



JACK O'LEARY
E-MAIL JACK

the take

Ron Garl's Ideas Worth A Listen

You might not have realized it, or maybe you have, but if you've played golf in Florida, chances are you've played a course designed by Ron Garl. In the past 30-plus years, the Lakeland-based architect has more than 100 of his 200-plus designs situated in Florida. His work spans the globe from Thailand and China to Nigeria and Morocco and from Canada to Colombia.

In short, Garl has a feel coupled with knowledge of what golfers want. While everyone has lamented the negative effects of

the economic downturn on the golf industry, he feels that, in the end, the game has won and golf course operators are emerging with a new significant game plan that will have golfers winding up the winners.

"We watch and help conduct polls that will tell what is important to golfers," said Garl, "and the top three answers are consistent. Golfers want an enjoyable course. They want value for their money and they want to be treated well. Who designs the course is actually way down the list."

The economic downturn has forced course owners to listen to their customers.

"Listening to their customers? What a concept," Garl said with a chuckle. "We've got to understand that golfers vote with their feet. If we don't give them what they want, they walk away. If we give them what they want, they walk back in."

Regardless of the reasons, this past winter has been a banner one for golf in the Sunshine State.

"There were more rounds played (this winter) than ever before," he said. "Sure, the weather was very good, but it was a lot more than that. Prices were down. The more you can keep prices down, the more people will play golf. I've always disagreed that the time factor has been the reason people don't play more. It's been the cost factor. If you don't believe it, try competing with Walmart."

You know Garl can design courses, but maybe you wonder how he can speak to operating them. He owns four courses himself. They're successful and they're based on these philosophies.

"I've long believed that the magic number is \$49.95," offered Garl. "That's for a round of golf, cart and a hamburger. Do that, offer an enjoyable course and golfers will come back. You can always get a golfer to try a course once, but the key is to give them something that makes them want to come back."

Even though there are indicators that golf has weathered the economic storm, there's still a black cloud that won't go away.

"The problem is that the number of golfers coming into the game has lowered," said Garl, "and the number of golfers coming into the game is lower than the number leaving the game."

"The silver cloud," Garl remarked, "has been that the courses that have survived the downturn have become more competitive and driven prices down."

Garl, a proud alumnus of the University of Florida, has joined his alma mater in a study of the economic shift and the development of a plan for the future. The timetable for this project is two years.

"We're just in the beginning stages," he said, "but it will be very comprehensive."

Garl was reminded the industry might not be able to wait two years for results and perhaps another two for implementation. The industry needs golfers now because that number affects costs of green fees/membership and equipment costs.

"That's right," he agreed. "The First Tee

is a great program, but it's not the answer the industry needs now. It will help 15-20 years, but not today. The answer can be found in two words — baby boomers. Thousands and thousands of people turn 65 everyday. We need a Silver Tee program more than The First Tee program. They have discretionary money. They're healthier than any 65-year-olds in history. They should be the ones who we campaign to get into the game. If you provide them with the right price, an enjoyable course and courteous treatment, they'll fill the tee sheets. It's an untapped market waiting to be asked."

Garl offered one other bit of advice, that when you think about it, makes sense.

"More courses here in Florida are giving golfers a sleeve of balls before they play and that's a good start," he said, "but why give your logo balls to them before they play? Most likely, they'll lose at least one or two in the water or elsewhere. Why not have someone situated at the 18th green? They can ask the golfers a short series of questions about their golf experience because golfers love to talk about their round. Then hand them a sleeve of balls and thank them for coming. That should immediately improve marketing effectiveness."

Garl often thinks outside the box. He's been known to color outside the lines when it comes to solutions to industry problems. Maybe now, as the industry is starting to come out of the biggest economic downturn in most of our lifetimes, his approach of common sense combined with creativity might catch on. ●

RON GARL'S TOP FLORIDA DESIGNS

A list of 10 notable Ron Garl designs in Florida, (although not necessarily in order of his preference; that would be like choosing one of you children ahead of another).

Fiddlesticks, Fort Myers - Across 36 holes, you have every challenge in golf. Play the proper tees and you have a lifetime memory.

Palm Beach Polo Golf and CC Wellington - Classic Florida design with reward for shot placement.

Victoria Hills, DeLand - Florida meet the Carolina Sandhills. Carolina, welcome to Florida.

University Park, Sarasota - There's 27 holes of fun with a new challenge beginning on every tee.

Indian River Club, Vero Beach - The first golf course to win the coveted Audubon recognition be-

fore it opened, proving golf can be eco-friendly, challenging and fun.

Golden Ocala, Ocala - The first replica course. All the holes inspired by the best of the great courses for you to play without leaving Florida.

Stonewate, Kissimmee - These 18 holes won't beat you up, but will tax your strategy and shot-making ability to the max.

Crown Colony, Fort Myers - The first course to use paspalum grasses to protect against salt air deterioration.

Timacuan, Lake Mary - Used as USGA qualifying site and popular with double-digit cappers.

Eagle Creek, Orlando - Five par 5s and a par of 73 should set this beauty apart. If that doesn't do it, how does 90 pot bunkers work?



Ron Garl

