



# Can I have your autograph?

Golf course architect **Jeremy Pern** (pictured left) shares some personal thoughts on the often delicate subject of Signature Design.

■ Anybody can design a golf course. No qualifications required.

Quite sensibly you will need a construction permit to build the course, but there is no legal requirement for the designer or architect to be in any way qualified, experienced or professional.

Of course qualified professionals do exist: they are usually members of professional bodies like the European Institute of Golf Course Architects or its equivalent around the world, and for the younger generation through education programs, Diploma and Masters courses in golf course architecture.

But anybody can design a golf course, which means that many courses are designed by *Nobodies*. Mostly people who have never done it before – first timers.

Nobodies emerge from the ranks of enthusiastic golfers, landowners, landscape architects, and occasionally real architects.

Some Nobodies achieve repeats, often for very low fees.

Nobodies' clients tend to get what they pay for so if you want your project to be to be built properly and on time and within your un-expandable budget you're almost always better off with a *Somebody* who knows what he's doing, rather than a *Nobody* who doesn't.

Somebodies – by which I mean professional golf course architects – come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, but they do have a few things in common: they are usually hungry – even the successful ones live pretty much hand to mouth; they are talented; they are enthusiastic and they are generally incapable of being employed by anyone to do anything else.

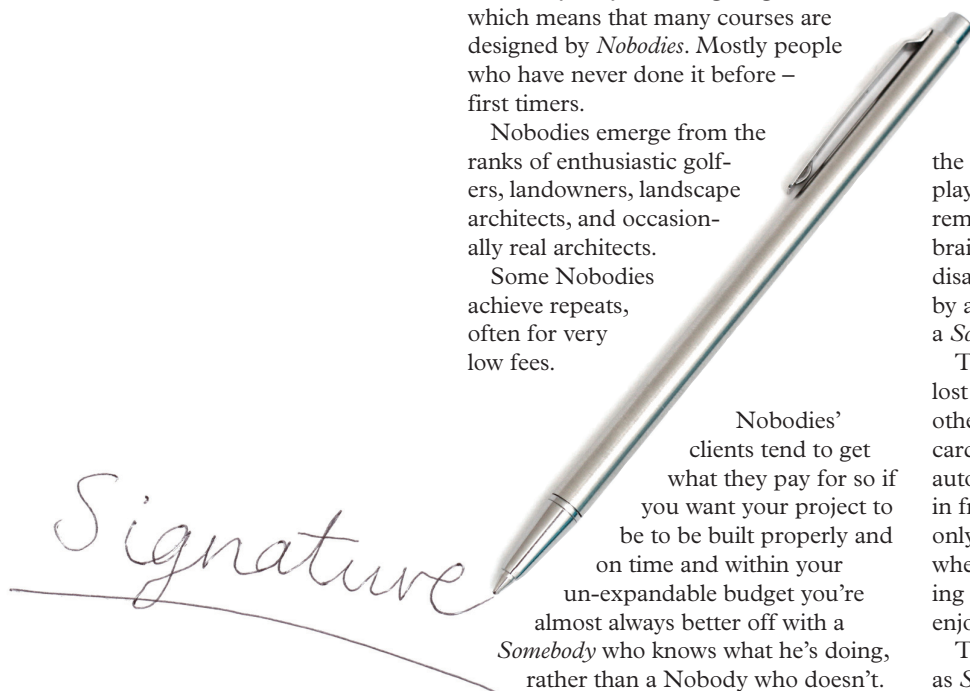
By far and away the biggest number of enjoyable rounds of golf played by people reading this article will have been played on a golf course designed by a *Somebody*.

Outstanding golf courses that stand the test of time, designs that are fresh and full of new ideas that pay respect to the past whilst turning their face to the future, are invariably designed by professional golf course architects rather than professional golfers.

But the most expensive rounds that the average mid-handicap golfer has ever played – rounds of golf that have remained fixed in that reptile part of the brain as unforgettable and just downright disappointing – have been designed not by a *Nobody*, not by a *Somebody*, but by a *Somebody Else*.

These are the courses where you have lost more balls per round than on any other course in your life, where your score card resembles a bar code number on an automobile part, where your humiliation in front of your wife and (ex) friends can only be described as “exquisite”, and where you lie to your few remaining golfing chums about just how much you enjoyed that memorable day.

The somebody elses are better known as *Signature Designers*.



These fellows sit at the very top of the golf course design food chain. If design fees are the criteria, these are the kings of the course design jungle.

Our signature designer possess two principal characteristics. Firstly, he is a professional golfer, usually famous, most often wealthy and generally past his prime, and secondly he will receive generous remuneration – shed-loads actually – for not to doing what he is supposed to be paid for as he will not be designing the golf course.

We all know that Signatures produce some very good golf courses, that is golf courses that their chums, fans and clients all say are good, and that the sports media flown in at great expense on opening day say are really really good.

So how do they manage to make the cut in the design game? Like the Emperor with his new clothes, the Signature Designer requires a Court – in this case it takes the form of a staff of professional designers and technicians – Somebodies who do all the work.

This is “Minimalism” at work, and is best described as the minimum amount of work required to make a large amount of money through golf course design.

To coincide with the launching of real estate sales a further visit will follow during construction. Helicopters are often involved.

The Signature will usually have only a vague idea of what is happening on site, so he waves his arms around, points meaningfully at a large technical construction drawing whilst camera’s

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Course design involves three basic skills of which routing – figuring out where all the 18 holes are going to go, comes first. Next the details of those holes have to be meshed together, with shaping and earth-moving plans, green plans and techie stuff like irrigation, drainage and agronomy.

Thirdly the design has to actually be built which means that the designer should have some notion of the economics and logistics of the construction process to say nothing of quality control.

Not one of these required skills can be acquired by hitting balls, albeit with ferocious accuracy, into small holes in a closely shaven lawn. It’s a fairly safe bet that the signature designer will have never mastered even one of these skills, let alone single handedly executed all three tasks from beginning to end.

So what is his real function? The answer is depressingly simple – the signature is simply a marketing tool for the developer. He is there to help sell real estate and/or hotel reservations.

Signature designers very rarely work on golf courses without large lumps of concrete littering the surrounding landscape.

Obviously the stakes are high, so Signature Design projects cannot be allowed to fail, at least not until the real estate is sold off.

The second thing he needs is money. There is usually a clause in his contract that says, roughly speaking, that he can do whatever he likes to “increase the overall excellence of the project.”

It is generally understood by thoughtful outsiders that Signature course construction costs are vastly higher than anyone else’s. One of the reasons for this is because substantial bits of their courses may get built several times.

Initially, so the rumor has it, the course has to be built as a full-scale prototype which is then rebuilt to increase all that excellence and natch – the price.

The third reason Signature Design courses are often so good is due to their outstanding locations. Luxury golf real estate is usually built on the best sites that money can buy. Disaster in the shape of an un-photogenic golf course is not an option.

With a Court, the cash and a wonderful site in place, what does the Signature Designer actually do?

Part one of the ritual is the Site Visit Photo Op. “It’s a miracle” he’ll say to gathered pressmen on signing his contact “...a miracle how God made the terrain just perfect for a golf course.”

He’ll also say something to the effect of how little will have to be done to transform it into a new Pebble Beach.

click away, mumbles inaudibly over the noise of the chopper and lifts off to his next tour event.

At last on opening day he does what we’ve all been expecting him to do – he signs stuff – and gives the fans his Signature and so the origin of the term. He tells everybody that what he’s (not) done is absolutely fabulous, the best thing since sliced bread and Big Berthas.

Despite the bull, signatures can develop given time. Some of the world’s best design firms started out with a Signature, who a few years later decided to learn the skills of the trade and thus become a Somebody in the business.

So, does the Signature Design give value for money? Yes, provided the real estate sells as forecast. Signature fees and course construction costs are simply added on to the per unit cost of the real estate and come off the marketing budget.

When the real estate is sold the course is handed over to an operator who usually goes bust a few years down the road. The course is then sold at a rock bottom price to someone with a little more savvy, an operator who calls in a professional, experienced and qualified Somebody who’ll make it playable, maintainable, and, for the right reasons this time, memorable.

By which time the name of the Signature has long been forgotten. **GME**

