

Jacobsen sounds call for populist golf

PGA Tour player, contending new courses are too hard and too expensive, designs layouts for the common man

BY STEVE CAMERON
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As a PGA Tour player, Peter Jacobsen has spent years entertaining fans, schmoozing corporate sponsors, fronting a rock band and generally cementing his persona as golf's resident humorist.

There is nothing even remotely light-hearted, however, about Jacobsen the course architect. In fact, he's more than willing to challenge golf's hierarchy by loudly criticizing the direction of his sport.

Jacobsen believes that while America might be awash in new golf courses — nearly 2,300 will have opened for business between 1999 and the end of this year — most of these layouts are too difficult, too expensive and basically designed to be elitist showpieces.

"The result of this trend toward building more and more courses for very rich people and very good players is that newer players find the game costs too much and that it's too hard," he said.

"At a time when our sport is struggling to develop as many new players as the ones we're losing ... we're tossing out all these courses that are so difficult that a guy who's just getting excited over the game plays three or four times, finds he's frustrated because it's so hard, and just quits.

"There's no excuse for that. Hundreds and hundreds more courses just for scratch players doesn't help anybody."

Statistics support Jacobsen's contention. The National Golf Foundation reports that rounds of golf are up less than 2 percent over the last two years, despite the availability of so many new courses.

Jacobsen is a partner in the course design business with longtime friend and former PGA Tour player Jim Hardy. The two met in 1984 and discovered over the years that their feelings about course architecture ran along similar paths.

Jacobsen-Hardy Design Co. has done six courses — beginning with the Oregon Golf Club outside Portland — and is working on six more.

"Peter sees courses through the eyes of a man who's won on the tour," Hardy said, "but he also has a great gift for understanding how those same courses will play



Jacobsen-Hardy Design Co. created Black Horse, a 36-hole facility near Houston, for the relatively modest sum of \$8 million.

for higher handicappers, for kids and women, and he has a marvelous feel for coming up with courses that anyone can enjoy."

Economics plays a huge role in this equation, obviously: When land costs run too high, a new course almost has to be the centerpiece of a high-end housing development or a very expensive daily-fee operation just to make fiscal sense.

"Somehow, we have to find affordable land and build courses suitable to every level

of golfer," said Jacobsen, whose company designed a 36-hole, daily-fee complex called Black Horse just outside Houston for a relatively inexpensive \$8 million.

"If you stay in that \$6-8 million cost range, the savings can be passed on to golfers in terms of the fees," Jacobsen said. "That's the only way to keep the game healthy, but I'm afraid there are too many people who don't seem to care about that."

Alice Dye, a PGA board member who has spent 30 years alongside her husband, designing famous golf courses for Pete Dye Inc., agrees with Jacobsen's grim assessment of this upscale venue problem — but doesn't believe course architects can do much about it.

"It's not the designers," Alice Dye said. "We can only build what clients want. The problem is that guys come in and they want their place to be named among the top 100 new courses, or they're dreaming about being named 'Best New Course' and all of that."

"There definitely is a trend toward making courses harder. It's like the size of houses. People just want to tear down a perfectly good house and build a bigger, more spectacular one."

Like Jacobsen, Alice Dye bemoans this trend toward catering merely to outstanding players. She also appreciates the irony of it, since some well-known Pete Dye

courses — TPC at Sawgrass, for instance — seem to embody the tough-and-tougher mentality.

"It's funny, because we're actually making our courses easier," said Alice Dye. "We don't put in forced carries — over water or marshes, whatever — except on par-3 holes, where the different tee boxes give every player a good chance to execute the shot."

"But you know what? Even golfers who can't handle these really hard courses still want to play them. They can afford it, I guess, so they just go out to the back tees and it's a disaster. The trend isn't very comforting."

The Dyes say they'll keep looking for clients who want affordable golf courses. They just finished doing a course in Culver, Ind., (Mystic Hills) for less than \$1 million.

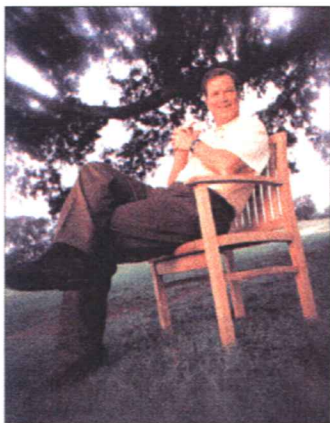
"It's a good golf course," Alice Dye said. "It's not some rock pile. And you can play it on a weekday for \$20, including a cart."

Is there any logical formula for repeating the success Jacobsen-Hardy has enjoyed at Black Horse, or that the Dyes managed to execute at Mystic Hills?

"Only if you can find affordable land," said Mark Voss, design associate for another big-name course architect, Robert Trent Jones II. "That just sets the tone, and land in desirable locations is going to be very expensive."

"But if we're all going to keep talking about growing the game, we've got to come up with some way to provide some less expensive courses. It's either that, or you just give up and admit, 'Golf is not a cheap sport.'"

Never, insists Jacobsen. "It's such a great game, and one of the great joys of golf is that I can play with my wife and kids, each of us with completely different abilities, and still have a wonderful experience together," he said. "I refuse to believe that designers and their clients are going to turn away from that concept completely. We can't. We simply can't."



Peter Jacobsen: "It's such a great game."