

Rees Jones

Golf architect Rees Jones tells *GCA* that the industry is picking up, but competitive pressure is stronger than ever

As global economies continue their recovery from the Great Recession, the golf business is also picking up in various parts of the world – but it is scattered, and many parts are still finding times tough, according to veteran golf architect Rees Jones. But, he adds, the industry is not being helped by media reports of golf's struggles.

"Golf is not as badly off as people say," Jones says. "Unfortunately, a fair amount of the mainstream media has fixated on the 'golf is dying' message and that's all they ever print about the game. I think those of us in the industry would be a lot better off if we stopped believing non-golf publications and media outlets. They're talking to bankers, not golfers, and the view they are forming, and propagating about the game is based on the fact that a bunch of developments that were never really economically sustainable have gone bust. That's a fact, and it's too bad, but it is a long way from being the whole truth about the golf industry."

As is well known, the economic challenges of the last seven years or so have had big impacts on the golf design business. Many less successful architects have been forced to leave the business altogether and find a new way of making a living, while some older designers have essentially gone into semi-retirement, servicing the needs of past clients and doing new work if and when it appears. In particular, the larger firms – those with

multiple architects capable of winning and leading design projects – have typically shrunk in both number and size. Jones's firm, though, remains a diversified portfolio operation, with associates Greg Muirhead, Bryce Swanson and Steve Weisser all having been with the company for many years. But the principal accepts life is harder now. "One thing that I think everyone in the industry will attest to is that fees have gone down in recent years," he asserts. "Because the business has been quiet by historical standards, even though a number of architects have left the industry, there is more competition for jobs, and that has an inevitable impact on fees. The shrinkage of some of the big firms has made this even more intense, as there are a bunch of guys who previously worked for one of the big names who are now solo, and the result is you get more and more people bidding on a job."

Jones, who made his name back in the 1970s after he left his father's operation to go off on his own, is conscious that getting established in today's market is very difficult for young designers. He does, though, believe that the golf development market will continue to grow – provided architects are prepared to travel around the world to where the work may be. "We are never going to have that great boom of the 1990s again in the US, but I am convinced that the market will continue to grow," he says. "Golf remains what it has always been – a great avenue for

people to interact – and its appeal is strong all over the world. In developing countries, golf is hugely attractive for developers and the newly affluent alike, because golf estate projects provide leisure, security and better housing opportunities to people who really want them. But there is definitely a trend in developing markets to go for designers that are already established. Often, to make your name you just need one great opportunity, a good client with a good site in a good location. There's no doubt those can be hard to find these days, but in all honesty they were never easy. I really believe that people who have talent and determination will find the openings they need."

One thing that the downturn has done is change the attitudes of those on the client side, developers and existing clubs alike, says Jones. They are now much more focused on seeing where the return on any investment in facilities will come from, and that is forcing golf architects to justify projects much more in financial terms than in the past. But there

are different ways to get a return. "I have one client, who, after some work on his course, has substantially increased his green fees and is seeing increased revenue as a result," he explains. "But it is true that we have to be much more focused on getting clients where they want to go now. You can lead them, but you can't shoot off on a flight of fancy. When we propose improvements to a golf course to a client, and the client says 'Well, where is the return on my investment going to come from?', often it is difficult to come up with a clear enough answer. Golf has always been a business for people who like to dream, and you still have to buy into those dreams and be a part of helping to make them come true, but even the dreamers are more pragmatic now than they were in the past. Even the dreamers are focused on the hotel or the environment for people to live and enjoy their pastimes, in a way that perhaps they weren't back in the 1990s. But that has to be a good thing really – it means projects might be harder to get going in the first

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place, but they are much more likely to succeed in the end."

Jones has always worked around the world, and he says that business is currently coming from many different locations. In the US and other golf markets the firm is working with a variety of golf clubs, from daily fee to private, and helping them determine the

best way to invest their money and get the most from that investment. "We have a new job in the Catskill mountains of New York," says Jones. "Adelaar is a casino project and a huge leisure development, with indoor and outdoor waterparks. I also think we're going to see lots of activity in the Bahamas. Mexico is starting to pop a little more – we have a new project in Loreto (Danzante Bay Golf Course at Villa Del Palmar), a timeshare proposition right on the ocean with a great hotel. And the Japanese golf business is surprisingly busy right now, as lots of clubs are looking to upgrade their facilities, in particular taking advantage of improved grasses to abandon the old two green system that they have used for so long. At the Ibaraki club, which we renovated quite recently, they have hardly had a free starting time since we redid the west course, and they're making a lot of money. The Japanese really love their golf. I played over there very recently. It was cold and windy, but the place was full!" **GCA**

