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ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Golf needs more smallish, accessible courses, says top designer Harradine



Abu Dhabi Golf Club

By Viren Varma

GREAT golf courses are works of high art that appeals to the gut and lingers in memory. We crave playing them, the way Van Gogh craved colour. It's just that appreciating aesthetics as such requires some cultivation.

Passionate individuals craft courses with fastidious care and, like most high art, conform to formal limitations that actually serve to liberate genius. Vision and creativity

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isn't the only thing, designing a golf course requires technical and scientific knowledge to inject "life" into the landscape.

Talk to old-school geniuses like Peter Harradine and you would know designing a great golf course also requires the clinical precision of a surgeon. "A golf course is like a heart transplant – the site must not reject it," says the senior designer of Harradine Golf which have designed and supervised the construction of over 200 Golf course projects in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

The Harradine golf courses are



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Al Hamra Golf Club and Resorts

designed to be as "maintenance friendly" as possible without unnecessary and unwarranted complications," says Harradine who has left an indelible imprint in the region with his top-line creations that includes the Abu Dhabi Golf Club, the Doha Golf Club, Sharjah Golf and Shooting Club, Al Hamra Golf Club, Jebel Ali Golf Resort & Spa to name but a few.

"Golf is better served when individual, unique courses are built that reflect their region and playing clientele," says the experienced golf architect.

Quite a refreshing thought in an

era when monstrous courses are fast changing the landscape of golf. Due to equipment technology and the athletic prowess of the modern player, the former limits of distance – yardages that were once more science fiction than real – have now been surpassed.

Much like in normal architecture, however, the real work gets done behind the scenes, by people with names that you probably do not recognise. But when you talk to guys like Harradine, you see that the spirit of golf architecture is still alive and well, and in capable hands.

"Golf needs more smallish,

accessible courses that serve their communities rather than monstrous, ambitious courses that try to please only a few," according to the affable Swiss whose family's golfing history spans three generations.

The "Harradine" design philosophy seeks to deliver courses that are a challenge to good players whilst avoiding unnecessary hazards and frustrations to the less experienced golfer who could actually abandon the game or choose a less demanding course.

Dubai, says Harradine, desperately needs a NORMAL course – a course where people can enjoy

themselves. "But our world is ruled by marketing, everybody wants to have a championship course. And that is spreading a wrong message."

Excerpts from a wide-ranging interview:

High-profile players, both past and present, are making forays into the business of golf course designing. Do you think they are hijacking the profession?

This is a big, big marketing ploy. If a professional golfer is offered \$2 million for signing a brand, then why not. He would be stupid not to accept such a lucrative offer. What about the guy who has studied landscape architecture for years at school and then getting his degrees ... he must think that he is a fool.

All you have to do to become a golf course architect now, is to go on a golf course, ensure a 300-yard drive and win an international PGA tournament and there you are – a golf course architect!

The wrong message is being spread. There are so many golf course architects – the unsung heroes who do not get any credit for their work. And, of course, the media does not talk about them – and that's a shame.

I do my best to get myself recognized for the golf courses that I design but I am one of the minorities of professional golf course architects who actually (and only sometimes) gets recognized. I must say that almost 80 to 90 per cent of the golf course architects are not recognized for their art. They design good golf courses – and they are not professional tour players.

Do you think modern day golfers are dictating the design of a course?

On courses that host PGA Championships, the design has certainly changed. There the design is dictated by the way the tour professionals play. On so-called normal courses, it's almost the same as it was about 30 years ago. Basically the bad player is the same



"Actually, there is a big myth. People think that growing grass in the desert is very tough. This is not true at all. If you have water it is a lot easier to grow grass in the desert and maintain it than it is in central Europe, for example."

bad player as was the case 30 years ago. The only problem is that he is a little longer with the new equipment but he can't control his shot. The touring pro has certainly improved a lot, thanks to new equipment and technology. Equipment does not really change the standard of a high handicap player, but for a good player or a pro it definitely makes a lot of difference.

Every golf course in Dubai is announced as a championship golf course. I would like someone to define what they mean by it! Basically, the courses that have

championships on them – like the Abu Dhabi one that I designed or the Doha Golf Course – they can be referred to as championship courses because they have championships played on the course.

By increasing the length of the course, do you think the golf course designers are trying to placate only a few?

Unfortunately, yes. Our world is ruled by marketing, and the marketing gurus convince developers that everybody wants to have a championship course, which



Sharjah Golf and Shooting Club

is not true. Unfortunately it's all a marketing ploy. When we design a championship course, we have six or seven tees and we do not put markers on the back tees. That's the strategy we use in the so-called championship courses

Today, Dubai has too many championship courses, but it doesn't have an easy course that everyone can enjoy. Nad Al Sheba was good and The Montgomerie is very wide and forgiving. In simple words, Dubai desperately needs a 'normal' course – a course where people can enjoy themselves.

Dubai also needs a public course?

Yes, of course. Golf is becoming too expensive here. In England, they call them the 'Municipal' courses. There is certainly a need for municipal courses. Golf courses over here are built just for the real estate business. In the old days, golf courses were built for people to play golf and now they are built to make money and that's the big difference ... a very big difference.

What in your opinion constitutes a good golf course?

It all depends on who the players are. Basically it's the combination of the views and the site. For me, it is the location, location and location and site, site and site. We have just finished a new golf course – Boulder Hills – in Hyderabad and it's definitely going to be one of the ten most photographed golf courses in the world. It's an incredible golf course mainly because of the fantastic boulders! On that site, the boulders are unique and they are going to be preserved for prosperity – they are monuments.

It is quite ironic because we are generally the "bad boys" of the environmentalists and those great boulders will be presented because of the golf course.

"The Boulder Hills at Hyderabad in India is an incredible golf course. It's definitely going to be one of the ten most photographed courses in the world."

Is it ready to roll?

It's ready to go. The only thing we are waiting for is the water. The government promised water two years ago but as soon as we get it, it's ready to go. We are actually ready to hand over the course in two or three week's time.

What is the unique selling point of the course?

We do not have many bunkers. We are not putting any extra hazards because the course already has many natural hazards. There are some great lakes, many trees and lots of fantastic boulders. It's a very interesting course: lots of elevated tees, and in golf elevated tees are the 'the' thing. We have 13 of them.

What documentation must be there before you ever touch the land?

Today we have some very clear documents showing existing contours, etc and then we walk the site to have a look at the total area. If there are any natural features, we try to keep them as much as possible in our design. Abu Dhabi, for instance, had no natural features whatsoever.

If you play Jebel Ali, you hear the birds, peacocks – lots of trees – we have brought life to the land. If you had seen the land before the course was developed – most of it was plain subkha .. a few lizards that's all. Now we have lots of birds, more lizards – we have really brought an incredible life to the site. We

have done the same in Abu Dhabi and Doha. So, here I think we have actually improved the environment a lot.

Does the land dictate the design?

Absolutely. I mean that's why every golf course is different. Every golf course is a different piece of art. It's the site that dictates a golf course and, of course, the design. You know that desert sites – they are very different. For example, the new Sharjah Golf course – it has incredible dunes and we are obviously going to keep those dunes.

In Central and Eastern Europe we follow the lie of the land. It's very interesting. If you design a golf

course and it looks artificial on a particular site, then we have failed. It must look natural. It should look like as if it has always been there.

What are the challenges you faced while designing a golf course in the desert, in particular?

Actually, there is a big myth. People think that growing grass in the desert is very tough. This is not true at all. If you have water it is a lot easier to grow grass in the desert and maintain it than it is in central Europe, for example. Here the weather is always the same – it's a bit hotter or a bit colder. In Europe they have to deal with snow, rain, cold and heat sometimes during the same day and so maintaining

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Jebel Ali Golf Resort & Spa

grass in Central Europe is a lot more difficult than in sand. Here, you control everything artificially. Also, the grass we use is different.

On an average one million gallons of water is used to maintain a desert course?

We have water-saving products. We need around 600,000 gallons a day. I mean we have products that save water. That one million is the figure you would use if you did not have any water saving products.

So, you mean to say there will not be any water shortage problems in the future?

In Dubai, they have huge sewage

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effluent plants – they are very clever. Recycled water for irrigation is ideal.

Of all the courses you have designed, which are your favourites?

There are two courses that I like the most. The one that I have just finished and the one that I have just started! You know the old courses

like Augusta – they are great sites. Look at Hyderabad – Boulder Hills is an incredible site. If you have a good architect then you can create wonders on a site. The same way, if you have an inexperienced architect, he could mess up the site. Everything starts off from the site.

If you have a flat site like the one in Abu Dhabi, you need a lot of imagination to incorporate natural features. But in a site like Boulder Hills – it's simply fantastic what you can do with a site like that. It will be the best golf course in India. There is no doubt about that at all.

An ideal location for the next EMAAR-MGF Indian Masters?

Certainly. ■

