



HOUSTON

Notebook

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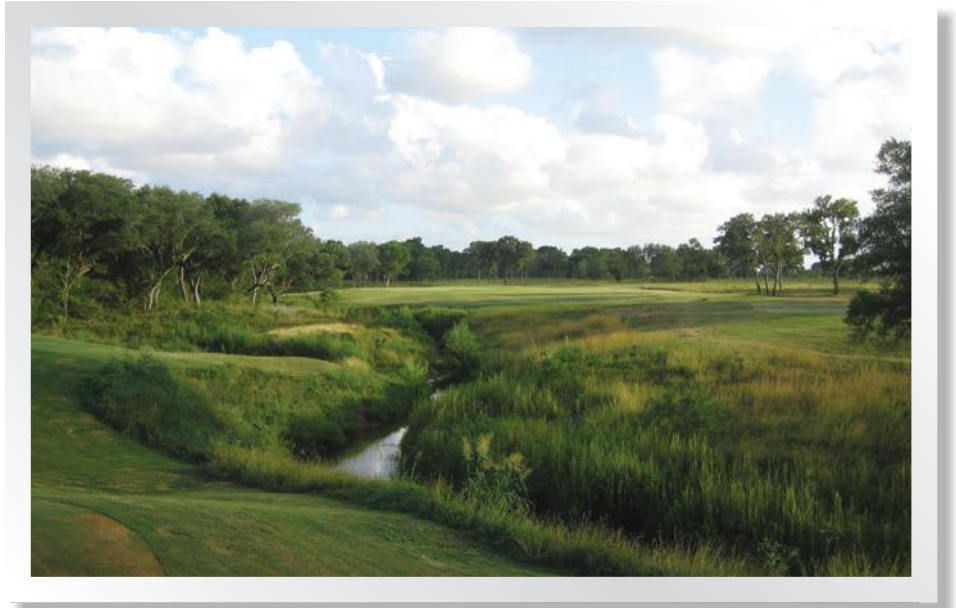
THE CURIOUS CASE OF MIKE NUZZO

Meet the Man who should be the "Next Big Name in Golf Course Architecture"

Golf course design isn't exactly the gig it used to be—at least not in this economy. However, if the future of that profession is influenced by innovative up-and-comers like Houston's Mike Nuzzo, maybe that's not such a bad thing. Nuzzo has proven a great deal with his first 18-hole design project, Wolf Point Golf Club, not the least of which is that a compelling golf course with classic shot values can be constructed and maintained on a reasonable budget.

Wolf Point is a revelation. Built on a secluded expanse of pastureland (just a few miles from the Gulf of Mexico), many of its views call to mind the open spaces and the natural knobs and contours at The Old Course at St. Andrews. Other features instantly remind one of the principles upon which classic designers like Alister Mackenzie and Henry S. Colt built their masterpieces: generous landing areas but with reward for accurate shot placement; green complexes that test both thinking and shot-making skills; and design features that fit the landscape rather than over-embellish it.

Perhaps Bobby Jones, a collaborator with Mackenzie on Augusta National Golf Club and a St. Andrews devotee, put it best: "In my opinion, a properly designed hole should impose a test upon each shot the player has to make. There should always be a definite advantage gained from an accurate and intelligent placing of the tee shot, or a reward offered for a long, well-



Wolf Point Golf Club, Hole 6

directed carry over some obstacle." Wolf Point is full of firm and fast golf holes upon which Jones, Mackenzie and Colt would have been proud to stamp their signature.

Wolf Point's fifth hole, one of the layout's longest par-fours, tempts the golfer to carry a high-lipped, 30-yard-long chasm named the "Inferno" bunker (one of Nuzzo's few indulgent choices on the course, but one that really pays off). Successfully passing the bunker sends your ball down a speed slot that should add yardage and give you an ideal angle into the green. Failing to do so can lead to, well...hellish results.

From the well-executed double-green connecting the putting surfaces for holes eight and 18 to the ruff-hewn, natural-edge bunkering to multiple greens that allow you the bump-and-run option, Wolf Point plays like a classic-era course, but manicured to modern country club standards.

Each teeing ground is only a few paces from the previous green. Nothing distracts the golfers from an ideal walk in the park.

Nuzzo's green complexes are immensely challenging but fair. Some resemble crabs flipped on their backs. Others replicate rippling waves. "The owner wanted a home field advantage in his regular matches, so the greens are challenging and angles into the greens on your approach shots are critical," Nuzzo says. "The difference between two tee shots found 10 yards apart could mean one player has a perfect angle in and the other player has almost no shot." (Think: the false front on the green at the Road Hole at St. Andrews)

Adam Lawrence, editor of the UK's *Golf Course Architecture* magazine says of Wolf Point, "Not only is it probably the best first course by a modern architect that I have seen, but it is also a living case study for the



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more NUZZO

future of golf design and construction."

Wolf Point was constructed by its superintendent Don Mahaffey, Nuzzo and an expert shaper, with the help of local labor who learned golf feature shaping, excavation and bunker building while on the job from Mahaffey. Mahaffey's company, Greenscape Methods, essentially built the course from the ground up for roughly one fifth the cost typically required to complete a resort or public course of similar quality and size.

So with all this praise, why has most of the golf world never heard of this course or its designer? Wolf Point is a personal golf course. It has one owner who is also its only "member." To date, 517 humans have traveled into outer space. It would be fair to guess that considerably fewer have played Wolf Point Golf Club in the four years it's been open. The owner, who wish to remain anonymous, might be one of the nicest men you'll ever meet. But when it comes to notoriety, magazine rankings or hosting USGA events, he'll

politely pass. A major at Wolf Point would consist of the owner teeing it up with a couple of guests with two loyal giant schnauzers acting as unofficial scorers.

"Part of me wishes more people could come see this course," Nuzzo says. "It's only when you get on the ground and see what we've built here that you put the back story together with the 'wow factor' of the golf course."

Having such a unique course as the cornerstone of his design resume is a blessing and a curse for Nuzzo. How do you build a following with a property that few

golfers are intended to see, let alone play, as your calling card?

"It is a challenge, but I can offer clients a lot of the same practical skills and services that helped make Wolf Point a success," he says. "I think an approach that marries artistry and engineering will serve some projects very well."

Nuzzo's path to golf course design was far from typical. He left his job as an aerospace design engineer at Lockheed Martin in 2000 to pursue a lifelong passion. He learned about golf design and maintenance from the likes of Finger-Dye-Spann associ-



ate Baxter Spann and Champions Golf Club superintendent Charles Joachim.

"I had to ask Mike if he had rocks in his head, wanting to leave a career in aerospace for the golf business, but I could tell he had a real passion for the game and he also had real skills to offer people doing golf course projects," Joachim says.

Nuzzo renovated and expanded the practice area at Champions and transformed a former par-three course in North Houston into the new and improved Swanson Golf Center, which was named the best practice facility in the Houston

area by the Houston Chronicle.

Nuzzo's talent and practical approach could help usher new techniques into golf design. Rather than Auto-CAD, he uses a more graphic-design-oriented software product, Adobe Illustrator, which enables him to render hole designs (or redesigns) that look like a detailed photo of the hole. Moreover, his approach to projects is focused on saving the client as much money as possible and ensuring his designs can be maintained practically and simply.

"I think I've found that in the construction process you can push yourself to make good holes into super-special holes," he says. "Those last steps can be done, or re-done, on any project. I'm certain there are a lot of clients I could convince that they really don't have to blow the whole thing up and start over to get an amazing renovation."

In a more robust economy, the golf community might have already declared Mike Nuzzo the next big thing in golf course architecture. Message board junkies might be dropping his name along with Tom Doak's and Bill Coore's just to sound in the know. For now, Nuzzo is working on a couple of renovation and practice area projects and submitting proposals for redesigns in and beyond Texas.

"There are a lot of courses that need just a little bit of help," he says. "It's not that hard for us to turn the worst hole on some golf courses into the best. And that can make a big difference."

Nuzzo often uses the term 'practical' to describe the methods and philosophies he follows in his work. Until we find our way to the next golf course construction boom (which seems like it could be decades away), 'practical' seems to make a lot of sense. mnuzzo.com.