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## 'Harradine: designs to grow the game'

Exclusive interview with renowned golf architect **Peter Harradine** about his distinctive philosophy in golf course architecture.



### What is the last course Harradine opened?

The Prime Minister of Bulgaria, Mr. Boiko Borisov, opened the Pravets Golf Club in Bulgaria on May 15, 2011. The course is just half an hour from the capital Sofia. It was an interesting project to be involved in as golf in that area is very much in its infancy and the club is keen to communicate a 'golf for everyone' message.

However, as you would expect, the property development at Pravets is of primary importance to the developer. The golf course plays a significant role in making the property an attractive potential purchase and I believe it will become the most sustainable course in the country, despite the fact that it does not benefit from some of the more spectacular sites associated with other courses in Bulgaria.

### What is the Harradine design philosophy? What characterizes one of your courses?

We try to make them maintenance-friendly. For far too long the industry has been spinning the bull about the necessity for championship golf courses and I think we have forgotten what the average golfer actually wants.

There are many examples of golf courses – some of which are very famous and we see on television as championship venues – that are not ecologically or maintenance-friendly. Let's stop this desire for over-manicured courses and go back to a more natural look that is also sustainable, both ecologically and from a maintenance perspective. Golf courses and the sport of golf offer many environmental and social benefits to their local communities, but some of the world's best known courses are also unfortunate examples of golf's excesses and unsustainability.

### What worries you about the golf course design business?

Very long, difficult courses frustrate the average golfer because the player never improves due to the difficulty and length of these layouts. What Harradine tries to produce are shorter interesting courses, with difficulties within the holes, where the player has to think rather than just hit long drives down the fairways. We try to be more manageable in length and style. However, some emerging countries do need at least one or two 'championship courses' in case they want to host PGA events.

As many people in the Golf Business Community know, I have strong views on the concept of signature design and feel that the media and developers attach too much importance to current or former professional golfers designing courses, at the expense of many excellent golf course architects who are less well known. Investors and developers need to take a balanced approach, look beyond the alleged marketing benefits, and see whether the additional costs of a championship course with a signature design is really going to produce a return on investment, when a shorter, more interesting course that is golfer-friendly may be more commercially successful.

### How has the development of golf courses changed over the past 30 years? What are the current trends?

We have many environmental constraints now, many of which I really welcome. Unfortunately, as I said before, we are constantly asked by developers and golf course committees to create championship layouts and I honestly don't believe that to be a positive trend.

A great executive 9-hole layout can have a more positive impact with a golfer rather than a huge long layout with monster par 4s and 5s. A smaller course can also be more environmentally friendly and addresses the issue that most golfers have in a modern world which is to create enough time to play a 7,000-yard layout. The only people that do have the time are retired or semi-retired and some of them have just started to play so they definitely do not want monster courses with many bunkers, hazards and crazy lengths.

Don't get me wrong, the world of golf needs long courses, but it also needs shorter ones, too. We just need to get the balance right.

### What are the current development hotspots for Harradine?

Eastern Europe is still a strong market for us and I believe Italy will also be worthwhile as we have quite a few projects there, although building permits are challenging. Italy is losing a lot of tourists because it does not have enough golf courses. Greece also has huge potential but, despite their expressed interest in developing their golf market, they don't seem to provide the right conditions for the building of courses. Their troublesome economy is not helping either and, as such, they are also missing out on a huge tourist opportunity around golf developments.

Ironically, Switzerland is one of the only countries where the number of golfers increases every year and finance for the construction of courses is easy to obtain. Unfortunately the building permits and procedures are so complicated that investors are scared off. Finally, Africa and South America also have enormous potential as they have few golfers, and such a fantastic scenery and environment.

### What about The Far East, particularly China?

In my opinion, China will implode eventually and that will influence the success of golf in that particular country. You can't have such a polarized society with extreme affluence and poverty and expect the economy to grow rapidly without problems.

I hope it doesn't implode in my lifetime. In golf market terms, it would affect many European golf design businesses as many of my professional colleagues would return to the traditional markets which would greatly increase competition in an already depressed industry. It's in everyone's interests that the Chinese market remains a huge success. But it is not one that particularly excites me, and I won't go over there just on the probable chance of getting a job.

### What are the key projects you are currently involved with?

We have five projects in Eastern Europe: Golf Club Tbilisi in Georgia, Golf Club Surcin in Serbia, Golf and Country Club Kazan in Russia, Golf Club Stugna in Ukraine and Golf Club Shurchinsk in Kazakhstan. We have designed the second nine in Cortina and have three further contracts in Italy, pending building permits. We have significant activity in North Africa: such as Golf Club Oued Chbika in Morocco: Golf Clubs Al Marassi and Uptown Cairo in Egypt, and the resurrected Tunis Sports City in Tunisia including Jebel Sifrah in Oman, and three projects in Switzerland and Austria. I've also just been asked to consider a project in Iran.

### You've been outspoken in the past about housing on golf courses. Are you against this?

I have absolutely nothing against housing on golf courses. It's just a pity that most developers don't give as much thought to the needs of the golf course as they do to the houses. A lot of our current work has come as a result of developers creating golf facilities that include housing – I'm grateful for that and long may it continue. But there should be enough room in any masterplan for a great golf course. It should be a priority.

We have a current project called Golf Club Stugna, near Kiev in Ukraine, and the developers are very receptive to the needs of the golfer as well as balancing the requirements of the property. The real estate is being created in unobtrusive and concentrated clusters, rather than sitting it on either side of the golf course's fairways. This makes good sense to me and creates an attractive development.

### How has planning legislation influenced your business?

Switzerland is a prime example of how difficult it can be to get permission to build a golf course. It takes 10-15 years to get a building permit in Switzerland, and that's if you eventually get it at all. It can be very tough indeed.

To illustrate this point, we started one design in 2006 and have revised it 27 times to accommodate the various changing demands by the environmentalists and we are still plodding along with various procedures which could delay the building permits by another 1-4 years. This situation continues despite the fact that we involved the local authorities and environmentalists, and adopted the correct procedures from the very beginning! The circumstances in Switzerland are a nightmare as unfortunately golf has a bad image there. Furthermore, the various negative procedures and legislation coupled with direct democracy which calls on the local population to approve or accept a project makes any proposed development very uncertain.

### How has the wider economic downturn hit Harradine?

We had 47 projects before the crash, and it went down to 17 in about six months. It was like a domino effect, it was incredible. Before, if the phone rang it was a new job, but during and after the crash when the phone rang it was to cancel or temporarily shelve a job.

It had a tremendous effect on our business at the time, but things are improving now. We had no enquiries whatsoever for two years, but in the past year we have sent out at least 15 new quotes.

### What are the toughest challenges for Harradine going forwards?

The biggest challenge is not exclusive to Harradine, but one for the whole golf business. We have to break down the perception that golf is a sport only for the rich and privileged. I played a lot of golf with my sons as they were growing up and I think this quality family time has helped me create a great relationship with them.

This is what golf is all about. No other sport in the world gives you this quality time and that is the message we must communicate.

In Western Europe, in particular, we have to convince people that golf developers and players are not just a group of uncaring capitalists wearing multi-coloured trousers. We care about what we do, and we must show people that golf is not necessarily expensive, is the best game in the world and definitely does not deserve this negative image.

If politicians in Western Europe were courageous enough to declare what a great game golf is, and back that up by investing public money to develop the sport and by charging reasonable prices, we would all experience a boom-time and see a huge turnaround.

### How positive are you about the Harradine business going forwards?

The economic downturn has allowed me to refocus on the projects we have and I can now visit each of our projects again at least once a month, which has always been my target.

In the boom-time, and with 47 projects on the go, I was feeling quite guilty about not spending as much time on site as I should have done. If anything, this readjustment in the business has been good for us. The previous situation was crazy and out of control and although very exciting I did not particularly like it.

Maybe a further increase in our present business of around 20% would be perfect, but our main focus is on keeping our customers happy, and having a business that can be managed professionally and consistently on a day-to-day basis.