

Gil Hanse's Moment

With the Olympic course in Rio and some high-profile restoration projects, Hanse is having his turn in the spotlight. How does he stay so nice? BY RAY TENNENBAUM

Photograph by Barry Sloan

"If there's anyone nicer than Gil Hanse in the golf business, I've never met him," says Ridgewood Country Club superintendent Todd Raisch early on a sunny Monday morning in July. He's driving a golf cart out to the fourth hole of the East Nine, where Hanse is due to perform surgery on the two bunkers flanking the green on the par-four hole. Raisch was an assistant here when Hanse found one of his first jobs after leaving Tom Doak's Renaissance Golf. "Gil has not changed one bit. He still treats everyone the same. And he always wants to hear your ideas, and will use one if it's good."

On this day, Hanse is happy to be immersing himself in the ideas of A.W. Tillinghast. Guided in part by a thick binder Raisch put together containing newspaper photos from the 1935 Ryder Cup and aerials taken shortly after the club opened, he will carve out the front of a bunker on the right-hand side, enlarging it and pulling it clockwise. Hanse has been ascendant for several years, with a rolling drumbeat of praise and attention for his own designs, but restorations are his bread and butter. He's touched up Winged Foot, Fenway, Sleepy Hollow, Plainfield, The Creek, Fishers Island, Pine Hollow, and Westhampton in the Met Area alone, and Hanse enjoys the work. "I know I'm a much better golf architect, and I think the guys I work with are also better designers, just by having absorbed these great architects' work," he says. "You really focus on what Tillinghast, [Donald] Ross, [George] Thomas, did at that specific golf course."

"A level of specificity is required to do a good job in restoration. A lot of architects will say, 'Well, typically Ross built these types of greens.' No. 'Typically' doesn't work. You've got to really figure out what was on his mind."

He quickly points out that the work of the Golden Age was long taken for granted. "We can all thank Frank Hannigan for his article on Tillinghast for *Golf Journal* back in the 1970s chronicling his work and his contributions to the game. Golf architects of that Golden Era were kind of an unknown quantity until then. That particular article spurred Ron Whitten and Geoff Cornish to write *The Golf Course*.... It wasn't overnight, but it started the ball rolling to the point now that clubs have on their logos 'a Donald Ross design,' 'a Seth Raynor design'—people are proud of their



Gil Hanse on the 11th tee at Winged Foot East.

heritage, and protecting and preserving it, and it paved the way for architects like myself.”



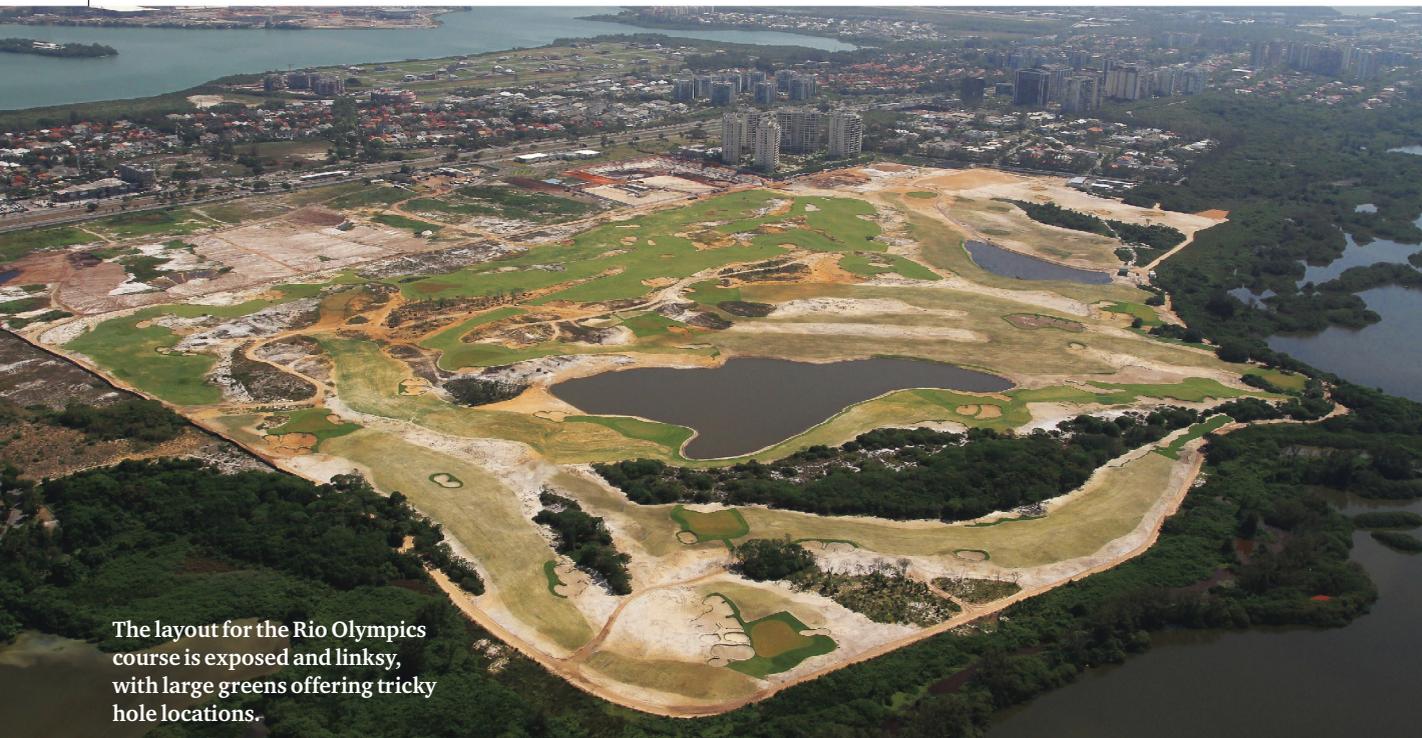
Hanse was born in Suffolk County and lived there until he was 13, when his family moved upstate to Hunter Mountain. His grandfather Gilbert C. Hanse, longtime mayor of Babylon, introduced him to golf, bringing him regularly to Southward Ho, the Tillinghast-designed club in Bay Shore. “He was my role model, the first guy who got me golf clubs,” says Hanse, “and I think a lot of what got me excited was just being out with him.

ticulture students, intending to use it to look at golf courses in the British Isles, he wrote to Tom Doak, who had used the award for the same purpose five years earlier. Doak sent a friendly reply, and within a few months Hanse had joined the crew building High Pointe near Traverse City, Michigan, Doak’s first solo design; five years later he was a design partner in Doak’s firm.

Early in his solo career, Hanse took on two projects on Long Island: creation of Tallgrass Golf Course, in Shoreham, and expanding South Fork Golf Club in Amagansett from nine to eighteen holes. He

edge, but what won him the job was his promise to move his family to Brazil for the duration of construction. That was nothing unusual – for Hanse, anyway, who is adamant about the need for an architect to be onsite, decrying “the franchise mentality which plagues so much of golf course architecture.... Golf course architects, after reaching a certain level of fame, spend more and more of their time on sales and marketing, and less on design.”

Hanse has been soaking up the limelight this year, first for his controversial redesign of Doral’s Blue Monster for Donald Trump,



The layout for the Rio Olympics course is exposed and linky, with large greens offering tricky hole locations.

But I knew there was something different about the landscape; I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but it was a Tillinghast course – [he laughs] – so it would have been arranged properly.”

He attended the University of Denver, majoring in political science and history with the thought of following his grandfather into politics, but by the time he enrolled in graduate school at Cornell he’d shifted to an interest in urban planning. His epiphany came in the form of a chat with a student who was studying to be a golf architect. “I called my wife Tracey and said, ‘The game plan is switched now.’” He threw himself into his new calling, starting with a maintenance job raking bunkers and mowing greens that summer at the Country Club of Ithaca. When he was awarded the school’s prestigious Frederick Dreer Award for hor-

begin to distance himself from a pack of young, well-regarded architects with the 2003 opening of his minimalist Rustic Canyon design an hour northwest of Los Angeles, built with a small budget on an environmentally sensitive dry wash crossed by barrancas. Critics loved Rustic Canyon’s firm, running conditions; the course was hailed as a model for affordable-yet-profitable golf. Another high-profile project was Castle Stuart Golf Links (2008) in Inverness in the Scottish Highlands; it hosted three Scottish Opens.

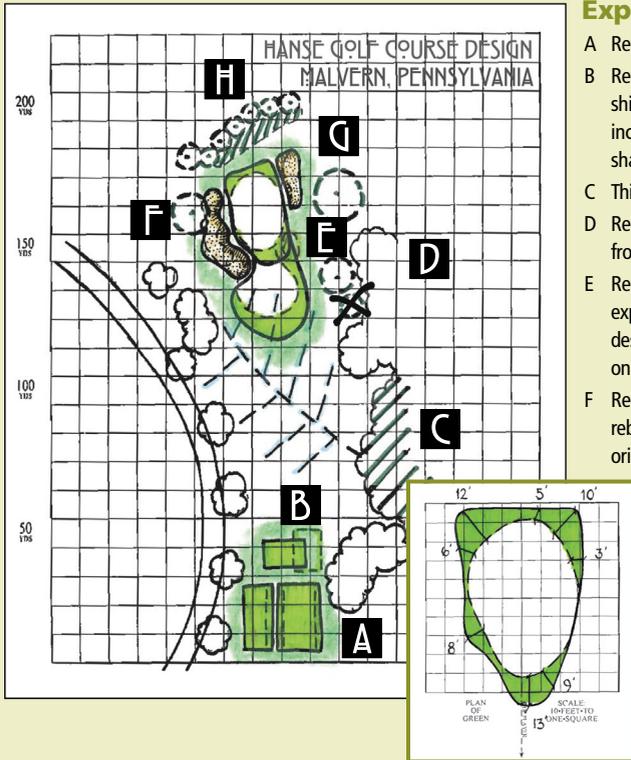
In 2012 he beat out marquee names like Nicklaus, Norman, and Doak to land the commission to build the 2016 Olympic course in Rio de Janeiro, where golf will make its first appearance in the Games in more than a century. Hanse concedes his reputation among golf insiders gave him an

then with a cogent cameo for FOX during the U.S. Open. Hanse is nearly always deadly earnest, but he also has a fine sense of humor – it’s a game, he seems to say, but you must take it very, very seriously. His holes can infuriate, particularly on first encounter, but subsequent visits engage and even charm; there is a kindness behind the toughness.

Part of the mission of Olympic golf is to push the game to new parts of the world. How does Hanse create a course whose prime purpose is to stage a competitive high-level event, yet keep it playable for the average golfer? “There’s a difference between playability and scoring,” he explains. “Augusta National is probably the perfect example of how you get a golf course that’s playable – it’s wide off the tee, not a lot of water in play, you’re not going to lose a lot of golf balls – but the level of precision

It's in the Details

Hanse's diagram and instructions for restoring the short par-three third hole on Winged Foot East. The green had lost its original corners; contrast the rounded interior shape with the photo on page 54.



Explanatory Notes:

- A Rebuild and expand both tees.
- B Rebuild forward tee, elevate and shift to left for better angle on hole, incorporate rock outcropping into shaping of tees.
- C Thin out right tree line.
- D Remove oak, hickory and dead tree from right side of hole.
- E Remove front right bunker and expand approach as per original design, add drainage in rough on hole.
- F Remove hickory tree and rebuild/expand bunker as per original design.
- G Rebuild bunker in original shape, expand green as per drawing, restore green slopes as per original.
- H Remove 7 white pines from property line and remove formal plantings from hillside, replace with informal hedge.

required to post a [good] score is off the charts. It's got big wide fairways to play—but to score you've got to hit the proper half of the fairway to get a good angle to get in to the hole location, and the fairways are tilted and sloped, so to get the ball to that side is challenging enough in that landscape. And then, you've got to get on the proper quarter of the green, otherwise you're going to three-putt.

"So—to make a long story short—on the Olympic course we created some eccentrically-shaped greens where we can really bury some pins."

Another challenge was coming up with an idea for something that had scarcely existed. "Every Brazilian golf course we've ever seen looks like a bad Florida golf course—white sand, green grass, palm trees—I mean, there is no identifiable Brazilian golf landscape. So, given the vegetation, the sand, and the grassing types, the closest parallel we felt we could make was with the sandbelt of Australia. Our golf course there looks a lot like Royal Melbourne, Kingston Heath, that style and feel. I'm hopeful the grass will be a little bit brown for a dried-out, firm-

and-fast, linky look. We want the face of golf to look natural and scruffy."

In a decade and a half of closures and abandoned projects that proved disastrous to most golf architects, Hanse never broke a sweat; restoration and renovation work

Gil Hanse listens to some tunes on a bulldozer at Los Angeles Country Club.



helped pay the bills. "We've been able to stay as busy as we want to be and then some, because we've been able to work with clubs who had the financial resources even during the economic downturn to be able to continue moving things forward. Donald Trump—he was a great example of that—him buying Doral during the economic downturn and saying, 'Hey, we're going to go ahead and renovate three golf courses here.'"

There's time for one more question before he climbs into the cab of the bulldozer, as Hanse gets his earbuds ready ("I've got Dave Matthews or the Grateful Dead going most of the time—it's a great release, and an escape from emails and phone calls"): Are great golf architects born or made? He hesitates before answering, "I think they're made. The thing that makes me pause is, we get a lot of compliments and platitudes, and they're all very nice, but the one that always strikes me is people will say, 'How did you visualize that?' I mean, that just has to be a gift. And I think there is a certain level of 'I don't know why.' I honestly can't tell you why somehow both Jim [Wagner, his design partner] and I are able to figure out composition, scale, what fits in the landscape. There has to be just some innate talent in that.

"One of the things that Tom Doak really drilled into me was go and see as many great old golf courses as you can and try and figure out why they're great, why they've lasted the test of time—so I think there's a tremendous amount of study that probably is more important [than innate talent]."

It helps when Gil Hanse is the one doing the studying. ■