

"Difficult golf courses are simple to make. Narrow fairways bordered by rough, and corridors of play constricted by trees is all it takes. The problem is such courses inevitably become a chore to play. Sheer difficulty is not the measure of quality golf course design. In fact, as golf course architects, we're not trying to design difficult courses at all. We're trying to build interesting ones, which golfers want to return to, time and time again."

One could easily imagine the above quote coming from a Golden Era architect - MacKenzie, Macdonald or Ross. Instead, it is Canadian golf course architect Jeff Mingay who not only used those words, but is applying them in the field day after day.



Thinker, traveler, student, writer, historian, enthusiast, commentator, and most of all builder - each of these descriptors apply to Jeff, which is why he is so interesting. He is a must follow on Twitter (@jeff_mingay) for golf geeks, especially those who want to better understand the game's fields of play. Jeff was kind enough to take time out of his busy schedule of work and travel to share his thoughts - many thanks to him.

THE INTERVIEW

How did you get into the business?

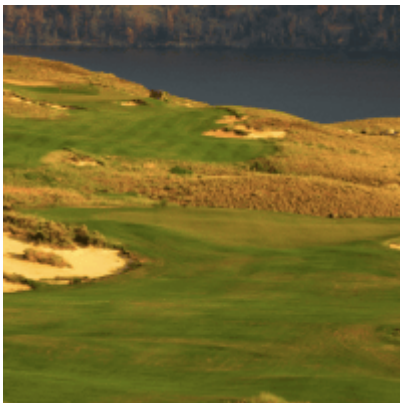
Rod Whitman. After I pestered him for a bit, it was Rod who let me come to work for him, with very little experience, back in about 2000. He was starting construction of [Blackhawk Golf Club](#) at the time. Over a couple summers there, in Edmonton, I learned how to operate bulldozers, excavators and other equipment, thanks to the opportunity Rod gave me. But, most important, I started to learn how to effectively implement design ideas, on the ground, at Blackhawk. That's where it all started for me. I helped Rod finish that job then moved on to supervise the construction of [Sagebrush](#), in British Columbia, for him. From there it was on to [Cabot Links](#), in Nova Scotia, with a few other smaller jobs mixed in over about a decade hanging around with Rod, and guys like Dave Axland, before I started moving on to my own projects, beginning in 2009 and '10.



Blackhawk Golf Club -
Collaboration with Rod Whitman



Cabot Links - Collaboration with Rod Whitman



Sagebrush Golf & Sporting Club - Collaboration with Rod Whitman

Who has influenced you the most in your work, both within and outside of golf?

Well, Rod's definitely been a big influence in many ways. I have great respect for his understanding of golf, his creativity and abilities to put his ideas on the ground very effectively. To this day, I'll often think about what Rod's opinion of what I'm designing or building might be ... which I think is good thing. It keeps me on my toes! I'd have to say Donald Ross, too. I was fortunate to grow-up playing and learning the game at Essex Golf and Country Club, in Windsor, Ontario. Essex was designed by Mr. Ross during the late 1920s. Just hanging around that great old course as much as I have over the years definitely shaped my views on what a golf course should be. I'm really interested in building architecture, too. Some of the thoughts, philosophies, and experiences of my favorite building architects are very applicable to golf architecture. In certain ways, Frank Lloyd Wright's been an influence.

Why is it important to study the history of golf and golf courses?

I think golf architects today are more fortunate than our predecessors because we have so much to look back on and learn from ... a century of what's already been done, what's worked well and what hasn't. If you don't understand this history, you're not going to have a chance to be the best. It's really as simple as that in my mind.

Describe your process for a design project.

I prefer designing on-site rather than working from maps, and making a lot of drawings. I find I'm more creative when I'm walking a property to figure out initial concepts, and when I'm shaping golf course features myself ... the way I learned from Rod. Obviously I'll have the basic concepts set in mind when we start building, but most of the details are worked out during the shaping and construction process as things evolve in the field and new opportunities present themselves. It's inevitable that certain ideas I've thought about in Toronto aren't going to translate exactly right onto a site in Edmonton or Victoria or Seattle, which is why I insist on being on-site a lot during all of my projects. The day I'm not shaping anymore, I'll need to re-question my ambitions.

Is there a particular element of a golf hole that you like working on the most?

The green. After the routing, the design of the putting surface and its surrounds is the most important element in golf architecture. The green means most to the playing interest of any hole. When designed properly, the green dictates everything, including the strategy of a hole. Really great greens make a course interesting and adequately challenging for better golfers, and at the same time allow for width, which is essential to the enjoyment of

everyone else. The Old Course, and the original designs of Augusta National and Pinehurst are great examples. On those great courses, it's really important to drive the ball into the correct spots relative to the day's pin position, otherwise getting close to the hole becomes very difficult. While it's tough to get close to the hole, it's not difficult to get on the green. This is that ideal balance between presenting interest and an adequate challenge to better golfers and enjoyment for everyone else, simultaneously. It's got everything to do with the green.

What should every Green Committee member study/learn before undertaking course improvement initiatives?

That they're going to be in the way of progress unless they come into the process of developing an improvement plan with an open-mind! Really, the committee needs to decide on a golf architect with consensus and then let him do his work without interference. This might sound biased to some, but there really are too many poor examples of golf courses designed by committee to suggest otherwise. Don't get me wrong, I want and appreciate input from committee members, they know the course. But, if you don't let the architect make the final call, things don't end up being cohesive and the course in question has no chance to truly reach its full potential.

What are the primary challenges you consistently face in trying to deliver results that are up to your standards?

See above! I'd have to say interference from committees and Boards. Budget constraints, too. I mean, economy in golf architecture is very important but it's frustrating when important elements of an improvement plan are pulled just to keep a project under a specific number. It's a reality that presents challenges relative to delivering the highest standard.



Jeff at York Downs - Photo courtesy of Frank Mastroianni, Canadian Golf Magazine

How do you know when you have hit the sweet spot in your work?

I recently re-read parts of John Low's 1903 book, *Concerning Golf*. He was first guy to codify a set of architectural principles in that book. One of his principles talks about how the great holes teeter on the Heretical Precipice. I love that term. Heresy is an opinion that's profoundly at odds with what's generally accepted. So, in other words, Mr. Low's saying that the best holes are those that are just about unacceptable, polarizing. Polarizing holes and polarizing golf courses are usually the most interesting, so I feel that sweet spot when holes I've designed or restored create a love/hate thing from golfers.

You travel extensively to see and play courses - why is that important to you?

Studying design theory in the old architecture books is one thing. It's as important ... well, more important, to visit the great courses of the world to get a sense of scale, locations, relationships between holes, relationships between the golf course and the clubhouse, etc. Having a real sense of the look and feel of the best courses, and understanding how everything involved fits together in the best fashion, is very important. You can't get that sense from a book or photos. I also enjoy talking with the golf course superintendents who take care of those places, to

learn more about what they do, what challenges they may face with certain features or situations, etc. At the end of the day, it's the superintendent who makes the architect look good, without exception.

What course would you love to get your hands on for a renovation project?

A few years ago, I would have said A.V. Macan's Fircrest in Tacoma, Washington. But I'm fortunate to be working on a restorative-based plan there, now. Another Macan design at Shaughnessy, in Vancouver, would be fun to restore, too. It was one of Mr. Macan's last courses, and biggest projects, over a career spanning six decades. He did his first course at Royal Colwood, in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1913. Remarkably, Shaughnessy was finished about 1960, four years before he died. Mr. Macan was a very interesting, very thoughtful guy who put a wealth of knowledge into what he called "the course I want to be remembered by", at Shaughnessy. His notes on Shaughnessy are fascinating, and the thought he put into some of the micro elements of that design is very admirable. Sadly, not much of his work is left there, today. And, it's unlikely the course will ever be restored. Shaughnessy's on leased land, and the story is that lease will not be renewed in the near future.

What do you love most about practicing your craft?

Definitely being involved with the shaping and construction work. Staying on the equipment keeps me fresh, alert, and more creative I think. I love being involved with the guys who are most important to the realization of my ideas. It's extremely satisfying to have a long day on-site, with all of the guys, then have few beers afterward, talking about what we're trying to do, and what happened that day. This type of comradery is very important to a successful result. I never want to be, and never will be, the guy who flies in for a few hours in a nice golf shirt, tells everyone what to do then leaves for a few weeks. That's not why I came to do what I'm fortunate to do. Again, the day I'm not intimately involved with the construction process is the day I'll need to re-question my ambitions.

What one word would you use to describe the courses you design, and why?

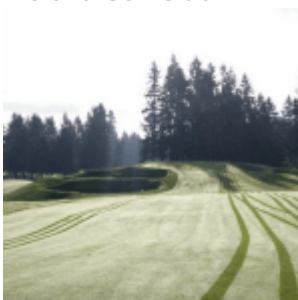
I'd like to use the word distinctive. The only common characteristic shared by the world's best courses is distinctiveness. The uniqueness of the best courses is one of golf's great attractions. So, I try to do something genuinely different on every project that's either inspired by inherent site characteristics, the design pedigree of an existing course, or a clients' needs and desires ... or a combination of these types of factors.



Oakville Golf Club



Victoria Golf Club



Fircrest Golf Club (photo by Bryan McLean)



Overlake Golf & Country Club

If you could only play one course for the rest of your life, what would it be, and why?

It sounds cliché, but probably the Old Course at St. Andrews. The Old Course is wide enough, the greens there are big enough, the ground is usually firm enough, and there's enough interesting contour and variance of wind on that site that the Old Course really plays like a different course, day to day, more often than any other in the world that I'm aware of. This type of variety is ideal. Too many other courses are relatively tight and have comparatively small greens, and are located in areas where there's not much wind, so they more often play the same, rather than different, every day. A course that's many courses in one depending where the pins are located on any given day, and which direction and how fast the wind's blowing is the ideal.

What are the top 3 courses next on your list to play for the first time?

I can't believe I haven't played Oakmont yet. I've admired that great old course from afar, forever. I also need to get to Royal Melbourne. That's a huge missing link in my architectural education. And, having been involved with Cabot Links, I'm really looking forward to getting back to Cape Breton some time this year to see and play Cabot Cliffs. I'm a bit familiar with that site, and the course looks stunning in photos. What else would you expect from Coore and Crenshaw and company though, right?

When you are not playing golf or building golf courses, what are you doing?

Hmmm ... admittedly, I do need a few more hobbies! I'm a big music fan. I'm always listening to music, trying to find new music, and going to see shows when I'm at home, or when I run into the right bands during my travels. Baseball, too. In the summer, I love going to baseball games, especially at ballparks I haven't seen.

Any interesting or challenging projects in process or on the horizon for you?

We've just started restorative-based projects at two classic A.V. Macan designs in the Seattle area that I've been thinking about, and dreaming about putting back together for a long time. I'm pretty excited about these projects, at Fircrest and Inglewood Golf Clubs. We completed five holes at Fircrest back in November last year and will be starting at Inglewood in a few weeks. These are really interesting, unique and trailblazing designs by Mr. Macan, dating back to the early 1920s, that not only set a standard for golf architecture in the Pacific Northwest but are still relevant today. It's humbling to have these opportunities to showcase what Mr. Macan did for golf and course architecture, particularly in the Northwest. This type of work also helps with my continuing education in golf architecture, which is an added benefit.

See [Jeff's presentation to the Derrick Club](#) on the Geeked On Golf GCA Video archive.

Additional Geeked On Golf Interviews:

[Ian Andrew - Golf Course Architect](#)

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[Justin Carlton - Golf Course Shaper](#)

[Michael Clayton - Golf Course Architect](#)

[Rob Collins - Golf Course Architect](#)

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[Brett Hochstein - Golf Course Architect](#)

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