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# STAR FOR THE COURSE

Gil Hanse, a golf course designer with a willingness to get down in the dirt, is in demand for his loving restorations of storied layouts

BY JEFF WILLIAMS • PORTRAIT BY MARY BETH KOETH

Last June, Gil Hanse was full on with his restoration of the Lower Course of Baltusrol Golf Club, the storied track in the leafy New Jersey suburbs designed by the iconic A.W. Tillinghast.

Hanse called a meeting of the club's master-plan committee, not in one of the comfy and opulent function rooms of the muscular clubhouse, but at the eighth green. Here he would present his ideas about restoring the green, doing so in the environment in which he is most comfortable: the dirt.

"Being outside in the dust and the dirt feels like being alive," says Hanse. "You are in contact with the dirt. You are in the field with the guys, there is such camaraderie and a bonding. I can't imagine building golf courses without that feeling."





Gil Hanse in Florida, near a bulldozer he will employ to shape a course. Opposite, the 11th green at Baltusrol's Lower Course, a notable Hanse restoration.



The committee members trundled out to the green site in carts, excited to learn what Hanse was proposing after his team had come across a picture of the final match between George Von Elm and Bobby Jones in the 1926 U.S. Amateur that showed a green that was different from what Hanse originally proposed.

"It was refreshing to have somebody that was so comfortable and good at what he does that he didn't feel the need to always [end up in] the conference room explaining what was going on. He was comfortable having us all come out there," says member Rick Shea, former president of Baltusrol. "We all took golf carts out there, we held the update meeting on the eighth green in the middle of the pandemic, one of those things you never forget."

It seems that whatever Gil Hanse touches these days is not to be forgotten. The Philadelphia-based architect, with partner Jim Wagner, has been at the forefront of American golf course design for the past decade. As well as restoring some of the nation's greatest championship tracks by the game's all-time great designers, they have created fun and interesting courses as original designs, including the 2016 Olympic course in Rio de Janeiro.

Hanse's firm has restored Tillinghast's Winged Foot West, site of the 2020 U.S. Open; William Flynn's The Country Club in suburban Boston, site of the 2022 U.S. Open; George Thomas' Los Angeles Country Club North Course, site of the 2023 U.S. Open;



Hanse (right) prefers the dirt to the boardroom when he's designing a course.

Donald Ross' South Course at the Oakland Hills Country Club and Hugh Wilson's East Course at Merion, both sites of numerous major championships. It's a star-studded roster.

But Hanse has no desire to be the star of that show. At a media gathering to celebrate the reopening of Baltusrol's Lower Course, Hanse made one thing perfectly clear: "I don't want my name on the scorecard," he says. "This is an A.W. Tillinghast course. We were charged to bring it back as much as possible to Tillinghast's original vision and that's what we tried to do."

The 58-year-old combines a laid-back attitude with an upright passion for designing golf courses, working with the land, getting his boots muddy. He cuts an imposing figure at 6-foot-5, but there's never a sense he is talking down to you. His voice is soft, but sure, his opinions pointed, but not sharp. There

is a major comfort level in his presence.

"Beyond just being a wonderful human being, he's just the salt of the earth," says Mike Davis, recently retired CEO of the United States Golf Association, who counts Hanse as a friend as well as a consultant on U.S. Open venues. "For somebody in a business that tends to have larger egos, he really is such a humble person. He's so thoughtful about who the previous architect was, in the case of Los Angeles Country Club it was his strong suggestion that they really try to bring back and showcase the George Thomas design.

"Whether it's William Flynn's Country Club or Merion with Hugh Wilson, he's good about not trying to put a Gil Hanse stamp on it. He's been so good at restorations and renovations because he's so thoughtful and selfless in these cases. That's why he's on such a great run. Those of us who know him, who are friends with him, are so happy for him. He's on that run not just because he's a nice person, but because his work is so stellar."

And so, too, are his original designs. The Boston Golf Club, Streamsong Black in Florida, Castle Stuart in Scotland, Ohoopie Match Club in Georgia, Pinehurst No. 4 in North Carolina, to name a few, have all garnered rave reviews.

The LACC North Course project in 2009 got him on the big-league restoration train. The Olympic Course in Rio, done in conjunction with former LPGA player Amy Alcott, gave him international cachet.

"He has a wonderful eye for golf courses and golf course architecture," says Davis, getting to the heart of Hanse's talent. "There are people in the field who are mechanically very competent. Gil uses science, but he's an artist, too. You are born with that or you don't have it . . . He doesn't draw a golf course on a topographical map and hand it to a contractor. His firm, they maybe aren't doing the giant dirt work, but they are doing the finish work, the bunkers, the putting green contours, the subtleties around the greens."

These are words of praise for a man who went to college to study political science, and through meeting the right people and being in the right place at the right time, ended up being an eminent golf course architect. He grew up in Babylon, a town on the South Shore of New York's Long Island, 40 odd miles to the east of Manhattan. His grandfather, Gilbert C. Hanse, had been mayor of the village, and also the only golfer in the family, being a member of the Southward Ho Country Club.

"My grandfather took me out to play golf. I idolized him. I just loved the golf landscape," says Hanse. "I went off to school and studied political science and history at the University of Denver thinking I was going to go into politics. It was one of those degrees that you go 'Now what do I do?'"

"So I wound up going to graduate school at Cornell in the City and Regional Planning Department, figuring I would do more parks and recreation planning. I took a landscape architecture class and met a gentleman there, Tom Griswold, who subsequently went on to work for Tom Fazio. He was applying his landscape architecture to be a golf course architect. That was the aha moment. I went home to [girlfriend and subsequent wife] Tracey and she said 'You can do this, this is a path of study to become a golf course architect.' With her encouragement I





Hanse's restored version of the fourth green at Baltusrol's Lower Course.

transferred into the landscape architecture program at Cornell and set about going full steam forward."

So passionate and accomplished in his studies was Hanse that he received Cornell's Dreer Award, given to a student in landscape architecture, which in Hanse's case was golf course design. This enabled him to hook up with top English architect Fred Hawtree, spend time in St Andrews, Scotland, and to travel around the United Kingdom looking at as many golf courses as possible. Hanse figures he got to see 110 courses that had been fashioned out of the "Olde Sod."

In his landscape architecture classes he would sometimes be kidded about using that knowledge to build golf courses. But he was certain he was on the right path. "I love the challenge of trying to replicate nature. Embellish what nature has given us. The greens complexes rarely are perfectly natural. You have to dig them out. That notion of trying to create and shape something that either embellishes what is natural or, as Alistar MacKenzie said, to build something that is indistinguishable from nature. I find that challenge stimulating."

And one that requires a lot of assistance, input and just plain hard work from the team he has assembled. It starts with design partner Jim Wagner, and design associates Kevin Murphy and Ben Hillard, and includes the Cavemen: Hanse's golf course shaping team of Neil Cameron, Shaymus Maley, Brent Vest, Josh McFadden, Tanner Guyer, Reece Haspell, Brett Brennan and Robert Nelson.

Hanse cites as heavy influencers highly accomplished architect Tom Doak, who gave him his first full-time job, the team of Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore and contemporaries David Kidd

and Mike Devries. "Then about five years ago, I just realized, you know what, the best golf architect in the world and the guy that's had the best and biggest influence on me is the guy that's sitting next to me for 25 years. Jim Wagner is just an incredible talent."

They met in the mid '90s when Hanse was working for Doak on the Stonewall project near Philadelphia and Wagner was on the greens-keeping staff at the Wilmington Country Club. "My role is along the lines of the COO, Gil would be the CEO," says Wagner. "Being able to play off one another, be able to say 'What about this, it's cool, it's fun.' I know these are all buzz words but it's about being comfortable with each other. Nothing is off the table. It's kind of like a Grateful Dead jam band where you are taking one person's lead, this harmony between the two of us. We know we are going to take it somewhere, but we're not really sure where it's going and how it's going to get there."

How Hanse has gotten here is a long, winding, fascinating journey, and spending time in Scotland were key to its start. There, he met Graeme Lennie, the longtime pro at the Crail Golfing Society, a short drive from St Andrews. They became friends and stayed in touch. After working for Tom Doak for four years, Hanse was looking to go out on his own. It so happened that the Crail Society, which had a course laid out by Old Tom Morris in 1894, was looking to build a second one. Through Lennie's contacts and endorsement, Hanse got the job and built Craighead Links, his first solo effort. He says it "launched our company."

With three projects in the Philadelphia area beginning in 1999, Hanse's ball was starting to roll. (He's an 11.6 handicap index, when he gets the rare opportunity to roll his ball.) Los Angeles Country Club kicked his career forward to a whole





Hanse restored historic Winged Foot, site of the 2020 U.S. Open.

passel of restoration work, especially in the New York area, with Quaker Ridge, Fishers Island and Sleepy Hollow to name just a few. That work, along with his jobs on major venues, led to even more projects: Les Bordes, in France; Ban Rakat Club Ballyshear Golf Links, in Thailand; PGA Frisco East course at the new PGA of America headquarters, in Texas. The man is on the move.

Baltusrol is his latest work on a major course, and it opened to members in May. His approach there was the same as it has been to all the historic venues—find out what the original designer intended and try to interpret those intentions to the modern game. Baltusrol had undergone significant renovations by the ubiquitous American architect Robert Trent Jones after World War II and further manipulations by his son Rees toward the end of the 20th Century.

“There were two layers of context how we ended up with Gil,” says Baltusrol’s Shea. “As the club evolved there was a recognition among those people who were particularly sensitive about being able to distinguish the original architect work that had been done, that we might not look as much like a Tillinghast course as one would hope. The second context, through the research process, it became clear to us that it would be a multi-level project. We had an irrigation system that needed to be updated. We needed to understand what a modern version of an A.W. Tillinghast Course would look like, morphed into the sympathetic restoration that was done in conjunction creating the infrastructure that would allow [superintendent] Greg Boring to maintain the restored golf course. We were walking the golf course with Gil and it became clear he was in the business of restoring the great architects. We had seen the work he had done at Winged Foot. From a scope of project standpoint and from a leadership chemistry standpoint it all came together.”

This complex process was driven by simple philosophy for Hanse: “I said listen, if you are looking for somebody who is only going to be interested in putting Tillinghast back into the 36-hole complex here, then we would love to have a conversation with you going forward,” says Hanse. “What that means to us is doing a significant amount of research to understand what he did

specifically at Baltusrol. I don’t care what he did at Ridgewood, or Winged Foot or other places we’ve been lucky enough to work at. I think that message resonated with the committee I met with. I think the next day we were offered the commission to do the plans for both golf courses. Our master plan process is that we work with a small committee; can’t overemphasize small.”

Baltusrol had a vast library of historical records and photographs that Hanse, Wagner and his associates pored over, focusing on the green forms and the surrounding bunkers. “If you look at all the photographic evidence, Tillinghast had the greens set up and bunkers were down,” says Hanse. “So there was a lot of focus on restoring that relationship between the greens and the greenside bunkers. Then there was big focus on expanding the greens back out, recapturing lost hole locations.”

Probably the most memorable and dangerous hole on Baltusrol Lower is the long, par-3 fourth over a pond. Jones had lengthened the hole in preparation for the 1954 U.S. Open to the consternation of some of the membership. The story goes that on a visit to the club he asked some members to accompany him to the lengthened tee where upon he made a smart swing with a 4-iron, the ball diving into the hole for an ace. Jones turned to the members and deemed the hole “imminently fair.”

It might have been fair, but it was no longer Tillinghast’s hole. Of all the work that Hanse put in at Baltusrol, redoing the bunker surroundings on the fourth was special. And it took digging in the dirt to figure it out.

“The one that stays in my memory and is the most iconic hole there is the fourth green,” says Hanse. “Looking at the old photographs and trying to get the bunker lines behind the green to fit. There’s three lines to a bunker. There’s the line in front of the bunker whatever the landform is, the second line is how does the bunker meet the grass and the third line is the top edge of the bunker.

“[We] focused on the first line and how the green sat in front of it, that sweeping lower line. What we came to realize was that the right side of the green actually sat much lower and there was much less dirt in front of the bunker, a thin line of the green in front of the bunker. I was working with one of my associates shoveling away and we found that old soil there and it was like wow, let’s chase that line, and by the time we cut that all away and stood back on the tee, we saw the bunker in almost its exact correlation from the green edge to the bunker. That was pretty exciting and having it happen on the most famous hole there, that was a lot of fun.”

Bringing fun to the game is central to Hanse’s work, which seems to have struck a chord with Baltusrol’s members. “He brought the right weight, the right authority and delivered it in a way that gave us the confidence that he would deliver something that the members would be extremely happy with,” says Shea. “Rarely do things like this work out in life.”

Despite his success, Hanse still gets out in the dirt as often as he can, as he is pretty handy with a shovel or a bulldozer. “It’s been a great ride,” he says with both pride and humility, “and I’m hopeful it keeps going for a long, long time.” ❖

*Jeff Williams is a contributing editor to CIGAR AFICIONADO.*