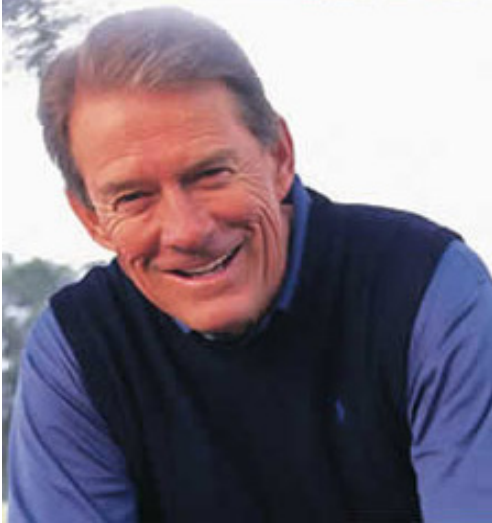


Expert Opinion

We Need to Stop Flat-Lining Golf Courses:



Jim Hardy walks the walk. Hardy played the PGA Tour during the 1970s, before learning the course architecture trade via a project management career with the likes of Jack Nicklaus, Arthur Hills and Tom Fazio. At the same time, Hardy developed a reputation that continues to this day as one of golf's top swing gurus; Golf Digest lists him among its Top 50 teachers and his current students include Paul Azinger, Scott McCarron, Tom Pernice Jr., Duffy Waldorf and his design partner, PGA Tour veteran Peter Jacobsen.

Hardy and Jacobsen formed Houston-based Jacobsen Hardy Golf Course Design in the early 1990s and together they're responsible for more than 15 original designs, including Redstone Golf Club (Dec/Jan 2003), host to the PGA Tour's Shell Houston Open, and Moorpark Country Club (Oct/Nov 2003), which was recently named one of GOLF Magazine's "Top 10 New Courses You Can Play" for 2003. Few course designers come at the craft with Hardy's unique background and perspective. His experience gives him strong feelings about architecture topics, and he shared his vocal views on golf course design with The Golf Insider:

As course architects, Peter Jacobsen and I have our share of pet peeves and right there at the head of the list is something we call "flat-lining." We see this a great deal in

our course renovation work: Well meaning green committees identify holes that play too hard, so they tweak them to make them play easier; or they identify holes that play too easy and make them harder. Pretty soon all the holes play to the same level of difficulty and you've "flat-lined" the patient.

As you may have guessed, Peter and I are dead set against flat-lining, as it pertains to both course difficulty and appearance.

In terms of how a course plays, we prefer a combination of defensive (difficult) and offensive (potential for birdie/eagle) holes.

Difficult holes from start to finish — like all work and no play — make a golf course dull. When I first played Firestone, it was clear to me the course had been flat-lined.

Think about the Masters vs. the U.S. Open and the type of golf those tournament courses invariably produce. The Open is all about defended par on each and every hole, at all costs. If an Open layout happens to include a short par-5, the USGA makes it a par-4. This better defends par, of course, but the resulting golf can be something of a death march. At Augusta, Amen Corner is so-called for a reason; holes 10-12 are very difficult. But 13 and 15 are redemption, or offensive, holes. This combination of offensive and defensive golf is exciting — for touring professionals and amateurs alike — so that's the sort of course design we practice at Jacobsen Hardy. You can see the results at places like Redstone GC, which plays host to the Shell Houston Open this month (April 22-25). Redstone's finishing trio, all par-4s, measure 474, 475 and 448-yards from the Tour Tees. That's our Amen Corner right there. But we designed fairly redemptive holes at 14 and 15, a short par-4 and short par-5. For both the Tour player and the average golfer, holes 10-13 play to a standard of par, but you need to score on 14 and 15 because the last three are tough.

This aversion to flat-lining applies to the look of our golf courses, as well. How many times, for example, have you heard architects boast about the "overall" style and/or design theme of a new golf course? Well, Peter and I don't worship the conventional wisdom.

We purposely design our courses without a single unifying style, much less a consistent set of design characteristics.

At most of the new layouts I see today, once I've played two holes I pretty much know what the green settings and bunker styles will be for the next 16 holes. We don't do that. We consciously vary the visual and playing experience on our courses. We have greens absolutely dead on grade; we have some up the in the air; we have some with backstop mounding and some without.

Last year we unveiled an 18-hole semi-private layout north of Los Angeles called Moorpark CC. I defy anyone to play that golf course and pick out a unifying theme. For example, we consciously varied the appearance and depth of our bunkers: circles and ovals, capes and bays, peanuts and free-form waste-area bunkers. Some are so deep you have to wedge out; some you can putt out of. Bunkers should work within the context of each golf hole, and every hole we design is different. That's part of the reason Moorpark has been so well received.

Peter and I are sensitive to flat-lining because we see it a lot on Tour. In an effort to keep scores from getting "too low", redemption holes are toughened, fairways are narrowed and pins are tucked. Pretty soon, the course is flat-lined and that's bad enough. What's really scary is that many architects today are designing new golf courses the same way, without the variety — in challenge and visual appeal — that makes golf so enjoyable.