
An audience with the King

Toby Ingleton spoke to Arnold Palmer about golf design, China, St Andrews and Pebble Beach

Modern golf starts with Arnold Palmer. His emergence as the best player in the world in the middle Fifties, into a new world of televised golf, plus his commercial partnership with Mark McCormack, was the key to the game's growth from a recreation for America's elite into a mass participation sport whose top players made big money. Along with his friends and rivals Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player, he pioneered signature course design and shaped the way the golf industry now looks. Turning eighty last September, he remains a powerful figure in the game. *GCA* was delighted to have an exclusive opportunity to talk to Arnold about golf, design and the future of the game.

The Open is back at St Andrews, where you made your Open debut, and for many golf architects it's a place that has a huge influence on them. Can you tell me a little bit about what the Old Course at St Andrews means to you and its influence on your design thinking?

When I first arrived I was surprised, but as I learned more about the Old Course and the playability of it I realised what a great golf course and how much fun it is. You really have to know what you're doing and it probably requires more strategic thinking than most courses. That means keeping the ball away from the hazards. And the fact that you can have a great golf course such as St Andrews without having the extensive length that we are consistently adding to many new courses.



A little extra care goes into everything we do



Those principles about playability and learning the strategy: are those things you take into your courses?

If you just know everything about a golf course the first time you play it, it's not much fun. It's more fun to have the challenge of playing the golf course a few times and learning where to play the ball and the shots that are necessary. For example, I think Oakmont is a golf course that requires some knowledge to play well – where to put the ball off the tee and so forth.

When you think back over your career, which courses stick out most greatly in your mind, and is it because of where you were or what you achieved when you were there?

Of course I love St Andrews and I think (and I'm not just mentioning these because these are courses that I've won the Open on!) but Birkdale, Troon, Muirfield are all golf courses that require extensive thought and I think that makes a golf course greater. Plus the fact that these golf courses have been in the same locale and the same position for many years and are still recognised as the best golf courses in the world.

You did some work at Pebble Beach in advance of this year's US Open?

Pebble Beach, being the great golf course it is, you really don't want to change it too much. We added a few things but the golf course is still Pebble Beach. On number three, something I'd wanted to do for years was to put sand traps on the bank, so as you look at the hole and the dogleg, you're looking straight into the face of a bunch of traps.

So you have that fear from the tee factor?

Right. You know the one thing you don't want to do is go through the fairway. Then you've got to think about the dogleg and getting into the best position you can. On the sixth hole there were traps up the left side, so what we have done there is we've just made the people more aware of those sand traps and forced them to go to the right, to the ocean. The objective was to

make the hole play a little longer, so if players wanted to chance a tee shot that would get them in a position to go for the green in two, they could, but it's risky.

Bringing the coast edge into play a bit more perhaps?

Right.

You built the first golf course in China and are still working there today. There appears to be a massive appetite for golf in that country now.

I think people are not quite aware of the magnitude of golf in China. It is growing rapidly. But that started happening many years ago with the Chinese industry in golf sending young groups to places like Japan and the United States to learn about the game and be equipped to handle golf as it is now arriving in China. They have forecast this in their business early on.

You're working in 30 countries, Are there any in particular you think are perfectly suited for golf?

I think one of the hot prospects for golf will be Brazil. Elsewhere in South and Central America I think we'll start seeing some golf courses that might be surprising. But Brazil is presently a very hot commodity.

Obviously the Olympic factor is a big thing there. I'm sure that would be a course that you would love to design?

We are working very hard to obtain the rights to do that golf course. We're spending a lot of effort and time working with the Brazilians. But no-one knows for sure who or what is going to happen in the Olympic design.

But they'll have to get a decision made pretty soon and I think there's a general understanding that it will need to be a new course.

I think it would yes. I don't think that they currently have a facility that would be able to handle the Olympics.

Would you say there is an Arnold Palmer style?

I have always tried not to have a style that is immediately recognised. I like to think we are doing courses that are different in style and structure, and that we are constantly doing new things in the design of our courses to give players an opportunity to try different golf shots. Not necessarily difficult, but something that is fun to play.

Obviously you have a number of architects in your company. How do you work with them and influence them?

One of the things that I do is I set policy for what we want to do as far as design is concerned. And I convey that to all of my architects. But at the same time I would like to think I let my guys have the opportunity to present what they might think and to discuss it.

How do today's courses compare with older ones?

We're building more natural drainage into golf courses, rather than expensive subterranean drainage. I think we've become more conscious of the fact that there is still the possibility of doing a good job with push-up greens, surface drainage, the sort of thing the architects of the past did. And the other thing is to reduce the cost of maintenance by creating less areas that have to be constantly maintained.

You have said in the past you would like to see the golf ball slowed down, but there seems to be a lot of resistance to that among the people who run the game. Do you think we'll ever see a slower golf ball or will we always be trying to add length to golf courses?

I'm against having to lengthen courses any more than we already are doing. My objective is still to slow the golf ball down. The stature of the players today, and the greater strength we see: that's going to continue. That leaves us with just one alternative and that is slowing the golf ball down. **GCA**

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The Golf Club at Kunming (left) in China is set to open this year, more than 25 since Palmer created China's first mainland course, Chung Shan Hot Springs. Palmer and team worked on Pebble Beach (right) in advance of this year's U.S. Open.

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