

# Testing the best

Architect Rees Jones tells *GCA* that the future of golf will require a new kind of championship course



The term ‘championship course’ is used reverently in golf circles and most golf clubs aspire to such a distinction. For more than four decades, American architect Rees Jones (known to many as the ‘Open Doctor’) has been designing courses that are of the utmost championship quality. He has worked on numerous famed courses, which collectively have hosted 23 major championships, five Ryder Cups, as well as other premiere events.

This coming year, 13 courses originally designed or renovated by Jones will be in the limelight as venues for: 2016 PGA Championship (Baltusrol Golf Club - Lower Course), 2016 Ryder Cup (Hazeltine National Golf Club), six PGA Tour events including the annual hosting of the Tour Championship (East Lake Golf Club), 2016 Women’s PGA Championship (Sahalee Country Club), Swinging Skirts LPGA Classic (Lake Merced Golf Club) and the 2016 US Amateur (Oakland Hills Country Club).

“The way we view championship golf courses is changing,” says Jones. “It’s no longer just about distance. True, there are plenty of professionals who now drive the ball over 300 yards, but there are also still plenty of tour players who don’t. Making courses even longer is not the sole solution, even if it’s desirable for other reasons.”

Jones believes course designers today need to be innovative; they need to figure out ways to make golf courses challenging but not overly favouring the longest hitters. “Even today, when courses tip-out at 7,500-7,600 yards, the entirety of that length is not really intended to be used on the same day,” he says. “It’s to also give flexibility in course setup. Mixing up the setup with shorter holes as well as long ones is a good thing, giving balance between longer and shorter hitters.”

Jones knows the style of a course is often dictated by the landform, but when it comes to designing green complexes he believes it requires both a meticulous mind, and one that is creative, yet in subtle ways.

“In the past, we used to think that front hole locations were more difficult when they were protected by hazards,” he says.

“But today, players hit the ball so high and they impart so much spin, getting the ball to those locations is not so difficult for them unless the green is elevated with a slope in front like many greens at Augusta or the Valley of Sin in front of the eighteenth green at St Andrews.

“Often, it is hole locations at the back or the corners of the greens that are most difficult because players want to fly the ball, even beyond the flag, and spin it back. This encourages the pros to use driver off the tee, even though this gives the player less of a chance to hit the fairway from which they can spin the ball. An errant shot over the green will be harder to recover from because most greens are pitched from back to front. We’ve seen this often. Tournament setup folks have recognised it too.”

According to Jones, today’s golf ball technology also comes into play. “These days, golf balls are constructed to allow stopping shots on a dime, so even when greens are firm the players can still aim at flags from the fairway,” he says. “This makes creatively crafted green contours more important for championship play than ever before. But of course, championship organisers generally want extremely fast greens and so you have to have pinnable areas that are flatter than in the past. So, in short, we are concentrating more on the transition areas in greens.”

Jones reminds us that hazards also need to be reevaluated, and the rough is more significant now, than in years prior. It is, he notes, significant that the deep, small revetted pot bunkers of the Open Championship rota courses still pose a challenge, even to the best players, and thus, they define their playing strategy around them, as was the case with Tiger Woods during his two Open wins at St Andrews, in which he executed his game in such a way as to avoid the bunkers above all.

“The bunker game of today’s tour professional is so proficient that normal sand hazards don’t typically affect them, especially given the level of preparation of sand bunkers and the quality of the sand today – but water does,” says Jones, “That’s



The South Course at Torrey Pines in California was totally remodelled by Rees Jones in advance of the 2008 U.S. Open. It will host the championship again in 2021

why Augusta is so challenging, because of the water on the back nine.” This, Jones points out, is another area where the needs of the professionals and the average golfer may clash; everyday players may enjoy the visual appeal of water-laden courses (and the challenge of taking on a water hazard) but they are also paying for their own golf balls, and losing ball after ball to water can get old fast.

Even among championship organisers, there are different mindsets about what constitutes an appropriate test. Week after week Tour courses are typically set up to allow players to shoot at pins and make birdies, often for excitement value. Traditionally, the PGA and the USGA prefer a more severe examination.

Rees Jones says even those organisations have realised that targeting a winning score close to par is a futile exercise. “I think we’ve gotten away from the par mindset,” Jones said. “We can’t control it. If we get

rain before the event, the greens are like targets, and the players will score low. You want the best players to prevail. I think we’re going to see a lot more double-digit, under-par scores winning majors, and I don’t think the USGA, the PGA or the R&A are really concerned about that. The priority is to test the player’s ability with every shot in golf. The pros don’t have to hit long approach shots much anymore, and that’s a pity – throughout the game’s history the approach shot with a wood or a long iron to a well-protected green has been regarded as the supreme test for the best players. So that’s why par fives which the pros will almost always seek to reach in two, or even drivable par fours, have become increasingly important in today’s championship golf. Converting par fives into long par fours is something which the USGA and the PGA have done quite often, and so, as long as you don’t overdo it, I think it’s a good idea. We want the

players to have to hit every club in the bag, not just a parade of drivers and very short irons, and really, that is one of a few ways in which we can accomplish that strategy.”

In closing, Jones reminds us his prescription for design success also includes a sense of balance. “The balance of a course is important too,” he said. “Today, we typically have four to six really good birdie opportunities, six swing holes and six really challenging holes, where a par is a great score. We are looking for balance, for holes that give the very best players a good chance to gain an advantage over the rest of the field. In order for a championship course to be compelling, it will always include a variety of captivating holes.” **GCA**

Rees Jones established his golf design business in 1974 and has designed or redesigned more than 170 courses in his career