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The Case for . . . TPC Sawgrass

BY JOE PASSOV

→ **When the Stadium course at TPC Sawgrass debuted at the 1982 Players Championship, the reviews were brutal. "This course plays all around my game and never touches it," said Jack Nicklaus. "I've never been very good at stopping a 5-iron on the hood of a car."**

Tom Watson was blunt. "It's a joke, a real joke," he said. "This course needs some major changes before it can even be called fair." Quipped Fuzzy Zoeller, "Where are the windmills and animals?"

Can a leopard change its spots? This one did.

Pete Dye, who altered golf course architecture with his original design of

then Tour commissioner Deane Beman's vision, went back and softened the Stadium course. It remains a spectacular mix of serpentine waste bunkers, endless water hazards, grassy moguls and hollows and semiblind shots, with 18 remarkably varied green complexes. Nevertheless, there's a fair question to be asked: Is the Stadium course truly an elite layout, one worthy of being the host of the PGA Tour's flagship event? The answer is an unequivocal yes.

I posed this question to Brian Curley over a recent breakfast meeting. Curley is best known for designing nearly all of Mission Hills's

The island-green 17th is one of the few holes that **truly** scares Tour pros.

courses in China on behalf of his Schmidt-Curley firm, but he got his start in the 1980s working with Dye on Landmark Golf projects such as PGA West and the Ocean course at Kiawah. What emerged were a dozen reasons why TPC Sawgrass remains relevant and in a class by itself.

- The last three holes are the most recognizable and distinct closing stretch on the PGA Tour and can produce dramatic lead changes. The finish is perfect, with a reachable par-5, a watery par-3 and a long, tough par-4 closer.
- With its small greens, good shots are rewarded and poor ones are punished.
- The out-of-play areas consist of level, hard-packed sand, which makes for a variety of recovery options. The pines create tight corridors but also allow openings for heroic recoveries.
- Dye crafted 18 distinctive holes, despite a consistent frame of mostly pines, with little change in terrain.
- For all of its artificiality, the island-green 17th is one of the few holes that truly scares Tour pros.
- The course is very walkable. Not coincidentally, one of the longest walks is from the 16th green to the 17th tee. That stroll is made with the island green in full view, allowing the hole to mess with a player's head.

- Even with the advancements in equipment, the par-5s on the back nine serve up superior risk/reward opportunities.
 - Parallel rather than perpendicular hazards allow the average player to negotiate his way around with prudent course management, yet for a world-class player, these hazards will come into play early and often.
 - While the artificial mounding looks as dated as big hair, this feature should get a pass as it was designed to accommodate tournament crowds—a big innovation at the time.
 - As with most Dye designs, recognizing the proper approach angle and hitting to that target is rewarded, while mediocre tee shots are left in awkward situations.
 - The railroad ties coupled with grades that slope away from the water's edge create a distinct line of attack, in contrast to many courses on which a ball might land nowhere near the water, only to find slopes that feed balls into the hazard.
 - Finally, the tall pines and tight corridors create ominous shadows, making the water darker and more menacing.
- Although many preferred Pete Dye's original rustic appearance, the Stadium course is an ideal example of a modern look and construction in a day and age when natural, minimalist designs win all of the awards. No wonder the Stadium course continues to hold up against the best field of the year. □