

Behind the Architectural Curtain - 106th PGA Championship

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Valhalla Golf Club, Louisville, Kentucky, USA

Posted on May 14, 2024

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LOUISVILLE, KY. For the fourth time a major golf event will grace the State of Kentucky. Valhalla Golf Club, a Jack Nicklaus design, hosts its fourth PGA Championship this week.

Nicklaus, described the site in 1983 as a "golf designer's dream because there is a variety of terrain, vegetation and water to work with. Everything necessary for an excellent golf course is here: room for wide, tree-lined fairways and spectacular golf holes."

With 486 acres of land. Valhalla has plenty of available grounds to handle large size galleries. 40 different routings were considered before a final one was finalized. Located 20 miles east of downtown Louisville, Valhalla opened for play in 1986.

Valhalla's rise in the golf pecking order benefited from having staged compelling golf theater, In 2008. the USA team, under the captaincy of Paul Azinger, recaptured the Ryder Cup without having the involvement of the sport's most dominating player Tiger Woods who was sidelined because of injury.

The three PGA Championships contested previously have all been exciting affairs. The first took place in 1996 and it appeared Kentuckian Kenny Perry would hoist the famed Wannamaker Trophy. A final hole bogey meant a playoff against Mark Brooks. The playoff would feature Perry again struggling at the 18th and Brooks claiming the title with a second birdie at the closing hole.

The 2000 PGA Championship was an epic battle with world number one Tiger Woods against the unheralded Bob May. The two knew each other stretching back to junior golf days in Southern California. May pushed Woods throughout and Tiger needed an 8-foot par putt at the final hole to ensure a playoff. Woods would win the playoff and not only defend his PGA title but continue a stellar stretch of golf in which he would win 7 of 11 majors between the 1999 PGA Championship and the 2002 U.S. Open.

The last PGA Championship played at Valhalla was in 2014 and provided the platform for Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy to win his fourth major title by the age of 25 – an amazing accomplishment only achieved by such heavyweight stars as Jack Nicklaus, Tiger Woods, Bob Jones and "Young" Tom Morris.

Valhalla has been updated by the Nicklaus team in recent years. The layout is a tale of two different courses. The outward side is routed through lowlands and requires keen awareness in quality driving of the ball to achieve the most optimum approach angles into the putting surfaces. Floyd's Fork, a serpentine tributary, inserts itself at several different moments on the opening nine – most notably at the stout two-shot hole at the 2nd.

The par-5 7th features a split fairway tempting players to hit towards the 26-yard-wide fairway on the left side. Those able to accomplish that can effectively cut-off 50 yards to reach the green in two shots.

The inward half presents a far different look. Holes weave through dense hardwoods in concert with an array of bunkers at different strategic locations which force players to make strategic calculations in order to keep positive momentum going forward.

The final hole is a 570-yard par-5 with a penalty area on the right side of the drive zone with mounds and deep Kentucky bluegrass rough awaiting left.

Players can reach the green in two shots but encounter a horse-shoe shaped green with a large spine in the center with three distinct shelves. In all the events played at Valhalla the 18th has played an impactful role.

The original vision for Valhalla came from Louisville-native Dwight Gahm who wanted his beloved community to have a facility capable of hosting major golf events. The desire to keep Valhalla front and center is now carried out by four area businessmen and long-time members of the club -- Jimmy Kirchdorfer, Ches Musselman, Junior Bridgeman and David Novak – who purchased the club from the PGA of America. The purchase was finalized on June 1, 2022.

The desire of the new ownership group is to keep alive the original vision of Dwight Gahm. In a short time, Valhalla has provided an array of treasured moments and the 2024 PGA Championship is certain to add even more.

Five architects were engaged to provide their thoughts on this year's PGA Championship. Each provides their personal viewpoint on what compelling architecture provides and what to look for at Valhalla this week.

What's the most difficult aspect in designing a course when the finest professionals are the ones playing it?

Drew Rogers: Frankly, that's the least of my concerns – worrying about how such a finite fraction of players encounters a golf course for a few select days. We already have plenty to concentrate on with designing and building suitable courses for dues paying clients and investors.

If the course doesn't work for them, then we need not even bother to think about satisfying tests for the best players in the world, because the course won't be sustainable without its originally intended goals and success, first and foremost.

Chris Cochran: There is so much that goes into planning a tournament course to host professional events, especially in the routing phase of design. Parking for players, staff, and spectators, drop off and pick up areas for spectators, gallery viewing and movement throughout the golf course, staging for TV and media, staging for corporate tents, how players navigate through all of this, adequate practice areas for the players and how they get to and from these areas, etc.

After that, it's designing golf holes that challenge all aspects of the best players in the world's game while having a fun, enjoyable golf course for those who will be playing the course when it's not being used as a tournament venue.

Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan: Keeping it fair for average, everyday golfers, especially weaker hitters, while also making it challenging for the pros who will play it infrequently. It is easy to make a golf course difficult but it takes a lot of creativity to also make it fun, forgiving and challenging for all other skill levels. The place to accomplish that seemingly impossible goal is in the design of greens and their surrounds.

Jerry Lemons: Finding length.

Beau Welling: Our goal is to create a challenging setup that also provides scorable opportunities to reward good play. Given the pros' length off the tee, creating that challenge can be difficult, but we're conscious not to "trick up" the golf course. Instead, our focus is on the greens contouring that requires accurate approach play.

With firm conditions, we feel this goal is very achievable as players must be thoughtful, creative, and very precise with their shotmaking – but it is much tougher to realize with soft conditioning where players have so much more control of approach shots. Because of this focus on conditioning, our team places a lot of focus and planning on the course infrastructure for tournament golf to ensure those fast and firm conditions are achievable.

With firm and fast conditions, golf can be more like chess; with soft conditions, it is more like darts. We want chess.

Should the designing architect be consulted when a major championship is being held at the course the person created?

Drew Rogers: **I think they should be in the conversation, for sure, so that others who are setting the course up for play can benefit from understanding the intended design strategies and so the architect can advise best actions if adjustments are warranted.**

I also think the home superintendent should be a big part of guiding course setup. They already know how to prepare their course for varied conditions and multi-day competitions in ways that implanted officials might not imagine.

Jerry Lemons: Maybe, but not necessarily.

Beau Welling: That could be a challenge given that many major championships are contested at courses where the original architects/designers are no longer with us.

If it is a modern course or one that has undergone some recent significant adjustments, then I think having the architect/designer involved makes sense to look at a variety of factors related to how the course plays but also how the site functions during a tournament.

When our team is looking at a project where elite-level golf may be in the future, there are often different elements that come into play and are considered to make sure that the course offers the necessary challenge while also remaining playable for day-to-day membership or guest play.

Our team looks to plan holistically in order to ensure the required site functions properly and the needs of the hosting organization, the players, and the spectators can all be met.

Chris Cochran: Yes. The professionals who run and set up tournaments are so good at what they do and to ensure the players and viewers have the best experience possible, but it is the golf course architect who typically will have the keenest insights into the finer points of how the holes play, the intent of the design and where the best lines or places to miss shots will be.

Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan: That is a nice professional courtesy, especially if there could be significant changes made to the course. But if the original design was well done, chances are that most of the tournament preparation will involve maintenance issues, not major strategic design ones.

I like to be consulted because I am able to learn what the "set up" committee is looking for, especially in hole locations, to improve my future design thinking.

The USGA and R&A both announced a rollback on the golf ball - elite players in 2028 and recreational players in 2030. Was the response satisfactory to you and, if not, were other efforts on the club's side specifically needed as well?

Drew Rogers: Well, it's a start. I'm not sure that the ball rollback alone will address the issues. Other equipment modifications are also worthy of consideration as well - shafts, clubfaces, materials, etc.

It would also certainly help if elite players were willing to get on board to understand the issues and promote the movement. But will their sponsors allow them to do so?

Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan: I believe that player's swing technique and physical conditioning are the major reasons for the ball going further, and equipment regulations will not change that. Prior to the 2017 US Open at Erin Hills, one pro not known for his driving distance, played the course to the maximum yardage on every hole, measuring a total of 8,500 yards and he shot 73.

Length doesn't matter that much. However, equipment innovation is good for growing the game because throughout the history of golf, each major game improvement made to equipment inspired an increase in participation by recreational players who think they can buy a better golf game. Therefore, I think that the rollback will not solve anything, but in fact could hurt the technical evolution process in equipment.

Jerry Lemons: It is a start to putting the Genie back in the bottle. It is complex that many love to see the ball go and go, but it has forever impacted the cost of golf.

Beau Welling: I have a degree in physics so the distance debate in golf is something that has been particularly interesting to me. The advances in technology with the ball is certainly a big part of the conversation, but it is really a multi-variable question. Club technology, the physical progression of golfers as athletes, the ability to optimize and match swing dynamics to equipment choices are some of the many other variables.

The announced golf ball rollback will have some effect on distance for sure, but we as a species are constantly evolving and innovating and that is not going to stop. So, I think the rollback will be a relatively short-term affair. As such, I don't see it affecting golf architecture much at all. We certainly are not thinking of making golf courses shorter because of the rollback.

What we will continue to focus on is creating strategic hazards that will be in play for longer hitters and keep trying to require the thoughtfulness, precision, creativity and shot making I mentioned earlier.

Chris Cochran: I think I see all sides of the topic but to me it comes down to what is more sustainable in the long run and best for the game well into the future, maintaining 100 acres or 200 acres?

This is the biggest reason I do not think the USGA and R&A have done enough to roll the ball back. I do not know how much attention was given on the club side, but I would think there had to have been a lot of talk about bifurcation from that perspective.

The PGA Championship switched dates from mid-August to mid-May. How important is it for the timing of an event to maximize both the given architecture in concert with optimum turf presentation?

Drew Rogers: I think the date and course selection are more critical to the actual site/location than anything. Mid-May in Minnesota, for example, could actually experience some shouldering "end of winter" conditions that might not be ideal.

By contrast, mid-August in Florida could be a complete washout due to rainy season propensities. So, unfortunately the date is not a one-size-fits-all solution, it seems, depending on each of the selected venues.

Beau Welling: I think the change made a lot of sense because it provides the players with a major championship every month from April to July, which is important because of the team events every year and also the Olympics every four years. The shift to May also opens up the potential for new host venues but clearly, they need to have the right grass types and climates to best present a course's architecture in May.

Jerry Lemons: The turf is as much these days more critical, but weather patterns can impact the firmness of the courses when switched.

As with Valhalla and the change to Zoysia grass, a late spring might have the zoysia in any given year a little bit behind. If a course is too soft, they can play it shorter if it needed to be.

Chris Cochran: I am a big fan of the May PGA Championship. By moving it to May it opens so much more of the country where the championship can be played like Florida, Texas, Arizona, and the Gulf states, etc.

I think this outweighs possible agronomic issues a course could experience from a bad winter.

Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan: Today's golf courses are built or remodeled with so much incorporated technological advancements such as vacuum drainage, high tech rootzones, precision irrigation, lab-selected bunker sands and liners, advanced turfgrass cultivars, when coupled to the best management practices by Golf Course Superintendents, that golf courses tend to play the same in any warm month.

In addition, with climate change, there may be fewer differences between mid-May and mid-August playing conditions as time goes on.

One of the more interesting and recent developments for major events is having at least one par-3 play in the range of 250 or more yards in order to secure long iron and even fairway metal usage. What's your take on the importance of the long par-3 hole and can more be done in that manner?

Drew Rogers: A hole does not have to be long to challenge the best players in the world. Long holes don't tend to stir much imagination or interest. For that reason, I would enjoy seeing shorter par-3s with really difficult shot values. And those are holes that are exciting to watch and are experiences that spectators can relate to as well.

Chris Cochran: I like the long par-3. I think it is fun to see the best players having their long approach games being tested, especially when you see them hitting so many short irons during a round.

Typically, there is more pressure on a player trying to hit a green in regulation with a long iron than hitting a long iron trying to reach a par 5 in two. Trying to have the golfer hit every club in the bag during a round of golf is still a priority for most architects.

Beau Welling: I think forcing longer club play on par threes can make a lot of sense but at the end of day, variety of par threes is what we seek. We want to ensure that the par threes are all distinct and memorable – so having a long par three around 250 yards (or more) really helps achieve that variety.

Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan: Long par-3s tend to be boring and generally benefit the longest hitters, while the greatest par-3s are short; 12 at Augusta National, 7 at Pebble Beach, 17 at TPC Sawgrass, and many, many more examples.

However, the truly exciting hole today is the driveable par-4 of 280 – 320 yards, that can be made devilishly hard yet playable by everyone, albeit with different strategies.

Jerry Lemons: I agree with any strategy to make the players be tested with every club in their bag. The long par threes are just part of this.

Are bunkers irrelevant today at the elite level?

Drew Rogers: They're not what they used to be. Players are really skilled at hitting great shots out of impeccably maintained bunker – more so than deep rough. Bunker depth and positioning can still impact elite players, but they're also really punitive to the average player as well. So where do you draw those lines in designing a course?

Who's paying the bills and racking up the rounds? There are plenty of other ways to introduce obstacles that will impact good players – and they don't have to involve sand. So those details are all about creativity within the architect's strategic vision.

Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan: Old Tom Morris said, “Bunkers are not a place for pleasure: they’re for punishment and repentance.” But what has allowed elite players to seemingly master sand play is because bunkers have become consistent and predictable playing surfaces, even between golf courses.

This is a result of sophistication in sand selection, bunker liners and maintenance practices to create “perfect” bunkers, that has eliminated the capricious nature and fear of the old-time hazards, that were appropriately called “sand traps,” that rarely played the same, even on the same course.

In 2006, Jack Nicklaus tried deeply furrowed bunker raking at the Memorial to disrupt perfect lies, and most pros hated it, so it was gone. Bunkers that challenge the best players today tend to be smaller, sometimes resulting in awkward stances caused by ragged edges and/or grass islands, or the ball being against a near-vertical front face.

Chris Cochran: I think bunkers are very relevant. If you look at Shotlink and scrambling data from the tour the average up and down out of green side bunkers is less than 50%.

Fairway bunkers are very relevant, look at last year’s PGA when Victor Hovland on the back nine of Sunday didn’t get his approach shot out of the fairway bunker down the stretch and how much the momentum changed after that.

Watching tournament golf especially in person, you see how hard the players work to avoid the bunkers. In addition, elite players appreciate the beauty of a well-designed, placed, and artistic bunker as much if not more than most.

Jerry Lemons: I hope not, but the thought of every lie in a bunker being perfect has driven clubs to the same level of expectation of consistency we wanted greens to be 30 years ago.

Beau Welling: I would not say that bunkers are irrelevant but most elite-level players are very good out of the sand, so bunkers are not the penalty they used to be. Course conditioning and the design of bunkers are a factor because players can end up with “good lies” in the sand.

To take that thought a step further, we are now seeing players intentionally trying to hit into the sand to take advantage of certain situations – that was something we saw from Justin Thomas during his 2022 PGA Championship victory at Southern Hills.

If bunkers had more randomness and a higher probability of “funny lies,” then they would have a different effect. But that wouldn’t be popular in today’s game.

What do you think architects such as Alister MacKenzie, A.W. Tillinghast, George Thomas, Donald Ross, et al – would think of how golf courses have evolved since their respective time frame?

Drew Rogers: I don’t think they would be all that surprised. Most architects from the Golden Age wrote about the subject of evolution 100 years ago – almost as if they were warning the reader that courses would be impacted by technology, etc. over time.

That said, I think they would share the same concerns that have been expressed today about losing the strategic impacts of their designs. At the same time, though, I think they may be pretty impressed with advances in golf course management and efficiencies developed to aid in the construction and maintenance of golf courses.

Jerry Lemons: If they were dropped in today, they would shake their heads, but if they had seen it evolve slowly as it has done, they would grasp many good things as good for the game.

Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan: Those past masters were not design geniuses on day one, so they had to evolve and refine their own design thinking, to include adopting new innovations that might improve their golf courses such as irrigation, drainage, improved grasses, and better maintenance equipment and techniques.

So, I think that they would generally embrace the modern golf course, except perhaps our penchant for over-manicured green grass everywhere and bright white sand that makes modern golf courses look “artificial” compared to their era.

Chris Cochran: I think they were very smart and clever architects. The game has changed so much since they were designing courses. At the elite tournament level, I think they would understand how much money is involved, TV viewership and what viewers like to see, how good the elite players are, and therefore would understand why tournament courses are what they are today and would do similar work.

I think they would also understand issues facing the game like the cost of labor, availability of qualified staff, rising equipment and materials cost and availability of clean water, players expectations for maintenance of golf courses, etc. and would design accordingly.

Beau Welling: I am sure they may have some interesting thoughts. Overall, I think they would be shocked initially but quickly grow excited by the possibilities of reconfiguring and reimagining how to adapt their designs to today's game.

Valhalla ends with a risk/reward par-5. What's your take on having a par-5 hole placed in the finishing role?

Drew Rogers: **As long as the hole forces players to make some critical choices, as the best golf holes do, the par seems irrelevant to me.**

Having to make decisions under pressure usually provokes some level of drama – and that's what that hole is intended to do.

Jerry Lemons: With adequate risk, it is exciting. It should barely be reachable, at least with a 3-wood.

Chris Cochran: From a spectator's standpoint they offer great drama and excitement.

Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan: One only needs to think of the great finishing hole at Pebble Beach, Kapalua Plantation, Shadow Creek, and I would be remiss not to mention Erin Hills, to understand just how exciting a par-5 can be, if it is a true risk/reward hole.

These are not easy holes to create given the distances elite players hit the ball, length alone is not enough, so there must be significant risk involved for failure to execute. But when such a design can be pulled off, these holes are awesome.

Beau Welling: We are fans of par-five finishing holes. In general, we tend to favor holes that can offer “high volatility” in scoring and a risk-reward par five is a good example. Having it at the end of the round can be very dramatic as it gives a player the potential to go and score to win. It's super fun for spectators, too.

Give a letter grade on the site selections made in the last 25 years by the PGA of America for its flagship event.

Drew Rogers: A-/B+? The PGA has done a commendable job of exploring variety in its championship venues. Blending classic/traditional with modern courses – those built in the last 40–50 years

And they have also sampled courses from various regions across the country. Additionally, the PGA seems to do a really good job with course conditions and setup via the efforts of Kerry Haigh.

Beau Welling: I am biased with this answer because I love the game and anyone who loves golf should have a great appreciation for the PGA of America. The PGA's vast membership of over 29,000 professionals from coast to coast are the boots on the ground to grow, protect, steward and innovate our game.

I am not fully aware of the detailed reasonings behind their site selections. However, I am confident that the PGA looks holistically into what makes sense with site selections to help accomplish their goals and objectives, which collectively are bigger than a single golf tournament.

Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan: B+ for the quality of the golf courses alone, but perhaps an A when one considers the other business decisions that accompany choosing a 'Major' site such as parking, traffic, hotels, TV compound, merchandise areas, and a myriad of other considerations. In some ways the golf course ends up secondary to other demands of hosting a major.

Chris Cochran: A. I like seeing tournaments played on courses I have not seen them being played on before therefore I like how the PGA is more aggressive with site selection for tournaments which I would hope would be even greater in the future by moving the tournament to May.

Jerry Lemons: A.

When you visit a course. you have not designed what draws your attention immediately?

Drew Rogers: I study how well courses fit the ground and setting. How well the ground was recreated to produce something compelling. You can tell immediately when an architect understands strategy and shot values, the use of angles, varied directions and presentations, balanced sequencing and flow, nuanced accents and generally applying psychological tests for players to sort out.

Most of all, a course can also really get my attention if it is an enjoyable playing experience. I don't mind difficult courses if there are options. Options make for fun for everyone and difficulty often leads to memorability.

Chris Cochran: For me it starts with expectations. My expectations for a course where I am paying a \$30 green fee will be different than playing a top 100 course I have not seen before. After that it's the look and feel of the facility and how the golf course plays.

I believe I am very open minded when seeing and playing other courses I have not worked on. I am a huge fan of good golf holes, especially clever holes that are set up in a way I would never have thought of or have not seen before.

Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan: How playable and interesting is the course for the people paying dues or green fees. This means number of tees, width of fairways, depth of rough, green sizes and slopes, amount of penalty areas, margins for shot error, and forced carries.

Of course, one cannot overlook how well the course fits into its surroundings and how view corridors were manipulated, but playability should always be number one.

Beau Welling: Visiting a course our team has not been involved with is always fun and interesting. The first thing that I look for is normally the overall routing. I always wonder about the “why.”

Jerry Lemons: Bunkering, of course! On a broader level -- why the decisions were made about placing golf holes in certain ways and how those decisions affect variety and shot values.

Knowing that you may never know the “whys,” I tend not to ever be critical of other golf courses. But I am certainly curious.

Drew Rogers



In 1992, Rogers took a design position with renowned architect Arthur Hills. He quickly assumed full management of numerous full-scale projects and became a well-recognized face of the firm and a highly respected golf industry practitioner.

Appointed a full partner of Hills' firm in 1999 before earning acceptance as a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects in 2001. During a time spanning nearly 19 years, Rogers collaborated with Hills on over thirty new course designs and over twenty major renovations worldwide.

In 2010, he established his own design practice (JDR), whose primary focus is to assist existing course entities that seek to make improvements to their facilities. JDR is a small, boutique entity that focuses on personal service, direct communication, well-planned improvement programs, and enduring excellence.