

# PETER HARRADINE

/ THE STATE OF THE GAME /  
The outspoken course architect talks  
exclusively to Golf Digest

BY ROBBIE GREENFIELD

> In this modern era of celebrity golf course designers, elaborate real estate projects and marketing clichés, Peter Harradine calls himself the ‘anti-hero’ of golf course design.

We’re sat drinking coffee on the terrace overlooking the Jebel Ali Golf Resort & Spa’s picturesque marina, the site of Harradine’s very first golf course project in Dubai when it opened back in 1998. Harradine is renowned for his staunch opposition to so-called ‘signature designers’ (famous pros who he claims ‘sign, but don’t design’ courses). He also resents an alleged corporate greed that is destroying the growth of the game at grass roots level, perpetrated by arguably his favourite bugbear of all: ‘Marketing bullsh\*t’.

“I suppose I’ve made a name for myself, and in truth it doesn’t seem to have done me any harm,” he says with a wide smile. “I was at a KPMG conference a few years back and after a while one guy stood up and said: ‘Harradine’s always against marketing; he’s against this, he’s against that. But for the last three hours we’ve been talking about nothing other than Harradine! If I knew who his marketing manager was I’d probably offer him a job!’”

If Harradine enjoys assuming the role of a mischievously placed pot bunker when it comes to the progress of golf’s corporate machine, it’s his impressive body of design work spanning three continents that does even more of the talking. Recent years have witnessed a Middle East invasion of the signature design projects he so vehemently objects to, but so far none have been able to topple his own Abu Dhabi Golf Club National Course from its perch as the twice voted for ‘best course in the Middle East’.

Then there is the less proclaimed (but in his opinion even better) Doha Golf Club, a course that European Tour professionals rate as one of the best they play all year, not to mention Jebel Ali’s terrific resort course and his recent additions at Al Hamra and the Sharjah Golf & Shooting Club.

Harradine’s Middle East collection accounts for just a small percentage of the vast array of varied courses that he’s designed worldwide, from the mountains of his native Switzerland to the boulder fields of Hyderabad, India. Not bad going for an architect who still grumbles

that ‘professional signatories get all the best sites!’

At 63 years of age and with 160 courses already under his belt, Harradine has no plans of slowing down just yet, although he admits that his business has been badly hit by the global recession. His three current

Dubai projects (including two in Dubailand) have all been placed on hold, as has a new Sharjah course he claims will be ‘easily the best in the Middle East - it’s just a fantastic site’.

Meanwhile, his first venture into Oman is still in the planning stages, and there is no telling yet when any of these projects will be completed. But even if not all of them go ahead, Harradine’s place as the most significant contributor to golf courses in the Middle East is secure. “Golf in general has taken an incredible dive,” he says. One year ago I had trouble finding good people. Now I’m getting up to 10 CVs per week.” >

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## Peter Harradine lifts the lid on golf course design

### How much of your job involves being on site?

Like everything else these days, there's always a lot of paperwork. The glamorous side to being a golf course architect - the first visits to untouched sites and the subsequent supervision - is five percent of the job. The rest is laborious technical stuff. All those minute details about the soils, the irrigation, the fertilisers, the grasses and the seeds actually make designing a golf course 95 percent technical. A lot of people think that golf course architecture is just about crafting these great sites into beautiful golf courses. I wish that were true!

### How do you go about establishing the routing of a new course? Are your hands always tied by the developer?

It depends whether the project is a standalone golf course (which I love) or real estate driven. Most of these real estate courses are not designed for golfers, they're designed to sell houses. We always try to consider the golfers anyway, but often the developer is on our case, demanding more frontage. On real estate projects, most of the time we don't have that much choice on the routing. A lot of the urban architects we work with use templates for the golf course but you can't do that. You can't computerise a golf course, it's an individual entity and each one is unique. But on standalone courses, especially on interesting sites, we can be a lot more creative. Those are the jobs I really look forward to. The one we've just started in Sharjah (which unfortunately has been postponed) was going to be the best golf course in the Middle East. That site is fantastic.

### What were the sites in Doha and Abu Dhabi like to work on?

The National [in Abu Dhabi] was built on the worst site I've ever worked on; the course is completely artificial. But with Doha those natural rocks gave me a starting point. My supervisor told me I was mad to leave the rock there on the 16th hole but to me that makes the hole. You've got to use the natural features and make them fit because you can never compete with nature. With real estate courses, you can't really use doglegs. Most real estate courses are pretty straight because you're trying to get as much frontage as possible. A great site with enough money and enough land is a dream these days.

### Do you try to impose your style on every site?

I try not to impose anything, but I suppose everyone has his own style. There are some things I would never do. I'm a traditionalist, I hate fancy gimmicks. I try to make maintenance friendly courses and create drama by using rocks and elevation changes. I like big lakes and big bunkers. You won't see any rollercoaster greens on my courses. To read a green with subtle undulations is a lot more difficult than hitting a putt on a rollercoaster green, which is pure guesswork. I try to make golf courses easy to play and difficult to score. Al Hamra is a classic example of that. And I always try to consider the 36-handicapper.

### What course here are you most proud of?

Well Abu Dhabi is always voted as the best, but for me, Doha is better. Maybe it's because I had a site there. Nobody interfered in Doha at all, the guy at the municipality said: "Peter, I don't even know what a golf ball looks like, just make me look good!" I just hope it stays as the only standalone golf course in

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the Middle East. It doesn't need real estate. It gets a great field each year for the Qatar Masters and the pros love that course. A lot of them tell me it's one of their favourite courses on the entire tour. Paul Casey told me he preferred Abu Dhabi and I replied, 'of course you do, you've won it twice!'

### What are the problems facing golf in the Middle East?

I think one of the big problems (and the Middle East is by no means alone here) is that because every course is designed to sell real estate, we're not increasing the golfing population. We're losing grass roots golf. In the UAE there's around 1,000 golfers without a club, but they can't afford the membership fees. I think a municipal course would do very well out here and the bottom line

is that it would be good for golfers. Sweden is a great example of a country that has built a lot of standalone golf courses - and just look at how many wonderful players it produces as a result.

### Which other golf architects do you admire?

I think Robert Trent Jones Snr is the father of modern golf course architecture. He began the landscaping side of golf design and he was really the first to go into the technical side of architecture. The old guys used to walk the site and just feel it out, but then again they had the pick of the best spots back then. It wasn't a very scientific profession until the likes of Trent Jones came along. I admired Desmond Muirhead's courage. He had an outlandishness that was a bit like Picasso. And there are a lot of architects that nobody has ever heard of who do a wonderful job. But they don't get the PR hype that the professional signatories get.

### Was it Jack Nicklaus who started the trend of pros putting their names to courses?

Ironically in the old days it was the pros who designed the golf courses - but they were mainly club pros too. My father started off as a golf pro, but he later became a course architect. Trent Jones Snr came up with the term 'signature golf course' and I think now that phrase gets misinterpreted. All the professional signatories do is sign a plan. Jack Nicklaus has turned signing golf courses into a marketing art form.

### What are your favourite golf courses around the world?

Cypress Point was built on a site that you can only dream of now. Pebble Beach is great sure, but Cypress is the ultimate. It's very difficult to judge an old course because so many things have changed since they were designed. It's like trying to compare a vintage car to the latest model. There are a lot of old courses in Europe that I love. As for St Andrews [Old Course], if we designed that course today we'd get crucified! It breaks every safety rule in the book, double greens and crisscrossing everywhere. But it's very hard to judge the classics because they are what they are. As far as I'm concerned there are always two courses I love the most: the one I just finished and the one I'm about to start! ■

Peter Harradine has designed (and co-designed) over 160 courses in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Some of his best work is pictured opposite. 01 Doha Golf Club, Qatar 02 Kazan Golf Club, Russia 03 Boulder Hills, India 04 Golf Club Zell am See, Austria 05 Golf Club Arosa, Switzerland 06 Sahara Golf & Country Club, Kuwait 07 Golf Club Asiago, Italy 08 Abu Dhabi Golf Club, United Arab Emirates



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