

Matt Osborne: the golf course designer

Dubai-based Matt Osborne, 36, golf course architect for Harradine Golf, on the science behind making each hole a challenge and why it's important that he plays a few rounds every week



By Colin Drury

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Matt's favourite is the Meydan course – at the final fairway there's the Burj Khalifa and Downtown views to enjoy.

Source:Supplied

Matt, what a job title. Does that really mean you spend your working life designing golf courses?

Pretty much. I'm currently working on six around the world: two in Egypt, one in Oman, one in Russia, one in Morocco and one right here in Dubai, which will be a nine-hole course, called Legends, in Al Barari. An example of my previous work is The Track Meydan Golf Club, which is one of the few pay-to-play courses in the UAE. I've also done smaller work on the Abu Dhabi Golf Club and Doha Golf Club. Essentially, our company, Harradine, does everything from municipal pay-to-play circuits to championship venues.

How did you get into it?

I've always enjoyed sport, and played golf from a young age. When I was 17 I read about a golf course designer and I thought it sounded – short of actually playing – like one of the most interesting jobs you could imagine. I decided there and then that's what I'd like to do. I took a degree in landscape architecture and worked in the industry for a couple of years afterwards. Then in 2005, I took a masters in golf course architecture at Edinburgh University. From there, I got an interview with Harradine in Dubai, and was fortunate enough to get a job in 2007. I've been with the company ever since, and I couldn't imagine doing anything else. I love it.

So what makes a perfect course?

It's a combination of many things – a great location in the first place. Golf's not just a sport, it's an experience, so you want wonderful views and scenery for the players to enjoy. Then you need a diversity of holes – different lengths, different challenges, different strategic elements.

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There needs to be a mix of bunkers, foliage and water features, as well as sloping greens and contoured fairways. The absolutely key thing, though – where it becomes a real science – is to try and make each hole challenging to the best players but manageable for those who aren't so talented.

But aren't those two things mutually exclusive?

Not necessarily. So, as an example, you may have a hole where the most direct route from the tee to the green is to play your shot right across a body of water. But you place the water roughly where a better player's ball might land. The less talented player perhaps takes an extra shot to play around the water but the pro has to decide if to try and go over – and risk seeing his ball drop into the water.

Makes sense. So what's a typical day for you?

A typical day doesn't exist. It depends which project you're working on, what stage you're at, what your deadlines are. What I do try and do, though, is make sure I myself play at least a couple of times a week. There's no way you could do this job without understanding the game; and the only way to understand it is to get out there with your clubs. You get a lot of inspiration when you're on the fairways, actually.

Tell us how a project works from start to finish.

It's a long process but generally, things start when a client commissions you to design a course for a particular patch of land or area. Typically, in Dubai, these might be developers who want a course as an amenity for a new residential development. You spend time gathering information about the site – topography, wind speeds, services that might be running underground, sunrise and sunset times, client requirements, that kind of thing. Then you create a concept design that's a rough idea of how the golf course would work – literally where the holes might be and the challenges for each one. Then, if that gets approval, you start a detailed design that adds contouring and landscaping. Once the client likes that, you put it out to tender and work closely with the contractors who build the course.

And how does it feel when you see people playing there?

Pretty amazing, obviously. We get a bit of feedback, too – like a lot of pros who have played at the Abu Dhabi Golf Course say they really like it. That's a nice feeling because those guys know.

What's the favourite hole you've designed?

It's hard to pick one, but the ninth on the Meydan course, I'm pretty proud of. It's a big old par five – holes that are typically around 430-550m apart – so you get the chance to really have a swing but as you come on to the final fairway, there's this amazing view that takes in Downtown and the Burj Khalifa. It uses the cityscape to complement the finale of the course.

What would be a terrible hole?

One with a lack of interest, I suppose. No visual interest, no challenge to play it. A good hole should stimulate the senses.

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