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Architect of the Year

After a decade of starts and stops, Tiger Woods' course design career has finally started to take off. He heads our list of 10 architects recognized for their achievements in golf course design during the past year.



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ARCHITECT

of the Year

Tiger Woods made a big splash as a course designer in 2017, earning our top honor as Architect of the Year. He is one of 10 we recognize this year for their achievements and advancement of golf course design.

By Robert J. Vasilak

The battle for the soul of golf architecture rages on, but there's little debate about which side is winning. The growing army of neo-classicists, their banners carried by designers such as Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw, Tom Doak and David McLay Kidd, hold the high ground.

But the signature architects who once were the trendsetters in golf design – former touring pros turned architects, such as Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player and Greg Norman – are still in demand, though much of their work is outside the U.S. And the old guard has been joined by a younger crowd of current and former stars who are shifting their focus from playing to course design. This includes familiar names such as Phil Mickelson, Ernie Els, Nick Faldo, Louis Oosthuizen and Annika Sorenstam.

Clearly, there's still a market for signature architecture.

And that brings us to Tiger Woods, whose Jupiter, Fla.-based TGR Design took a major step forward in 2017. Though injuries kept him off the course as a player for most of the year, his design business finally seemed to

take off after a decade of starts and stops.

With the opening of Bluejack National in Texas; new projects in Dubai, the Bahamas and Mexico; and commissions for high-profile projects in Branson, Mo., and Chicago; Woods' firm pushed its way into the front ranks of the course-design industry.

For those accomplishments, Golf Inc. recognizes Woods as our Architect of the Year for 2017.

Tiger knows what sells

Woods' courses are unquestionably used to sell houses, and he declined to be interviewed for this story because, according to his publicist, he's making a determined effort to resume his career as a professional golfer.

That being said, Woods has plenty of projects on his plate these days — testimony to the records he's set as a professional golfer, his enduring value as a pitchman and the polish that his marketing team continually applies to his personal image.

Woods knows what sells, so he sells himself as a signature architect with neo-classic bona fides. His influences, he and his pub-

licists have said, include the original links courses in Scotland, the distinctive layouts of the Sandbelt of Australia and the classic golden-age courses of the West Coast. He favors tracks that play firm and fast, with wide fairways, big greens, no rough and enough strategic options to “make golfers think and make choices.” He even has an appetite for short, unstructured playing fields that allow golf imaginations to run wild, such as Tom Doak's Sheep Ranch layout at Bandon Dunes.

On top of all that, no other architect this side of Kidd talks as much about bringing fun back into the sport.

“Modern golf has become too hard,” Woods has said. “I want to design fun, playable courses that bring people together and bring golfers back to the game.”

Ron Whitten, architecture editor of *Golf Digest*, has drawn a surprisingly close connection between Woods and the neo-classic wing of golf design. In 2016, he compared the magazine's choice for best new private course, Wood's Bluejack National, with its choice for best new public course, Doak's Loop at Forest Dunes. His conclusion: “They are virtually

TIGER WOODS
 on the site of
 one of his firm's
 newest projects,
 Jack's Bay in
 Eleuthera,
 Bahamas, along
 with TGR Design
 President Bryon
 Bell (left), and
 Senior Design
 Associate Beau
 Welling.



the same course, in concept and philosophy.”

If Whitten is right, Woods’ branding couldn’t be better.

TGR Design is most certainly not a golf factory. Like the neo-classicists, Woods claims to favor quality over quantity. He contends that he works in “a thoughtful and deliberate manner” and that he’s willing to devote “many months and sometimes years” to creating “unique and memorable golf courses.”

The formula has so far produced good but not great golf. Golf Digest ranks Bluejack National, which Woods had hoped would be among the best in the nation, as the third-best course in Texas. It considers El Cardonal at Diamante Cabo San Lucas, a posh private community, to be the No. 11 layout in Mexico.

Nonetheless, Woods’ work has won the hearts of developers who harness the marketing power of signature architecture. “I don’t think anyone else can move the needle like he has for us,” the developer of Diamante said at El Cardonal’s unveiling.

For that reason, U.S. and international cli-

ents with something to sell are lining up at Woods’ door.

- In Dubai, Woods is putting the finishing touches on a private, Trump-branded layout that will anchor a homebuilder’s luxury real estate development. Woods was signed to the contract years ago, before he’d opened even one course, because the developers felt his designs would be “judged against the best golf courses in the world” and serve as “a testament to the luxury and quality” that their community aims to deliver.
- Last year, Woods was commissioned to design a flexible course for Jack’s Bay, a private resort community in the Bahamas that intends to offer “luxury lifestyle opportunities that are unmatched anywhere in the Caribbean.” Woods has promised to deliver a “unique and incredible golf experience,” but the experience will be brief, because the course will have just 10 holes. In the future, though, if residential sales proceed

smoothly, Woods may be enlisted to create an 18-hole track.

- In 2017, Woods also agreed to design his first public course, at Big Cedar Lodge outside Branson, Mo. Big Cedar, which is set on being “America’s Next Great Golf Destination,” already draws crowds with courses and facilities designed by Nicklaus, Palmer, Player, Tom Fazio and Tom Watson. This year it expects to open a Coore & Crenshaw-designed track. Woods’ course will honor the memory of Payne Stewart, and in the future he expects to complement it with a short, family-friendly layout.
- Also in 2017, Woods signed on to modernize a pair of historical but uninspiring municipal courses in Chicago. The venture is “a complicated puzzle,” according to one of its organizers, and Woods is expected to be its chief promoter. Assuming that the wheels of Chicago politics can be properly greased, Woods will create an 18-hole track for an annual PGA Tour event and, again, a family-friendly short course.

Woods has other commissions as well, including a second 18-hole track at Diamante and a “luxury, Western-style” course in Beijing. But these appear to be on the back burner. Meanwhile, he’s in line to design the centerpiece for a delayed high-end community near Nashville, Tenn.

What will be his legacy?

With all these contracts in hand, Woods is as busy as any of his competitors on either side of the design divide. The conspicuous void in his portfolio, however, is a course that fully exemplifies the neo-classic philosophies he so frequently espouses — the kind of course one can find at world-class destinations such as Bandon Dunes and Streamsong. Maybe the owners of such places can’t afford him. Maybe they haven’t forgotten Thanksgiving 2009 and the scandals that ensued. Or, maybe they sim-

ply sense an incompatibility.

This is a hurdle that Woods may never cross. For as much as he walks the neo-classic walk, by and large he talks with developers who view him primarily as a sales tool. And no matter how closely his work might be linked to Doak’s, nobody characterizes him as anything but a signature architect.

“Architects may have the same philosophy,” noted Mike Nuzzo, a neo-classic designer, “but what matters is the execution.”

In the United States and elsewhere, the vast majority of developers are looking to hire brand-name architects who’ll create pretty courses that appeal to the largest number of home buyers, most of whom don’t play golf.

For better or worse, Woods has aligned himself with those developers. He talks about leaving a legacy, but he invariably follows the money. He is, let’s not forget, the first golf

architect to command an eight-figure commission.

Still, Woods has changed the landscape of golf design. The straightforward characterizations that once distinguished the signatures from the neo-classics no longer conveniently hold. Norman, a signature writ large, is designing his version of links courses.

As for Woods’ neo-classic inclinations, Whitten believes Tiger has simply embraced a set of ideas that have become fundamental to the gospel of 21st-century design.

“He’s being influenced by what preceded him,” Whitten explained. “He knows what Doak and Coore & Crenshaw have done, he loves playing links golf, and he loves the ground game. He’s fusing those aspects with something that looks more opulent to make his own statement.”

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