



Architect Spotlight:

Brian Silva and the Defense of Par

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BEVERLY, MA -- In his book, "Golf by Design", Robert Trent Jones, Jr. says "...the architect assumes the role of defender against the golfer attacking the course."

Brian Silva, Golf World's Golf Course Architect of the Year for 1999, reluctantly disagrees. He is reluctant because of his admiration and respect for "Bobby", as he calls him.

It's "Bobby" when he talks about Robert Trent Jones, Jr., "Pete" for Pete Dye and "Ross" for Donald Ross, but Geoff Cornish is always "Mr. Cornish".

Silva knew what he wanted to do very early. His vision took shape as he rode on his father's lap while the elder Silva drove a Caterpillar. John Silva was prominent in golf course construction, shaping fairways, bunkers and greens for several New England architects, including Geoffrey Cornish.

Later Brian drove the Caterpillar himself, shaping mounds and tiered green-like structures in his back yard.

He asked Mr. Cornish what he should do to become a golf course architect, and Mr. Cornish told him to study turf grasses, so he got an Associate Degree in Turf Management from the Stockbridge School of Agriculture, a Bachelors in Landscape Architecture, and a Masters in Plant and Soil Sciences from the University of Massachusetts. He then taught Agronomy for three years at Lake City Community College in Florida before returning to Massachusetts with the USGA in their Green Section's Northeast Region. Cornish surprised nearly everyone by bringing Silva on as a partner in 1983.

Cornish's judgment was soon justified. Silva's first original eighteen-hole design, The Captains GC in Brewster, MA, was selected by Golf Digest as the Best New Public Course of 1985.

So it's "Mr. Cornish".

"Bobby wasn't wrong," he says, "but if ninety-nine percent of your concern is defending par, you can. The easiest thing in the world is to build a hard golf course."

"I think for a while there in the 80's," he says, "designers were probably working too hard to defend par." For one thing, he says, golf holes were too narrow. And he includes his own.

"If you go to some of my courses in the '80s," he says, "and then you go to Waverly Oaks [located in Plymouth, MA and named Top Ten You Can Play in 1999 by Golf Magazine], you say 'this isn't the same guy!' At the 80's courses, the average golfer is almost scared to hit driver, but at Waverly Oaks, there are fairways 60 yards wide."



The greater width is not just to improve playability.

"What the 40 or 50 yard-wide fairways reemphasize in golf, is something that was lost for a while," he says. "There is usually a preferred side to come in to a hole, and wide fairways demand more strategic thinking from the golfer than just quaking in his pants and asking 'Can I get it into this corridor of trees?' Even the PGA tournaments lose it when the fairways are 25 yards wide, because that kind of golf really is devoid of strategy. It's just like the tire commercial says, 'wider is better'".

Much as we golfers would like to think so, strategic shot value is only one of the factors that the golf course architect needs to keep in mind. There are literally hundreds of others.

"The levels of golf course design is what I find fascinating," Silva says. "You have to keep so many things in mind at once. There's the regulation issues with wetlands, there's finding the right orientation of pars, the collection of pars. Do you want the out of bounds on the slice side or the hook side? Do you want the golfers looking into the sun in the late afternoon? There are all those characteristics."

Also, he says, "I have to keep construction costs in line, but I want to keep the future maintenance costs low".

An architect cannot allow any of those considerations to get in the way of his most important objective, though. "I would say our goal is to find the six, eight, ten, or 12 natural holes on the site," he says.

Once those holes are found, Silva concentrates on the beauty of the hole.

"All those other kinds of considerations take precedence," he says, "but I still want the holes to be aesthetically attractive, so that they capture the golfer's imagination. I think a lot of golfers see the hole as a pretty composition."

But what about those strategic shotmaking values?

"Not everyone agrees on what golf strategy is," he says, "or what shot values are. There is a percentage of people who don't have any idea what that stuff is, so I'd better catch them with the aesthetics of it first. Finally, I do have to build in enough of the subtleties, different shot requirements, and shot values that only a small percentage of golfers will ever notice. But those will determine the enduring greatness of the golf course."

He quickly changes the word "greatness" to "goodness", as if "greatness" was too big a term to apply to something he designed himself.

Silva points out that there really are very few hard and fast rules for golf course design.

"We're in a different business." He says. "To some degree, who knows what's right or wrong?"

"If I designed a football field," he says, "that was 70 yards long and was 50 yards wide, then went down to 10 yards wide, then went back up to 50 yards wide, someone would say to me, 'that's not a football field.' But in the field of golf, there are great 110-yard, downhill par threes, and there are terrible 110-yard, downhill par threes. Golf design is so interesting in that way. It's a game of relatives, one that doesn't have rigid dimensions."

Different people see shot values differently, even great golfers. Silva tells this story to illustrate.

"I was just at Seminole [Seminole Country Club] the other day, in North Palm Beach, Florida."

(A few years ago, Cornish, Silva and Mungeam, Inc. rebuilt 188 bunkers, restored greens and built tees on this layout that is consistently ranked as one of the top ten courses in the country.)

"Ross [Donald Ross] originally did the course. The 18th green is now right up next to the dunes at about the highest part of the course. Well, Hogan, with all his love of Seminole, was always on record as hating the approach shot on that hole, because, with the prevailing wind coming off the ocean, he had to hit the ball over the beach, what he called 'the hazard'. He felt uncomfortable hitting a ball over a hazard in order to get the intended result. So a guy like Hogan might say, 'You fellows who designed the green didn't think enough about the prevailing winds', where another person would say, 'It's awesome! I'm up on the green, and I look out at the ocean.'"

Silva feels that only a few players consider design as they play the hole. "Most golfers," he says, "don't have an understanding of what you're asking them to do in order to most efficiently play the golf hole."

As an example, Silva offers the 215-yard, par 3, 7th hole at Black Creek.

"We did a course a couple years ago in Chattanooga, TN, called Black Creek. I had previously worked with this group of people at an existing course, and they wanted to build a course to look like it

was designed by this fellow named Seth Raynor, who worked back in the '20s with Charles Eames McDonald. Those two would actually design their features to cause players to put the ball down on the ground."

"Now, I love that kind of stuff because I'll be standing 215 yards from the green, and be hitting to a reverse redan green that actually pitches away from the shot. Well, they did that for a guy like me, that if I read it correctly, could hit to the front of the green and catch a kind of banked turn, and kick myself back to the hole."

Any shot landing closer to the pin will hit on a downslope and will very likely be over.

"Players still hit directly at the flag, and then cry and moan when their ball goes over the green. Well, their shot choice is simply not the shot that is required by the hole."

He feels that golf architects particularly, and the golf industry in general, have not done enough to educate the golfer to appreciate and utilize design.



"Guys like me have not done a good job of educating the average golfer," he says, "because when they see a hole like the 7th at Black Creek, they say 'That's wrong! You should never have anything like that.' Well, when you go over to Scotland, you see reverse redans all the time, and supposedly, we are replicating the character of links golf. Mr. Cornish [Geoffrey Cornish] will always tell you that links golf is the root of everything a golf architect is supposed to do."

Silva believes the average golfer usually sees the big picture, but often misses the subtleties. He offers another example—the 18th at Pebble Beach.

"Now obviously when you are standing at the 18th hole at Pebble Beach, with Carmel Bay down the left side," he says, "everybody

soon forms the opinion that they shouldn't hit it too far left. A surprisingly small number of golfers, though, other than saying 'I shouldn't aim at the Pacific Ocean', don't read the hole as well as they should."

"For example, I don't think many players say, 'The ideal shot on this hole is to head down the right side with a draw, because if I do, I take the water out of play, and I give myself the entire width of the corridor to play. Now, if I fail—if I hit it down the right side and it doesn't draw, the worst thing that can happen is that I am in the right side of the fairway. If I do draw, the hole keeps turning to the left, so I'll also be cutting some of the distance, and the overspin of the draw will give me more roll.'"

Silva believes that golfers' inability to take what the architect gives them starts with a decision to aim down the center of the fairway, no matter what.

Silva gets a little passionate, as if he finds the average golfer's frustration a needless impediment to the enjoyment of the course.

"The average golfer, often does not think of his tendencies in hitting the ball, and aims down the middle of the fairway. When you aim down the middle of fairway, you are doomed to failure, because you're only giving yourself half the corridor. An accomplished player—one that is significantly better than the average player, one who is able to work the ball in two directions—reads the golf hole and gives himself the entire

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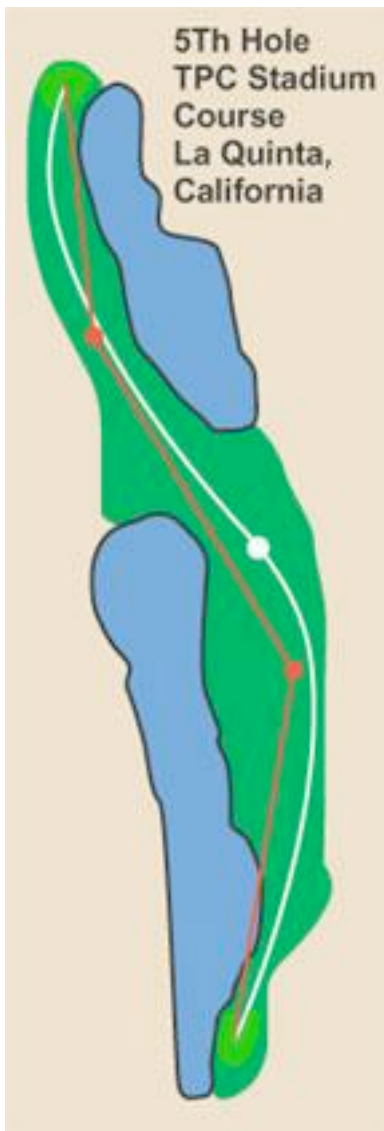
Some of Cornish, Silva and Mungeam, Inc. courses include Stow Acres in Stow, MA, a Golf Digest top 75 public course; The Captains Course in Brewster, MA, selected by Golf Digest as the Best Public Course to open in the USA in 1985 and currently ranked in the Top 25 Public Courses in America by Golf Digest; Firestone West, a new 18 at the famed golf facility in Akron, OH; Shaker Hills in Harvard, MA which was named Runner-Up by Golf Digest as The Best New Public Course to Open in 1992; Cyprian Keyes Golf Club in Boylston, MA, selected by Golf Digest as the Fifth Best New Affordable Public Courses for 1998; and Waverly Oaks Golf Club in Plymouth, MA, rated number 4 on New England Journal of Golf's "New England's Top 100 You Can Play".

The company's renovation work includes such outstanding courses at Seminole Golf Club in North Palm Beach Florida, Olympia Fields Country Club in Chicago, site of the 1997 U.S. Senior Open and 2003 U.S. Open, The Broadmoor in Colorado in preparation for the 1996 U.S. Women's Open, Jupiter Island in Florida, Lookout Mountain in Georgia, The Atlanta Country Club, across Rae's Creek from Augusta National, and Myopia Hunt Club in Massachusetts.
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width. But he doesn't need the entire width—he's an accomplished player. But Joe Average, makes it twice as hard on himself by aiming down the middle. I do think a lot of people make it harder on themselves than they should."

Years ago, Silva designed courses for the average player and then added length to accommodate the better player. But at some point he changed his mind.

"The way that you should design", he says, "is to design the course for the accomplished player who can work the ball both ways, and then make sure that there is an alley for the regular player. Allister McKenzie had it right. He used to say the best par threes in the world (even though he designed the 17th hole at Cypress Point where you can't do that) you could play with a putter. I change that expression to include all holes. One way or the other, you can get from the tee to the green. Of course, a good player will fly it."



He offers this example.

"The 5th hole at PGA West in La Quinta, California", he says, " is a hole that we all give too much heat to for being impossible. But it's not. The hole wonderfully alternates the required shots. Off the tee, Pete [Pete Dye] tells you to take the first pond out of play by hitting your drive down the right side, drawing it right to left. If you fail, you're on the right hand side of the fairway. If you don't, you're better off. Then, for your second shot, (there are players who go for it in two), he alternates it. You hit it out to the left with a fade. If it doesn't fade, you're chipping or putting. If it does fade, you're golden."

"Now, here is how a good player plays the hole. He hits draw, then fade, and he is putting for eagle. That's how the architect should set up the hole."

"As an average golfer, I play the hole exactly the same way—it just takes me two shots to hit the fade. Allowances have been made. I go out to the left for my second shot, and then back to the right on my third shot. The accomplished player does the same thing, but it just takes him one shot."

"That's why I think you need to start, when you're blocking out your holes, with an accomplished player in mind, and then just make allowances. This is one of the hardest holes in the world, but it fits Mr. McKenzie's rule. I could have putted it."

Silva is kind enough not to say it, but the greatest defender of par is probably the poor golfer who doesn't take the time to find the corridor the architect gives him. Like Pogo says, "We has met the enemy and it is us."

Photo credit: www.golfclubatlas.com (7th hole at Black Creek).