

BY MIKE NUZZO

From left: Don Mahaffey, Project Manager and Superintendent; Mike Nuzzo, Author and Architect; and Bobby O, farmer and excavator



Hand held GPS with display of the golf course plans enables ready set-out of the golf features

a golf course built for

I will never forget the phone call for the rest of my life. Halfway into the conversation I asked if this was going to be a public or private golf course. The response was private, very private, a personal golf course - oh my. Very eager to see the nearby site, I was unable to visit for two very long weeks. I was, however, free to ponder how to design, build and maintain a golf course if it was just for me. I was excited.

At our first meeting I was prepared to pitch designing a course as inexpensively as possible, it may have even been a pasture golf course. Fortunately that wasn't the intention. The directions were simple: I don't want to lose a ball, especially in long grass, make it challenging and as nice as possible. It took some time to fully realise the opportunity and true potential for both the client and me.

Before starting the routing, there was another issue to tackle. Ideally the golfer will be immersed in the course, and for me, every visible outside element detracts from the game. I vividly recall using a ball washer as a target on one of the finest holes in the world. It helped me hit a great shot but left an aftertaste. It has been a goal of mine to avoid as many visual distractions as possible: housing, grass lines, cart paths, irrigation satellites, tee markers, pump station, rakes and ball washers especially. Even the irrigation lake was fair game, until it became an integral part of the setting.

How many constraints usually surround a new course? How many had I navigated already? No membership drives, no tee sheets, no real estate, one lot view, no committees, no containment mounding, no lush surrounds, no competition with other courses and no market research. I was free to focus my attention on site features, contours, width, uniqueness, challenge, minimising the walk, hole lengths, bunker severity and overall strategy. Not everyone had to like it, just my client and his dogs.

Initially my client requested a driving range. I asked him why would you need to practice when you could just play? I showed him how there would be plenty of room to hit balls, and the first hole could be a surrogate. It is short and wide and looks like a range, with a few exceptions. The Texas gulf coastal winds are also a major asset to the site and I've seen it topple trees when it changes bearing because they were only sturdy in one direction. Utilising the wind, each subsequent hole redirects either subtly or significantly, adding to the variation of each shot and enabling the golfer to engross themselves further into the game.

There are two regions within the course, one characterised by a ranch with majestic live oaks, while the meandering creek that bisects the property defines the other. The intent was to intertwine the regions throughout the round, as opposed to having distinct separate portions of the course. The last major site attribute is an abundance of mined sand for capping.

There was another significant element that facilitated old-fashioned ideals. It was more remarkable than the original directions of wide and fun - there was no schedule. Finish when it made the most sense. Although this would be an advantage like no other, it wasn't long before it got more challenging when the client requested to not use a golf contractor and finish as much as possible in-house. We were very fortunate that an experienced superintendent, Don Mahaffey, was interested and it was his dream to work building courses. He now had his chance as he was brought on as project manager and superintendent before we had even moved any dirt. As the responsible man on site every day, Don had ideas and contributions that have been essential to the quality of every aspect of the course.

Our next hurdle was solved when we found a small team of local farmers who were between harvests and had several large scrapers available to excavate our irrigation lake. They were given some general plans, but were largely guided in the field. Time really allowed for character to take form.



Mike Nuzzo's plan for the private golf course showing the irrigation lake, stream and the homestead

If we had started by building the holes that weren't impacted by the lake excavation, they would have wound up quite differently, as the more time we spent on site, the more the course evolved and the more we all liked what was simmering. While we did have detailed plans, they were only used sparingly to leave room for improvisation. This past autumn we had a huge influx of talent and brought an "A" grade shaper, Jacob Cope, onto the job full time and have been creating great shapes ever since.

Another one of my druthers was to have just one type of short grass blanket the entire course, allowing the landforms to flow continuously. For efficient maintenance we chose two dwarf Bermuda grasses, one for the fairways and one for the greens and surrounds. Aesthetically it will minimise mowing lines and highlight the rumpled fairways. The finish crew had no idea where the greens started or ended, and we won't know the limits until we start mowing. From a playability standpoint, the client favoured a course that played fast and was resourcefully maintained, even if it meant being a little tan at times - it didn't need to be a verdant, lush park.

Decoders have been a big part of meeting our goals by eliminating the visual distraction of irrigation satellite boxes and reducing cost. The installation has also been safer and simpler.

On the shortest one-shotter, there is a considerable challenge that separates the player from the hole. A wedge hole often plays surrounded by abrupt trouble, like Troon's Postage Stamp or the 17th at Sawgrass. Here there is only a lone bunker deceptively short of the green. The primary defence is a severe repelling slope, should the player hit the wrong spot. The green is small and a separate target is tiny, but rewarding, if you are within its margins. The green complexes are varied, without containment, undulated and there is often a largely preferred line of attack. On many holes it depends on the flag location.

With a judicious use of 'slurping' bunkers (Texan for 'gathering' bunkers - Editor) throughout the course, these are often severe - small and deep with irregular bottoms and no rough separating the sand from fairway.

The client's cart has the only rake on the course. A quick brush with the walker's foot is the only daily maintenance. Fortunately, a mechanical rake won't fit in most of them.

A further illustration of our freedom is the 10th hole. It is a bunker-free 300 yards (270 metres) long and almost 80 yards (70 metres) wide. There are several elements defending the hole. The direct line, into the prevailing wind, plays hard along the edge of the lake, and the green is less and less receptive the further away you play from the lake. The fairway also imparts the highest frequency of interesting lies. Par lies somewhere between three and four, but I bet some days a five will be an accomplishment.

By design, many tees surround and seamlessly integrate into the green complex. The collar, fairway and tees will all be the same height of cut and the marker is a single embedded cup-sized stone. The constant change of direction and mostly level terrain has enabled this approach. The course can play long or short and has extensive teeing options, usually taking advantage of key hazards.

One of our design intents was long continuous views across the golf course. We had not anticipated how long they would look until we finished. Other benefits of being so private will be mowing greens in the afternoon when they are dry, irrigating only when necessary, using large gang mowers, and aerating when the client is away. Some fun perks that will lead to a significant home field advantage are a red and white shrimp float in place of a flag, the stymie, match play, winner's choice tees, hickory matches and 'unpinnable' pin locations. While I was writing this article, our client made his first hole-in-one at the local 'muni' - I wonder how long it will take him to make one at his own course? We hope to give others a chance too and also to show off the golf, by invitation of course.

Mike Nuzzo is an American golf course architect based in Houston, Texas, who has a particular interest in applying digital design and rendering methods, along with GPS construction technology, to golf course architecture.