

Green approach

The golf industry must trumpet its record of good environmental stewardship more loudly, says double Major champion Nick Price

Regular readers will know we believe golf is unfairly criticised for its environmental record. It's true golf needs to improve, but the game is not the chemical-hungry water-guzzling monster it is often painted to be. That's a view shared by Nick Price, the Zimbabwean professional and golf course designer. Price, whose firm has built courses all over the world, reckons the game needs to shout louder about green issues. "There are countless studies and examples of how beneficial golf courses are," he says. "Many courses use grey water for irrigation as a golf course is a wonderful way of filtering water. But getting the point across requires education by golf associations, industry and all who have a vested interest. It also requires the support of the Tour which has the opportunity to educate with the exposure it gets through the media."

Developing a better image for golf around the world – especially in countries that have little history with the game – is important for its future growth. And Price – widely travelled both as player and designer – is enthusiastic about the prospects for expansion. "The golf boom has come late to Asia, especially China," he says. "The size of the country, its large population and diverse countryside make the scope of golf course development hard to grasp. But just look at the amount of good golfers that have started coming out of Korea and other parts of Asia following their golf boom in the early 90s."

Price's firm has played a part in this development, designing courses in his home region of southern Africa and many other far-flung lands. But the role of touring professionals in the course design business is controversial, especially among professional golf course architects, who often feel that pros contribute little other than the marketing value of their name to design projects. Price – who takes an alternative approach, limiting himself to two or three projects at once, so he can be more deeply involved – naturally has a slightly different view of the player-designer's role. "I don't know that I speak for all touring professionals but everybody involved in this industry has a different feel for land, a different philosophy, a different ability to play or understand the game," he says. "Speaking for myself I believe that as an international player who

has played multiple times in the four corners of the world, I have a feel for a piece of property and also understand the effects of climatic conditions, recognising sun angles and how to deal with that and wind direction in; all of which are instrumental in the strategy, design and construction of a golf course.

"Understanding what shots one can demand from golfers is very important," he continues. "With the changes in the game I wonder how some of the younger guys who venture into this business in the years ahead will look at strategy? I grew up in an era where, if you wanted to play well, you had to understand strategy and how to get the most out of a course. But today it's hit it as far as you can and then worry about the next shot later. Hogan always said you hit a shot with the next shot in mind. Understanding strategy and the shots that players of any ability are capable of hitting is a key to designing enjoyable golf courses. For over 25 years I have played every week with average golfers in pro-ams and I can't tell you how many times I've played courses where it's absolutely clear that the architect thought golfers are better than they actually are. In

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their excitement to create a dramatic look, they don't understand that the shots they are demanding are virtually impossible – for amateurs and sometimes even professionals! I don't understand how that makes for an enjoyable round of golf."

Yet with improvements in equipment and the incredible standard of today's top players, making courses difficult for the touring professionals is a tough challenge. One approach is to lengthen holes, narrow fairways by growing deep rough and to mow greens lower and lower, increasing their speed way beyond that intended by the original designers. Price is not a fan of this approach. "Frequently the hardest holes on a golf course are the shortest," he says. "So adding length does not always achieve the goals of the tournament committee. There is a better way to challenge good golfers – or any golfers for that matter. I believe you can do it by being creative with variety in the design and set up of the course. If you have shorter holes offering a great balance of risk and reward, such as reachable par fours and five, plus some longer holes that demand greater accuracy, and a variety of features around green complexes requiring different recovery shots; you are better able to test a player's entire game – including the mental aspect. Just look at the reachable fourteenth hole at Torrey Pines in this year's US Open. How much fun was it watching players decide whether to go for it or lay up? But when a course is just long and narrow you eliminate many quality players from competing. And it becomes boring and one-dimensional." **GCA**

