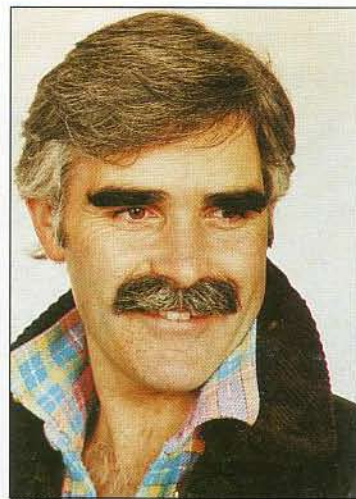
Total disillusion can set in at seeding. Where is this golf course, promised for so long? The money has been spent but the course is unusable. The client must be fully aware that when the construction is finished, unlike a motorway or block of flats, the job is far from over. (Unfortunately clients with this understanding are rare birds indeed.) Equally the client must know of the financial implications of the cost of maintaining the course during this phase. It is often not appreciated that the greenkeeper and his staff and equipment must be on site when seeding starts. From now on, however, things can only get better.

The eventual success of the design and construction phase of the course must be based upon a full and honest relationship between the client (including his greenkeeper), his architect and the contractor. The architect has the responsibility of ensuring that the golf course lives up to the client's great expectations. Those expectations must be reasonable and achievable within the limits of the project.

The owner of a course must understand from the word go that a golf course is an organism which is in a continual state of change and evolution. It is never 'finished', it is simply in a better or worse condition than previously.

A good golf course, like a fine wine, should improve with age...

At the end of the day, however, it is the enjoyment of the course by the golfers themselves that must come as the yardstick against which we all should be measured.



***The author is a golf course architect living and working in France. His recent achievements include the Royal in Switzerland, le Golf de Marivaux in France, and Dartmouth Park in Great Britain.***