



## THE UAE MUST STOP BUILDING MORE COURSES

Designer **Peter Harradine** tells **Ben Jacobs** UAE golf clubs must shut before new ones open

**D**oha Golf Club Club designer Peter Harradine thinks the UAE has too many courses. The 66-year-old told *Middle East Golfer* the region will close more clubs than it opens over the next 10 years.

"There are enough courses out here already," said Harradine, who also designed widely reputed tracks at Abu Dhabi, Al Hamra, Jebel Ali and Sharjah. "We don't need any more. Too many are currently empty and struggling to make ends meet, so why keep building?"

"It takes a lot of cash to maintain the courses out here, mostly due to water costs. I don't think any track was intentionally created to make a loss, so if certain ones continue to end in the red year after year they should eventually call it quits. Such a decision must be taken by the owners or the people who pay for the facility in question."

Outspoken Harradine believes UAE golf is fuelled by commercial greed and is also far too intrinsically linked to the property market. Despite designing five championship courses (all with strong commercial ties) in the Middle East region alone (and seven more on the PGA Tour), he would much prefer to see smaller, family-friendly resorts

emerge which he believes better cater to the average hacker.

"I have always pushed for what I call 'reasonable' golf courses," said Harradine, who first came to the UAE in 1976. "By this, I mean ones which aren't championship courses. There are too many championship courses in the UAE. I agree that a developing golf destination needs one or two, because they want to alert themselves to the European or PGA Tour, but every single new club does not require one.

"Championship courses cost a lot to maintain, especially in the UAE. Personally, I have always been a great believer in nine-hole courses. My Jebel Ali one is a perfect example. Despite being a 'standalone' resort, the golf club makes a profit, which is no mean feat in this economic climate. It is a simple, more or less pay and play facility. That kind of model is very sustainable."

Swiss-born Harradine believes clubs in the region foster an irrational desire to erect expensive hotels or showy clubhouses (like the iconic falcon-shaped one at his own Abu Dhabi Golf Club) or build aesthetically unique holes purely in order to stand out. Such a philosophy places quantity above quality and substantially raises the price of a round in the

process. The average cost for 18 holes in the UAE is currently a staggering AED 500 and Harradine thus feels customers aren't getting value for money.

"We have basically taken the fun out of golf because everyone, including my professional signatory colleagues, wants to produce a monument," he said. "We need to stop trying to build the No.1 golf course on the planet and start targeting the bulk of the market. However, the problem is we live in a world driven by marketing bullsh\*t and that is why golf is in such a mess. We have forgotten the punter: the 36-handicapper who definitely doesn't want to stumble around a championship course because it will take him 12 shots just to reach the green.

"Another issue is most golfers never get a true idea of the best places to play because all everyone talks about is the longest par-three, -four or -five in the UAE or the most contoured greens. People rarely mention the good old-fashioned enjoyable courses. They just harp on about the monuments. What they don't tell you is a lot of these so-called signature holes are often gimmicky, while the clubs that house them are usually empty or broke. Jebel Ali and Sharjah rarely get a word of coverage, but they are both successful."



Jebel Ali's short, par-four fifth is widely seen as one of the top holes in the UAE

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Harradine clearly has a soft spot for Jebel Ali, where a round is only AED 195. His favourite hole there is the 311-yard, par-four fifth, which is defined by a rusty old gate. He brazenly refused to remove it because he felt it gave the course a distinct personality and was also reflective of the history of the land. Harradine was also asked to destroy the huge rock in the centre of the 306-yard, par-four 16th at his beloved Doha Golf Club, but again fervently fought to protect the natural topography.

“My design philosophy is to alter the lie of the land as little as possible,” said Harradine, who jokes he was born with a golf ball in his mouth! “Of course, sometimes you have to. The site for Abu Dhabi Golf Club, for instance, lacked undulation. It was basically just a white salt flat, so I had to give it some shape. I could do what I wanted there. However, the natural features of the land should usually dictate matters.

“Golf courses do tend to have certain ‘no-nos’, like not starting or ending with a par-three, but I will gladly break the rules if the topography or the land available suggests it is the right thing to do. In my view, it is a cardinal sin to sacrifice the existing topography for some kind of theoretical sequence that must be followed.”

As a result, despite listing Abu Dhabi Golf Club as one of his proudest achievements, Harradine has had a few bust-ups with the Abu Dhabi Golf Championship host, which arguably showcases what is both right and wrong with golf in the region. The 7,334-yard, par-72 track is one of the most popular and challenging in the

region, but does it necessarily appeal to casual golfers? In its formative years, Harradine was certainly unhappy that some of his short par-threes were lengthened to add needless complexity, and was equally disappointed by the European Tour's decision to insert some extra fairway bunkers.

“All changes at Abu Dhabi are now made with my input, and have been for the past few years,” said Harradine, who was a proficient five-handicapper before a back injury stopped him from playing. “However, in 2006, they made some changes without consulting me and I was against most of them. A lot of the bunkers they put in were absolutely useless.”

Unlike many high-profile American designers, Harradine is clearly not a big fan of sand. His Jebel Ali-baby has just one fairway bunker and he only placed it for aesthetics. Conversely, Abu Dhabi has 90, including five new fairway bunkers (3, 5, 6, 13, 17), with yet another expected on the 18th by the time the 2012 Desert Swing gets underway in mid-January. Harradine believes shipping in less sand could substantially lower costs in the region, as would educating golfers about proper etiquette.

“There are viable ways of designing a golf course to dramatically reduce costs,” he said. “Maintenance is a big issue. A normal 18-hole golf course in Europe has about six or seven staff. Here there are hundreds of them. It is crazy. Perhaps we need to teach our golfers





The recession-ravaged Tiger Woods Dubai was indefinitely suspended in February

better etiquette so they rake the bunkers themselves. I am not a great bunker fan since I prefer to work with trees. We certainly don't need 10 hectares of them on a course."

If costs can be slashed it might just encourage more UAE-based golfers to consider picking up a club instead of a cricket bat. Although initiatives like the MENA Tour obviously help, cheap golf is surely the secret to unearthing the first Emirati European Tour pro.

"It is all a question of mathematics," said Harradine, whose son Michael finished as the top amateur at the MENA Tour Championship in Al Ain. "The more Emiratis that play, the better chance you have of getting at least one on the professional circuit. The problem is there really aren't that many people out on the fairways. Golf is the greatest game in the world. To me, it is practically a religion, yet it has a bad image. It is simply too expensive. The notion that every Emirati is rich is a fallacy. I know quite a few Emiratis who would love to try golf but it is just too pricey. Personally, I would consider subsidising them. That is the quickest route to getting a local pro."

If the UAE is genuinely serious about widening golf's appeal beyond the wealthy middle-class businessman, it must stop focusing on glitzy trappings and start adopting a cheap and cheerful approach. Jebel Ali, which has a holiday atmosphere, does deserve some long overdue credit, while Harradine's newly revamped Meydan Golf Club, which will open early next year, is another no-nonsense track that should appeal to the kind of demographic that fancies golf without the stuffiness. Nonetheless, in such a congested market, even the clubs with the right ethos struggle to break even; the only way to change this is to dilute the market by shutting some courses. Harradine is right: in 10 years, there probably will be more courses closed than new ones opened.

## ON-GOING PROJECTS



### 1. AUSTRIA

Zell-am See Golf Club

### 2. EGYPT

Al Marassi Golf Club  
Uptown Cairo

### 3. GEORGIA

Tblisi Golf Club

### 4. GERMANY

Bielefelder Golf Club  
Golfanlage Wilkendorf  
Vilsbiburg Golf Club

### 5. INDIA

Hill Springs Golf Club

### 6. ITALY

Cino Golf Club  
Golf di Cortina d'Ampezzo

### 7. MOROCCO

Qued Chbika Golf Club

### 8. OMAN

Jebel Sifah Golf Club

### 9. QATAR

Dukhan Golf Club

### 10. RUSSIA

Kazan Golf & Country Club

### 11. SERBIA

Surcin Golf Club

### 12. SUDAN

Almogran Golf Club

### 13. SWITZERLAND

Patriziale Ascona Golf Club  
Blumisberg Golf Club  
Dietschiberg Golf Club  
Meggen Golf Club  
Nuolen Golf Club  
Selva Golf Club

### 14. TUNISIA

Djerba Golf Club  
Tunis Sports City

### 15. UKRAINE

Stugna Golf Club

### 16. UAE

Ain Madhab Golf Club  
Meydan Golf Club  
Abu Dhabi Golf Club



# A QUICK HARRADINE!

**Q What is the history behind Harradine Golf?**

**A** My step-grandfather, Albert Hockey, re-modelled his first course in 1920 and my father Don followed suit in 1929, when Harradine Golf was officially founded. He was a five-handicapper for 25 years. He even beat Max Faulkner in a match play event on our home course in Lugano, two years after Max won the 1951 Open! I caught the bug from him and have since designed over 160 courses in the Middle East, Europe, Africa and Asia.

**Q How badly did the recession hit you?**

**A** We had 47 projects before the crash. We lost 30 of them in six months. Before the recession, our priorities changed every day. You had to scream and shout just to get the job done. Even during that mess though, we didn't dare say no to anyone. If you turn down work during good times, clients will remember and then they won't call you when things calm down. I don't reject work – unless I am asked to build a solitary bunker in Timbuktu!

**Q What projects are you currently working on?**

**A** We are doing a lot of work in Eastern Europe. We also have projects in Africa, Italy and Switzerland. I must say I am pretty happy because during the crazy times I didn't have time to monitor and check all of my projects as much as I wanted to. Now I am back to a working normal routine and have plenty of time to go on site. In a perverse way, I am quite happy the financial crisis happened. We were out of control beforehand.



Peter inspects Meydan Golf Club, which is due to open next year

**Q Are you in favour of golfers putting their names on courses?**

**A** No! I think you have to look at facts. I have been around golf courses all my life. The guys on the Tour have no time to meticulously look over plans. The retired ones do, and a few have a real eye for it, but they don't have the same training as a qualified designer. The developers are idiots just to hand someone like Tiger Woods

\$55.4 million to slap his name on a course like Tiger Woods Dubai. You can't blame Tiger, or any other professional golfer, for taking that kind of money. One thing I simply won't do is design a course then allow someone else to put their name on it. That is an insult to my profession. I don't mind a big name golfer associated with or endorsing my course, but I have lost jobs in the past because I have refused to let a pro take credit for my hard work.

**Q Should the Abu Dhabi Golf Championship rotate between Abu Dhabi Golf Club, Yas Links and Saadiyat?**

**A** I am not worried if the tournament moves elsewhere. If the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority wants to promote itself as a golf destination, then they should rotate it – as long as it eventually returns to The National! I am certainly not against doing two or three years at Abu Dhabi, then the same at Yas and Saadiyat. They briefly alternated the Desert Classic between the Majlis and Dubai Creek and that worked well. Apart from logistics, there is no reason why they couldn't do the same with the Abu Dhabi Golf Championship.

**Q Could the UAE host a Presidents Cup?**

**A** Why not? At the end of the day, it all boils down to finance. If you can stump up the cash you can pretty much get anything. The Presidents Cup would be a real coup for the UAE and I am sure a number of clubs would be very keen to host it.

**Q What is the favourite course that you have designed?**

**A** There are two courses I really like: the one I have just finished and the one I am about to start! Everyone thinks his own track is the best. I have seen some really bad courses, but the members always believe their local club is the best thing since the wheel. Jebel Ali and Sharjah are arguably the most sustainable tracks in the region, while I firmly believe Doha is the best course in the Middle East. I was blessed with a good site and exploited the rock formations on the back-nine to create a fair challenge for golfers of all standards.

**Q Where would you like to build a course?**

**A** I would dearly love to build something in South America. I have also never had a course by the sea. That is a dream of mine, but sadly I seem to get all the rubbish sites!



McIlroy is one of a number of pro golfers who reckons Doha rocks!

**Q Who is your dream fourball?**

**A** My dad Don, my son Michael and Rory McIlroy. Rory is my golf idol. He has bottomless potential and I would relish playing 18 holes with him on my Doha track! **golfer**

