

HOW TO MASTER THE GREENS: THE A-Z OF PUTTING

THE CUT

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AUSTRALIA'S BIGGEST

ANGLES OF ATTACK

AMERICAN COURSE ARCHITECTS SCHMIDT-CURLEY GOLF DESIGN HAVE WORKED ON 150 LAYOUTS AROUND THE WORLD AND WON MANY AWARDS. BRIAN CURLEY SPOKE EXCLUSIVELY TO *THE CUT* ABOUT WHAT GOES INTO CREATING A GREAT GOLF EXPERIENCE.

WORDS Thomas Hyde

The 11th hole at Leader's Peak Course, Stone Forest, Kunming, China, a drivable par-4 set amid a forest of karst rock formations.



Brian Curley, who cofounded the firm Schmidt-Curley Golf Design with Lee Schmidt in 1997, grew up in Pebble Beach, California. His interest in golf course architecture sprang from playing, caddying and working at local courses, some of them among the most inspiring layouts in the world for a young man aiming to pursue a career in the business.

After graduating from the School of Architecture at California Polytechnic San Luis Obispo, Curley worked for the Landmark Golf Company, where he specialised in course design and construction. There he met Lee Schmidt, the company's vice-president of design and construction, whose work had included PGA West and La Quinta Hotel & Resort.

Schmidt left Landmark and spent seven years with Nicklaus Design and before long Curley, too, left the company to work with Pete Dye. In time, the two men met up again and formed Schmidt-Curley. That was some 35 years ago and they've never looked back.

The Schmidt-Curley team have worked on more than 150 golf courses worldwide. In 2011, *Golf Magazine* named them 'Golf Course Architects of the Year' and their many other accolades include being voted top golf course architects in Asia for seven straight years.

Their extensive portfolio includes the original 12 courses at Mission Hills Shenzhen, north of Hong Kong, and all 10 courses at Missions Hills Haikou, on Hainan Island, where their Blackstone Course, with its lush fairways and greens laid out across a dramatic volcanic landscape, is one for the bucket list.

A REVIEW IN THE *WALL STREET JOURNAL* OF DAVID SOWELL'S BOOK *THE MASTERS*, CARRIED THE HEADLINE, 'WHAT MAKES A GREAT COURSE GREAT'. IT WAS A STATEMENT, NOT A QUESTION AND THERE'S NO DOUBT AUGUSTA NATIONAL IS AMONG THE MOST FAMOUS GOLF COURSES IN THE WORLD. YET, POSING IT AS A QUESTION AND FROM A CONTEMPORARY DESIGN POINT OF VIEW, APART FROM ITS ICONIC STATUS, DO YOU BELIEVE AUGUSTA NATIONAL IS A GREAT GOLF COURSE?

Absolutely! Yes. I feel it should be a great example for all designs, where playability off the tee is what drives the design and enjoyability of a round. Despite its new length, the course still plays with enough difficulty to challenge the best players. I prefer more natural courses and surroundings, but even when designing those we try to incorporate that approach. As a tournament venue, Augusta National is fantastic for its potential for unparalleled changes to the leaderboard on the back nine.

THE GREAT PETE DYE MENTORED YOU. WHAT'S ONE ESSENTIAL LESSON YOU LEARNED FROM HIM?

Probably the most I took from those days was the emphasis on angles of attack. This is very evident on his courses like TPC Sawgrass, where stark, contrasting lines of long bunkers create carries that reward aggressive play. That same philosophy is seen on natural courses where fairways are set at angles and the landing areas tighten up the more you move deeper down the fairway. These features are made more dramatic by sets of tees that can be moved back to create stronger angles and forced carries.

OF THE CURRENT PROJECTS LISTED ON YOUR WEBSITE, FOUR ARE IN VIETNAM. WHAT'S YOUR TAKE ON THE GROWTH OF GOLF THERE?

I think there will continue to be growth, but it certainly will not have the same scale we've seen in China. Vietnam golf courses go through a stronger planning approval process and because of that there are only a few developers that dominate the market. If I have a concern, it's that building golf courses to attract tourism will slow down as the marketplace plays catch-up, but the Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City markets will continue to expand as the player base expands, which it is doing.

ONE OF YOUR PROJECTS IN VIETNAM IS IN RUGGED-LOOKING TERRAIN NEAR HA NAM. TO LOOK AT THAT LANDSCAPE UNTOUCHED, THE QUESTION THAT COMES TO MIND IS: WHERE DOES THE VISUALISATION OF A GOLF COURSE EVEN BEGIN? AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS? TOPOGRAPHICAL MAPS?

Believe it or not, that area is easy to digest because of the dramatic differences between flat areas and vertical mountains. Initial site visits in environments that are covered in thick jungle are very difficult to walk, so we use basic topographic information.

FROM TOP: The par-5 8th hole at the Ocean Dunes Course, FLC Quang Binh, Vietnam, with a green set into a wicked complex of man-made dunes; 3rd hole at Marriott's Shadow Ridge course, Palm Desert, California, a reachable par-4 for anyone who can carry the right cross-bunkers.

The 'island' green on the 3rd hole at Leader's Peak Course, Stone Mountain. Golfers arrive at the green via a pathway through surrounding rock pinnacles.

YOUR WORK OFTEN INVOLVES REMODELLING EXISTING COURSES. WHAT, TYPICALLY, IS THE PROBLEM WITH A GOLF COURSE OR A SINGLE HOLE THAT REQUIRES IT TO BE REBUILT?

Issues with existing courses that require remodelling are varied, but beyond conditioning issues like changes in turf grass or levelling of tees, most remodels focus on updating of the design and will focus on features like bunkering. Some courses are looking for ways to save maintenance cost while improving the experience, but I would say most courses we've been involved with are clubs that see a need to stay relevant in the marketplace and are looking for design upgrades that reflect the latest trends.

IN DESCRIBING YOUR WORK, YOU USE THE PHRASE 'ECONOMICALLY SUCCESSFUL'. WHAT ARE THE FUNDAMENTALS THAT MAKE A GOLF COURSE SUCCESSFUL?

The key to success is always the ability to drive revenue. This can be in public green fees or in membership dues, but the issue all golf courses face is that they have set operational costs that cannot be adjusted to reflect fewer rounds being played. Unlike a restaurant that may order less food and reduce staff in slower periods, the golf course is a living thing that must be maintained every day, regardless of the amount of play. With that in mind, the designer needs to understand the marketplace and how a course can be successfully maintained where initial construction costs can be successfully debt-serviced.

YOUR DESIGNS OF COURSES HOSTING PROFESSIONAL TOURNAMENTS ACCOUNT FOR WHAT'S DESCRIBED AS 'PLAYER-GALLERY CIRCULATION STUDIES'. WHAT ARE THEY AND, TYPICALLY, WHAT DO YOU LEARN FROM THEM?

In years past, courses hosted events and felt that just setting up some ropes to separate players and the gallery was all you needed. Often you would see players walking along the same cart paths as the crowds to get to the next tee. But times have changed, to say the least. Now, the demands of hosting an event are extremely complicated, because, as golf is being played, a tremendous operation goes into servicing the needs of the event. As a designer, you must be aware of how a world-class event can move along without duress while still accommodating the needs of the gallery. A basic feature of that is allowing unencumbered player movement that's separate from the movement of the gallery but where both are engaged without being a distraction to the players.

MUCH OF YOUR WORK IS IN CHINA. IF WE'VE GOT OUR FACTS RIGHT, YOUR FIRM WAS INVOLVED IN EACH OF THE ORIGINAL 12 COURSES AT MISSION HILLS, THAT GRAND RESORT COMPLEX NORTH OF HONG KONG AND THE CAMPUS OF GOLF COURSES AT MISSION HILLS ON HAINAN ISLAND. HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED THERE?

I was in Shenzhen following the 1995 World Cup of Golf because the organiser of that event was a friend. I was introduced to the right people and soon after that we began work on the Faldo Course. As well, we had identified China as a new frontier and a serious player in that marketplace, so we gave that project our full attention. For that, I am forever indebted to the original chairman of the development, Dr David Chu.



"THE SITE WAS DIFFICULT TO WALK, AS THE ROCK FORMATIONS ARE VERY SHARP AND THE AREAS IN BETWEEN WERE COVERED BY DENSE BUSH AND THORNY THICKETS. SPIDER WEBS WITH HUGE, FEARSOME-LOOKING SPIDERS."

BELOW: The reachable par-5 15th hole on the Olazabal Course at Mission Hills Dongguan, China. The hole skirts a huge lake and contains more than 20 bunkers.



Risk and reward – the par-5 double dogleg 16th hole at Southern Dunes Golf Club, Phoenix, Arizona.



ABOVE: Hole 18 on the Lava Fields Course, Mission Hills Haikou, China, a par-5 finisher with multiple angles of attack.

AT MISSION HILLS, YOU WORKED IN COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIAR NAMES – FALDO, OLAZABAL, SORENSTAM, NORMAN – AND IT'S A PRACTICE YOU'VE CONTINUE TO EMPLOY. WHAT KINDS OF TIPS, DO YOU GET FROM THE PROS THAT YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE ACCOUNTED FOR YOURSELF?

It's funny how people think players want difficult courses with tough tee shots and multi-tiered greens and so on, but that is not the case. Most touring pros prefer a relatively straightforward design where, as Tiger Woods has said, "everything is in front of you". When I did the Blackstone course at Mission Hills, Hainan Island, I worked with a PGA Tour team who advised me not to make the greens extreme, because word would get out and

players would be less likely to commit to an event. The bottom line is that they do not want to be embarrassed, so severe and difficult designs rarely get good reviews.

ONE OF YOUR MOST STUNNING COURSES IN CHINA IS STONE FOREST INTERNATIONAL. WITH ALL THE QUARRY-LIKE STONE PINNACLES THE COURSE PLAYS THROUGH, WAS THAT AN ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT LANDSCAPE TO WORK WITH?

The site was difficult to walk, as the rock formations are very sharp and the areas in between were covered by dense bush and thorny thickets. Spider webs with huge, fearsome-looking spiders. The site was also heavily treed – eucalypts mainly – so

we could not see many long views. But once the trees were gone, there were a lot of open areas that accommodated golf holes and very little rock work was needed. I scoured the site to find the best outcrops to serve as backdrops and find the best connections with the least effort or disruption of vegetation. The result is quite stunning and most of all the course is very playable.

SOUTHERN DUNES, IN ARIZONA, IS ONE OF THE MOST EYE-POPPING PUBLIC COURSES ANYWHERE. IS DESIGNING A PUBLIC COURSE DIFFERENT FROM A PRIVATE COURSE? Good question. Yes. Public courses need to be easy to digest in a player's first round of play – that is, free of things that would create any conflicts with other players. Private courses

can incorporate more odd and idiosyncratic features that not only grow on you over time but are key to the character of the course. I know of fantastic private courses that would be disasters to operate as a daily fee course.

FINALLY, YOU HAVE YET TO BUILD A GOLF COURSE IN NEW ZEALAND OR AUSTRALIA. ANY PLANS?

I would love to be given the opportunity. In fact, I am at that point in my career where I would likely take on a deal where I not only offered my services and greatest attention but would be open to being based in that location for the duration of construction to ensure the greatest results and to become fully engaged in the life and culture of a new locale. □