



## Golf Course Design Elements

An Interview by Colin Goehring with Golf Course Designer &  
Architect Kevin Norby

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### ***What are the most important considerations for a golf course developer when choosing a golf course designer?***

What is really important is knowledge and experience. As an owner, you want to make sure you're working with someone who can guide you through the project approval process and provide some assurance that, when complete, the project will be successful.

In particular, it is important that the client determine who they are building the golf course for: Whether the course is designed for private, public or resort play will have a considerable bearing into the design elements. These are important factors as an owner considers what their maintenance budget will be, as well as the caliber of golfer that will play the course.

A golf course architect is also valuable to the owner in terms of providing guidance regarding maintenance facilities, maintenance equipment, sighting of the clubhouse, the amount of parking required, finding good contractors, where to look for when hiring a manager or golf professional. In many ways, we become a sounding board for the owner because we have a wide variety of experience in getting these golf course projects up and running smoothly.

That's where having an experienced golf course designer is particularly helpful for a golf course owner; simply in having worked through a lot of the unforeseen challenges that an owner can have when setting up their golf course.

It's also important that you find someone whom you can work well with. You'll want to find someone who is really willing to listen to your goals and your concerns. You want to make sure you've got a golf course designer who isn't just

imposing their personal biases, style or budget onto your golf course. Issues like sizes of greens, species of grass, the type of sand in your bunkers are all important considerations which all affect the initial construction budget and ongoing maintenance budget.

A designer without experience may lack the necessary understanding of how all these elements can affect the final costs. The last thing you want as an owner is for your costs to skyrocket and to jeopardize the success of the project. This is where knowledge and experience will be invaluable.

Having an experienced golf course designer is essentially like having access to a Rolodex of industry professionals whom your designer has a relationship with and they can call upon for specialized knowledge when necessary.

### ***What is your philosophy of golf course design?***

What is really important for us is to have a clear understanding who will be playing the course and their level of skill. We will design a public course much different than a private course. The public and semi-private courses will typically have more play by higher handicap players. If you don't set the course up to accommodate that, you will end up with a course that won't be enjoyable for the customer and will suffer from slow play. People just don't want to come back to a course that takes more than 5 hours to play. So in that case, we intentionally design this type of public course to be a little more forgiving, with wider fairways larger greens and more forgiving hazards.

Having said that, one of the real tricks to golf design is to create a great course that is fair and relatively forgiving for the beginning golfer, yet strategic enough that the better player feels challenged. We can do this by not only providing multiple tees but by manipulating the angle to the green, contouring of the green and landing areas, placement of bunkers and hazards and also by adjusting the width and angle of the fairways.

### ***What are your considerations about how the course will look and photograph when you set up a golf course design?***

Golf is a very visual game. I think that when people come out and play the game, they want to have a great experience that they will remember. Typically the holes that people will remember the most are the ones that will have some dramatic effect or elevation change. For that reason, we try to design a course so that the holes are visually exciting. As a general rule, we try to take advantage of dramatic elevation changes by putting the tees up higher and the greens and landing areas lower.

People also want to be able to see how the hole lays out in front of them, where they are supposed to hit the ball. For this reason, I generally avoid hidden sand traps and hazards.

My favorite type of hole to design is the short par 4. These holes we design so that there are several options with varying risk / reward opportunities. We set it up so that a player who really wants to go for it from the tee may have the opportunity to drive the green or get very close to it. The more conservative option is to lay-up and have a longer approach shot. Those are really fun holes because they give a wide variety of playability options.

As it turns out, it generally ends up that the holes with some elevation change or some elaborate bunkering or water are the most photogenic.

### ***What can you tell us about designing an “Environmentally Friendly” golf course?***

It pretty difficult in this day and age to find a piece of land to design a golf course on that doesn't have some sort of environmental constraints. It may be as simple as a few stands of trees, some wetlands, or a drainage corridor with some potential for erosion. As a rule, we are looking for ways to preserve and possibly incorporate these sensitive areas rather than to modify or eliminate them.

It seems that these days everybody likes to claim that they are environmentally friendly but there's a right and a wrong way to go about doing that.

We've been fortunate to have been involved in some projects that really showcase how golf can co-exist with nature. One of the examples of that the Refuge Golf Club in Oak Grove, Minnesota. We worked with about 340 acres and about 100 acres of that was high quality wetlands, as well as a pretty severe problem with diseased oak trees. We were able to go in and route the golf course so as to preserve the wetlands. In the end, those wetlands became an important part of the golfing experience and strategy. A few months after that project was done, we were notified that the department of Natural Resources had submitted and ultimately awarded the project an award for environmental stewardship.

Currently, we're working with a new 18 hole golf course on Lake Rathbun in south central Iowa. The project is part of a new State Park and is being administered by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. We worked with six different routing plans on that project before we came up with one that avoided all the sensitive plant and animal communities. We also made use of vegetative buffers, native prairie restoration, and a variety of water management and monitoring practices to insure that the project does not negatively impact the existing plant and animal communities. This is another great example of how a golf course can co-exist with nature.

***How about considerations of fertilizers and pesticides that can affect the drainage and water systems – what do you do with that when you're designing a course?***

Frequently, we are either required or requested to bring somebody in to monitor these situations so we know that the amount of chemicals or nutrients that enter the water supply are at least no greater than they were prior to development. There are a number of studies that show that golf course developments can actually reduce these problems with run off. This can happen because golf courses make use of storm water ponds, vegetative buffers, and also because golf course superintendents are licensed applicators.

We often will bring in storm water specialists, biologists, and engineers to monitoring the sites. Often the erosion and chemical contributions from a golf course will actually be reduced to a water supply. A golf course can be actually enhance the environment and animal species that live there.

What will inevitably happen is that there will be people in the community who will be concerned and outspoken about the possible negative environmental impact of the proposed golf course. An experienced designer can assist the developer by clarifying the issues and clearly articulating the solution to those concerns.

***How can people reach you for a consultation about their golf course or if they are considering hiring a golf course designer?***



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