

ASGCA Member Spotlight 2008: Jan BelJan



Jan BelJan, ASGCA

[Jan BelJan](#) shares her thoughts on golf course architecture, how it's perceived and how it's changed over the years. A former Superintendent and ASGCA member since 1990, Jan has also served as an ASGCA Board Member and Membership Chair. She currently practices in Jupiter, Florida.

Designer vs. Architect ...

Often asked is the difference between “designer” and “architect”. Semantically, they are similar as both involve creativity. Both words define creation for a specific purpose. However, I consider myself a designer. The very word “architect” has a harder sound to it, and connotes the creation is structured, hard-lined and when complete, finished. “Designer” implies a creator of something amorphous, fluid and changeable.

Golf as mainstream ...

I enjoy the current status that golf seems to have in popular TV shows and contemporary movies. In some cases, the settings are meant to imply exclusivity while other settings show daily fee play. Although I'm not a committed program watcher, I have noticed that golf has been part of story lines that show business dealings, friendships, recreation. Print and TV ads also feature golfers.

Interesting to note that Justin Timberlake is reported to have a 6 handicap, hosts a PGA tour event in Las Vegas, was recently involved in the purchase of a golf course in Tennessee, and has formal arrangements with Calloway. He, along with others in the same demographic range such as Zac Efron (14 handicap, “High School Musical”) and Hayley Joel Osment (9.6 index, “The Sixth Sense” – “I see dead people”) are role models whose presence may inspire today's youth to take up golf. Many famous personalities have found golf to be a venue to raise awareness for their preferred charities or their own foundations. In that way, many who do not play golf benefit from those who do play.

Rallying against elitism ...

I am less keen on the perceptions that golf is an ‘elitist’ game, and, that developers and managers of golf courses are environmentally irresponsible. It is hard to shed the elitist image when potential golfers consider the investment in equipment, lessons (or not), guest fees and time to learn the fundamentals. Golf may not seem as approachable as other games/sports. The National Golf Foundation reports that as income rises, so

do numbers of rounds of golf. The USGA, LPGA and PGA of America are tireless in their efforts to create programs that work to encourage new players and often publicize those programs during TV coverage. Organizations like the Executive Women's Golf Association (EWGA) and the National Golf Course Owners Association (NCGOA) have excelled at addressing issues in attaining and retaining golfers. A visit to any of their web-sites displays offers for free instruction or equipment use to try, or to learn, the game. Still, the image of elitism exists.

Golf is good ...

I am disappointed that for all the economic and environmental good golf courses do for entire communities, that this message is unwillingly given or is poorly received. Perhaps not all of us really believe our "green" message. Or we have not taken time to solidify our thoughts on golf's full impact on green space and recreation opportunities for the general population. Maybe some of us would rather not be part of the seemingly endless education process.

In need of some history ...

If it were possible to change anything in the golf industry, it would be to educate about the history of the game, the sport and the business of golf so that the industry of golf can be advanced with an eye on tradition. I would like to change the view of golf to include golf as a means (or an end) to social, mental and physical fitness for young and old alike, to have golf recognized as family recreation that is fun and exciting, and to enlighten players and viewers of the benefits of golf and its playing fields.

Striving for perfection ...

Courses were once designed considering only strategy and the native turf. Think of many revered British courses. In 1920 the USGA Green Section was founded in response to finding an impartial source for agronomic information to condition turf in preparation for the 1920 US Open at Inverness CC in Toledo, Ohio. That was the formal beginning of golf course maintenance practices influencing golf course design. It was expected that every club delegate to every USGA Green Section meeting would contribute some information that would be useful to every club that was a member of the USGA. The steady exchange of information created a desire to have more "perfect" conditions. As the desire to have more "perfect" conditions grew, the way to create those conditions also grew to include design and construction and the research and resource we all use today.

It is easy to see how technological improvements to maintenance and irrigation equipment as well as to turf types have markedly changed the way courses are designed. The level of maintenance detail may vary depending on the course type - private, resort, government owned. Based on the developer's philosophy for the course and the target market's expectations, a course can be designed to match the permit process,

construction budget, grow-in budget and the projected maintenance budget for the course during the time the developer expects to maintain ownership of that course.

Course designers have been, and will continue to be, judged by golf course conditioning. Conditioning is relative to climatic zone, weather, natural grade changes, soils, water quality, quantity and distribution, drainage, turf types, natural hazards, retained or installed landscape and numbers of rounds played as well as the country in which the course is located. These and other factors help determine the level of detail in design, which, in turn, impacts the maintenance. Large or small greens, numerous or fewer tees, bold or subtle contours, steep or flat slopes, location and number of bunkers, water collection areas, widths of fairways, and total acres of turf and naturalized areas are created with an eye on projected budget, technology and manpower to maintain the integrity of the design.

Changing with the times ...

The business of golf course design has become more detailed and paper-driven than in yesteryear. This is not necessarily bad. We have been able to provide more accurate estimates of construction time, materials quantities and other line items for a given design. Thus, we can more effectively plan for options or changes in weather or other crises

Travel was far different – there were no “hubs” for airlines. There were no cell phones, let alone PDA’s, etc. But you would be fed a palatable meal in flight. Still site visits were the only way to see what was going on. Other than Polaroid, there were no instant images on still film or slides, or on moving film. Articulated heavy equipment was a rarity, so fewer machine types were considered in the bid process. Rotary phones were still being used – remember those?

The gist of all this is that things took more time to do and required different skills than today. As it became possible to have faster results, faster results were expected. So, too, now. Because it is possible to have instant answers, instant answers are expected. Financial pressures dictate many of today’s instant decisions. Operating a business was less complicated. Business tax structures were less complicated.

Permits were fewer and less time consuming. My father, who designed only the golf course on which I grew up 35 miles from downtown Pittsburgh Pa., had to deal only with the Army Corps of Engineers, no other agency or entity in the 1960’s. One plan that showed the routing for the permit and did greens plans for the dozer operator. A far cry from the late 1980’s when 35 agencies reviewed paper or site work on a course I worked on outside of Philadelphia, Pa.

Today, we think about the business of golf much more formally because we now think about the users of the course further into the future than we once had.