

# CCF Historical and Architectural Series Volume 7

## By Geoffrey L. Manton

The Big 3. In golf, that label has had different meanings over the years. In the 1960s, it was Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, and Gary Player. In the late 1990s, it was Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson, and Ernie Els. Today, The Big 3 moniker belongs not to professional golfers, but to golf course architects - Coore & Crenshaw, Tom Doak, and Gil Hanse. The design firms of these men have reached the highest echelon of their field and are the most well regarded and most highly sought-after architects today. Not surprisingly, they all adhere to the same school of architecture. Some call it minimalism, others term it naturalistic design. No matter the terminology, it's a design style that's creating waves in the industry that are rippling all the way up the the most famous and revered golf courses in our country.

If the genesis of this movement could be traced back to one course, the overwhelming source would be Sand Hills Golf Club in Mullen, Nebraska. It's here at this remote site in the sand hills of western Nebraska that Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw carved 18 holes out of the landscape in a manner that resulted in a golf course that appears as though Mother Nature deserved the architect design fee. Coore & Crenshaw are known for claiming that there were over 100 golf holes at Sand Hills and that they simply picked the best ones to uncover for their routing. It's this simple design philosophy of working with the land and moving as little earth as possible that defines the Minimalism movement. Fittingly, it's comparable to the philosophy that was embraced by many of the Golden Age architects, who, in turn learned it from their predecessors dating back to the earliest courses in the U.K. After all, the Old Course at St. Andrews was scripted more from Mother Nature than from the ink well of a golf course architect.

The Big 3 share more in common than their design philosophies. Tom Doak and Gil Hanse were both the winners of the prestigious Dreer Award (1982 and 1987, respectively) given to Landscape Architecture and/or Horticulture students at Cornell University. This award allows recipients to spend 6-12 months abroad immersed in research of the topic of their choosing. Being landscape architecture students

***List of original designs among Golf Digest and Golf Magazine's Top 100 US Golf Courses***

**Coore/Crenshaw**

- Sand Hills Golf Club
- Friar's Head Golf Club
- Old Sandwich Golf Club
- Bandon Trails
- Streamsong (Red)
- Sand Valley

**Tom Doak**

- Pacific Dunes
- Sebonack Golf Club (*with Jack Nicklaus*)
- Ballyneal Golf Club
- Old MacDonald
- Streamsong (Blue)
- Rock Creek Cattle Company

**Gil Hanse**

- Boston Golf Club

interested in golf design, Doak and Hanse both spent their time in the United Kingdom, traveling the country to study all the oldest golf courses, many of which were the same golf courses that influenced C.B. MacDonald and other Golden Age Era golf course designers. Using this first-hand experience as their foundation, Doak and Hanse gradually built up a resume of golf course design work that has brought them to their pinnacle today.

Fittingly, Bill Coore and Tom Doak also share a common background. Both men worked for Pete Dye. Although Pete Dye is known for building extreme and difficult golf courses, he will also be remembered for fundamentally changing the approach to golf course design and construction during his era. At a time when his peers were bulldozing their way in the penal style, building golf courses that protected par via the aerial game, Pete Dye employed the lessons he learned on a golf sabbatical to Scotland with his wife, Alice, in the mid 1960s. Some of Dye's earliest courses, such as The Golf Club in New Albany, OH, or Harbour Town and Long Cove Club on Hilton Head Island, SC, are known for the emphasis that's placed on angles of play from tee through green. Furthermore, Pete Dye stressed that he was not a golf course designer, but rather a builder. Dye, much like many of the Golden Age architects, was hands-on throughout the construction process for his courses. As opposed to his counterparts who designed on paper and left the course construction to an outside contractor, Pete Dye was in the dirt. As a "builder", Dye was able to revise and edit in the field throughout the build process. As members of Dye's construction crew, Tom Doak and Bill Coore learned the same lessons and then carried them forward in their own design/build golf architecture firms. Apropos, Gil Hanse spent 4 years working for Tom Doak and so the same lessons were passed on.

The Big 3 may have earned the respect of their peers on the merit of their new course construction, but it's their renovation work that's solidified their status as the best in the industry. A review of their collective curriculum vitae of golf course restoration work is a view of the greatest and most elite golf clubs in the country, nearly all of which are Golden Age era courses. Many of these

**Sample of Coore & Crenshaw's  
Classic Era Restoration Projects**

- Maidstone Club (*W. Park Jr.*)
- Pinehurst No. 2 (*D. Ross*)
- Seminole GC (*D. Ross*)
- Prairie Dunes (*P. Maxwell*)
- Riviera CC (*G. Thomas*)
- Old Town Club (*P. Maxwell*)
- Wykagyl CC (*L. Van Etten*)

**Sample of Tom Doak's Classic Era  
Restoration Projects**

- Garden City Golf Club (*D. Emmet*)
- Chicago GC (*C.B. MacDonald*)
- Crystal Downs CC  
(*MacKenzie/Maxwell*)
- Carmargo Club (*S. Raynor*)
- Shoreacres (*S. Raynor*)
- Bel Air CC (*G. Thomas*)
- San Francisco GC (*A.W. Tillinghast*)
- The Valley Club of Montecito  
(*A. MacKenzie*)
- Somerset Hills CC (*A.W. Tillinghast*)
- Yeamans Hall Club (*S. Raynor*)
- Essex County Club (*D. Ross*)
- Milwaukee CC (*C.H. Alison*)
- Cherry Hills CC (*W. Flynn*)

clubs have seen a leapfrog in golf course rankings as a direct result of the restoration work by these architects. By employing the same design principles of the original architects, often with historical documentation as their guide, the Big 3 have brought back the strategic elements of these courses. The common thread of work for all these golf course restoration projects is *tree removal, fairway expansion, green expansion, and bunker restoration.*

At St. George's Golf and Country Club in East Setauket, NY on Long Island, Devereux Emmet's masterpiece fell victim to the same cluttered

**Sample of Gil Hanse's Classic Era  
Restoration Projects**

- Winged Foot GC – East and West (*A.W. Tillinghast*)
- Fishers Island Club (*S. Raynor*)
- Merion GC – East (*H. Wilson*)
- Los Angeles CC – North (*G. Thomas*)
- The Country Club, Brookline (*W. Flynn*)
- The Kittansett Club (*W. Flynn*)
- Myopia Hunt Club (*H. Leeds*)
- Worcester CC (*D. Ross*)
- Oakland Hills CC – South (*D. Ross*)
- Baltusrol GC – Upper and Lower (*A.W. Tillinghast*)
- Plainfield CC (*D. Ross*)
- Ridgewood CC (*D. Ross*)
- The Creek (*C.B. MacDonald*)
- Quaker Ridge GC (*A.W. Tillinghast*)
- The Rockaway Hunting Club (*D. Emmet*)
- Sleepy Hollow CC (*C.B. MacDonald*)
- St. George's G&CC (*D. Emmet*)
- Southern Hills CC (*P. Maxwell*)
- Aronimink GC (*D. Ross*)
- Gulph Mills GC (*D. Ross*)
- Sakonnet GC (*D. Ross*)

tree planting programs and fairway/green contraction as many other courses of its era. Knowing the strength of the golf course that lay underneath, St. George's contracted with little known young architect, Gilbert Hanse, around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to devise a master plan to restore St. George's to glory. However, due to lack of vision for what could be, the membership elected to not adopt Hanse's plan for St. George's and the course remained stagnant, cloistered by overgrown trees for another decade.

However, in 2010, new leadership at St. George's insisted on a restoration project and was successful in luring Gil Hanse back to St. George's to complete the work. The result has been tremendous, both for the club and the golf course with St. George's now ranked among the top 100 classic courses by Golfweek Magazine; a course that can hold a candle among the finest of the many great golf courses on Long Island.

Also, around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Gil Hanse devised a master plan for another Devereux Emmet golf course, this one about 75 miles to the north - The Country Club in Farmington, CT.

*(Up Next: Hanse, Emmet, and CCF)*