



09th September 2019

SII Meets... Peter Harradine: Golf course designer extraordinaire

Peter Harradine has called the UAE home for almost 40 years and in that time has led the way in golf course design in the Middle East with a hugely impressive body of work – including the iconic Abu Dhabi Golf Club and Ras-al-Khaimah favourite Al Hamra Golf Club.

In our latest 'SII Meets...', the renowned golf architect discusses his life and career in the sport he loves.

My dad was a golf course architect.

He designed quite a few courses himself so, obviously, the right thing to do was to follow in his footsteps. I started playing golf a long time ago, when I was six years old in Switzerland. Then I studied landscape architecture and I was 23 when I first started in the family business. I knew the practical side of things well because from around 12 years old I would go with my dad to work on site. I think I'd have rather been doing more fun things in my summer holidays than pushing the wheelbarrows, raking leaves, and fertilizing, but it was all good experience.

I never had the character to be a professional golfer.

Or the skill to be honest! I admire golfers for their ability to stay calm as whenever I played I'd get mad as hell. I loved playing for fun but had a back operation about 13 years ago and sadly the doctor told me to stop playing. That has been really hard as golf had been a part of my life for so long. I do really miss it.

I've turned down jobs because the ideas have been ridiculous.

Obviously I don't want to name names but I've been approached with some remarkably ill-thought out proposals over the years. Fortunately, I've never looked for a job and people have always contacted me. That has meant a few bizarre ideas coming my way, I've refused some jobs because I thought that it would actually ruin the environment or that it just wouldn't work or that it would be dangerous. Thankfully most of the 160 or so courses I've designed have actually been built but there have still been some that didn't get over the line because of financing or building permits.

Drip irrigation brought me to Dubai.

I bet not many people say that! I was working for an English company on a golf course in the south of France when I was approached to install a drip irrigation system for Dubai Municipality. My first question was, "Where is Dubai?" But I decided to give it a go and then set up my own company. For a while I wasn't really involved in golf courses – ours was more of a garden business. It is still a huge part of our business and almost 40 years later Dubai Municipality is still our biggest client.

It's so different here to my home country of Switzerland and that's why I've stayed so long. In Switzerland we're dying under bureaucracy; we need a permit for everything. It's a great country and it's beautiful, but if you want excitement, if you want things to move, if you want vision, if you want courage, come to Dubai. Definitely not Switzerland.

Abu Dhabi National was my first UAE golf course.

I got back into golf course design again because I missed it and Abu Dhabi was the first one here. I was particularly proud of Abu Dhabi because it was built on a salt flat. A lot of engineering went into that. I created all the mounds, created all the lakes. It was closely followed by Jebel Ali. I've also designed Al Hamra in Ras-al-Khaimah, Sharjah Golf And Shooting Club and The Track at Meydan. As a company, we also built Arabian Ranches and Dubai Creek Golf Club but I didn't design those two.

Maintaining a golf course in the Middle East is easier than people think.

It is certainly a lot easier than maintaining it in Europe. You have the right grass here, you can control the irrigation. You know it's going to be nice weather tomorrow and the next day. In Europe it can snow one day, then the next day it's raining, the next day it's hot, so it's very difficult for the greenkeepers. In Europe the farmers have ruined the land. It's full of weeds, and a lot of silt and clay. It's not easy and we actually build European greens on pure, 100% sand. Obviously there's plenty of that here. The only thing that really ruins golf courses are golfers.

I prefer members to love my courses than professionals.

Abu Dhabi Golf Club still hosts a European Tour event and of course there is an element of pride when top players complement that course, or any of my courses. The Falcon clubhouse was my idea and it's great that everyone seems to love it but it is photographed more than the course now! We're better known for our championship golf courses because that's what the press focuses on.



Courses such as Abu Dhabi Golf Club often get more coverage than Peter's other designs.

I have a course in Switzerland, which is at an altitude of 1800 metres and the cows actually graze on the rough. People don't talk about those types of golf courses but they are ecologically very sound, people love them and they're great to play on. These are the courses I am particularly proud of as they are what it's all about.

Nine-hole courses are golf's great hope for the future.

I've been saying this for years and pushing them where possible – that's what you see with our courses at Meydan, Sharjah and Jebel Ali. People just don't have so much time anymore. To play 18 holes, if you count the time to get there and then you have a shower after having your obligatory post-round drink – it's basically a full day. This is an all-go world we live in and a lot of young people work very hard. We need to encourage them to either take up golf or play more and nine-hole golf is a great way in. Membership fees cost less and the rounds don't take as long. I just can't understand why more courses don't do it.

Players are not designers. They are professional signatories.

This has to be one of the biggest gripes I have and I'll talk about it whenever I get a chance. They don't design anything, they just sign. Developers are paying players stupid money to sign their name to a course for marketing purposes. It's completely wrong because the average golfer, and I come from a family that plays a lot of golf, doesn't care who designed it. If they play a course well, it's a great course, if they play it badly it's a rubbish course. They just want to have a good time.

I know a lot of professional golfers. Most just sign their name but then there are some who actually go to design meetings and then start changing things because they can't read a plan. I don't blame the professional golfer for doing it. I would do it as well if I could. Earning a lot of money just for signing a plan. Why not? Throughout my career I've refused to work in this way, with a golf course that wants to put a player's name to it. I've just said no. I have never collaborated with a professional golfer.



Our family will be in golf design for at least another generation.

My son Michael wanted to become a professional golfer but I insisted he should get a degree first, something to fall back on. Professional sport can be brutal and it's so important to have an alternative path in case it doesn't work out. He's done really well with golf; he has played at the Dubai Desert Classic and performed well at regional tournaments. Unfortunately his issue has always been distance and nowadays if you don't hit the ball a mile it can be tough. Fortunately he is also developing into a very good course architect. He is a qualified landscape architect and has designed a few courses. He has taken over the company and I'm very happy that our family's legacy will continue for a little while longer at least.

Golf in the UAE is in good shape but it could be better.

Yes golf has played some role in promoting the UAE to the world but mainly in the early days. Now it is beyond that. For example, the Burj Khalifa has put Dubai on the map more than any golf course. Golf is in a good shape here but they really need to reduce the green fees to make it more affordable. Green fees are crazy at the moment.

In general, golf must become more accessible. I once went to Wentworth and I was not allowed into the clubhouse because I wasn't wearing the right attire. A lot of courses are stuffy, and people don't feel comfortable. I have always said 'what's important is the etiquette of the game, but in terms of what you are wearing, who the hell cares'?! It is changing and guess what? People are seeing that golf can actually be fun. Golf is incredible. It's the best game in the world. It's a great family game.

I used to play with my three kids and it was quality time that no other game in the world gives you with your family. But people need to be convinced of this. Don't forget, if we miss a generation of fathers that do not play golf, their kids are not going to play golf either, and that's serious.