

OLYMPIC FOCUS TURNS TO RIO 2016

By Paul Prendergast

While the world basks in the afterglow of a successful London Olympics, the man charged with designing the course that will host the re-introduction of golf to the Olympic arena after a 122 year hiatus - Gil Hanse - has his eyes firmly focussed on Rio 2016.

The Games of the 2016's Olympiad are now four years away and at long last, the turning of the first sod on the construction of the golf course will occur in a matter of weeks.

Hanse and collaborative partner on the project, LPGA Hall of Famer Amy Alcott, were successful over a 'blue riband' field of bidding designers that included Jack Nicklaus and Annika Sorenstam, Greg Norman and Lorena Ochoa; Peter Thomson and Karrie Webb, Gary Player and Robert Trent Jones Jr among others for the right to build the golf course in Barra da Tijuca to the south-west of Rio De

Janeiro, where many of the Games' venues will be located.

Hanse's name may not yet be as high profile around the world as many of the above but any anonymity he might currently enjoy is fading rapidly. His credentials and the appreciation for a growing body of fine work are seeing to that, as will the scrutiny he is about to be placed under over the next few years for his work in Brazil.

Hanse was awarded U.S. Golf Magazine's 'Architect of the Year' in 2009 and recent projects from his design team have been standouts and highly acclaimed. The Boston Golf Club in Massachusetts and the site of the Scottish Open on the European Tour- Castle Stuart - have received rave reviews, the latter including the plaudits of the elite players that have competed at the Scottish to round off their preparations for the Open

Championship the following week.

The Rio 2016 Organising Committee awarded the project to Hanse in March 2012 after a very protracted process that is, hopefully, not a set of circumstances that is going to prove to be synonymous with the construction of the golf course. At the time of writing, a legal dispute over the ownership of the land threatened to derail a construction process that is already working to a less than ideal timeframe. Time is now of the essence to ensure the project is not only completed but allowed time to sufficiently mature for the optimum conditioning expected of a 'championship' layout to host the world's finest players.

The site's sandy soil, natural dune formations and close proximity to the ocean provide some very remote similarities to the location Hanse had to work with at Castle



Gil Hanse's winning design proposal

Stuart, but that's about where the comparisons end. Creating a traditional links course with their characteristic playing conditions in a climate so starkly opposed to that of Scotland will not be part of Hanse's thinking.

Their Agreement with Rio 2016 preclude Hanse and Alcott from commenting broadly on the legal dispute but with the clock ticking, they have their shoulders to the wheel in the shadow of these distractions to construct the golf course in time for proposed 'test events' earmarked for 2015.

In the weeks following the completion of the London Olympics, Gil Hanse provided some insights to the project and the task ahead.

Q. From what we've seen from afar, the tract of land you have for the golf course is a sandy based and in close proximity to the coast - elements that would

normally represent an enticing prospect for a course designer. I've heard the Sandbelt courses in Melbourne may be part of the blueprint for the course design you have in mind for Rio?

These elements are the most enticing aspects of the site and while you cannot see the ocean from the property, the sound of the waves and the salt air offer enough of a taste to make it feel like seaside golf. We have drawn parallels to the sandbelt courses of Australia, primarily because of the look of the vegetation on site, more shrubs and low growing trees, as well as the sandy soil.

We have a love of the look of these courses, and are hopeful that we can capture some of this feel in our course in Rio.

Q. We've heard the Olympic competition at Rio could be a stroke play event, not match play

as had been mooted as an option. Does this change any of your thinking about the design for you at all i.e. some golf course are good 'match play' courses, for example?

Like all of you, we are still waiting for the final word on the format, and it will impact some of our thoughts. However, we do believe that the aspects of a course design that are good for stroke play are also good for match play.

Principally, these will include '1/2 par' finishing holes where big swings can occur, and holes that will hopefully inspire aggressive play at the finish. We would really like to see positive golf, as opposed to defensive golf, being the theme for the late stages of the competition.

Q. The London Olympics have just concluded. Were you able to enjoy these as a spectacle, knowing Rio is now inside 4

» GIL HANSE - COURSE DESIGNER

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years away, or did you feel an undercurrent of other emotions i.e. nervousness, pressure at the task ahead!?

I think that in some ways, we are now 'on the clock' with the conclusion of the London Games and that will add some urgency to the process. I believe that we will feel the most pressure when the Games are on, as that is when the critical reaction to the course will be most prevalent.

During the construction process, I do not believe we will feel a great deal of pressure as we have plenty of time to create the course in the sand, and our methodology of designing in the field allows us some flexibility in the process and the

opportunity for our team to be more creative in the dirt than on paper. I am hopeful that the overriding emotion during construction will be one of happiness, as I believe that if we are having fun in the ground it will result in a better golf course.

Q. It's been some months since the excitement of the bid announcement for you, has the 'enormity' of it sunk in yet for Amy Alcott and yourself?

I know that for us, it has been quite an exciting time. I am guessing that for Amy, who has had a Hall of Fame career in golf, this is a little bit more in line with 'usual' but we are truly excited for the opportunity and we understand that there is a great deal of responsibility that comes

with this selection.

Our goal all along has been to do what we do best, not to change our methodology based on the enormity of the project, and most importantly not to try and do too much to the golf course. The notion of restraint in design is one that we will constantly be reminding ourselves of.

Q. How much time do you both intend to spend in Rio on site during construction over the next few years?

I plan on being on site for the vast majority of the construction process, my family will move down to Rio with me so that we can dedicate the time on site that we feel is necessary. My design partner Jim Wagner will also be on

site with me for long periods of time, and our shapers Neil Cameron and Kyle Franz will also be moving down there as well.

Q. Is it likely you will spend significantly more time on site than at other Hanse Design projects?

Yes. We have already let our existing clients know of our commitment to Rio and they are all very understanding. Jim Wagner will be handling our other projects and he is more than capable and talented to give them the attention that they need.

Q. Are you aware if they have decided on a name for the golf course/golf club as yet?

No, at this time there has been no decision on the name. I have not been privy to any conversations about this topic so I am not sure where they stand on it.

Q. Have the 'vanquished' course design bidders been supportive of what you have ahead of you in terms of support, being available to bounce design ideas off them and so forth?

I have spoken with a couple of

them about practical observations for the site, grass types, soil makeup, and thoughts on the character of the land. We have reviewed all of the routings and at this time we have decided to modify our routing slightly to improve the variety of the course.

As we move into construction, we plan to reach out to some of them for their thoughts on the different challenges of hosting two tournaments over a span of two weeks and for any stylistic ideas that may not have been apparent to us in their presentations.

Q. Have many of their ideas subsequently had any influence on your thoughts for the golf course or facilities you're contracted to put in place?

Not really, although we did go over them thoroughly and we were impressed with the creativity that went into the designs. However, when we decided to compete for the commission, we made it a point to stick to the principles and methods that got us to where we are, and we feel as if our design will give us the best chance of accomplishing that

goal.

Q. There seems to be tremendous good will from the greats of the game down to support growth in golf in South America through these Games. Are you getting the sense yet from Brazilians of a heightened interest in Golf, from a general population and administrative standpoint?

I think that with the London Games concluded there is now a sense of being on the clock, and the administrative efforts have been ramped up to get us closer to construction. I know that amongst the Brazilians we are dealing with on a close level, they are very excited about the possibilities for growing the game in Brazil after the Olympics.

It will be one, if not the only, venue from the Games that will be completely open to the public. I know that the general population will be at least curious about golf and, hopefully, we will have a great competition and that will make them enthusiastic about the course and its place in Brazilian sports.