



Elevating the Game

**Jim Engh
on mountain golf**

interview by Tom Dunne

Jim Engh is one of the rising stars of golf course architecture. Since starting his own firm in 1991, he has designed a number of award-winning courses, including Sanctuary, Lakota Canyon, and the Club at Black Rock. Much of his recent work has been in the Rocky Mountain region, but Engh currently has exciting projects on the go at Reynolds Plantation in Georgia and Carne Golf Links in County Mayo, Ireland. The ability to combine thorough design documentation and cost efficiency with bold creativity have made Engh one of the more sought-after architects in the country.

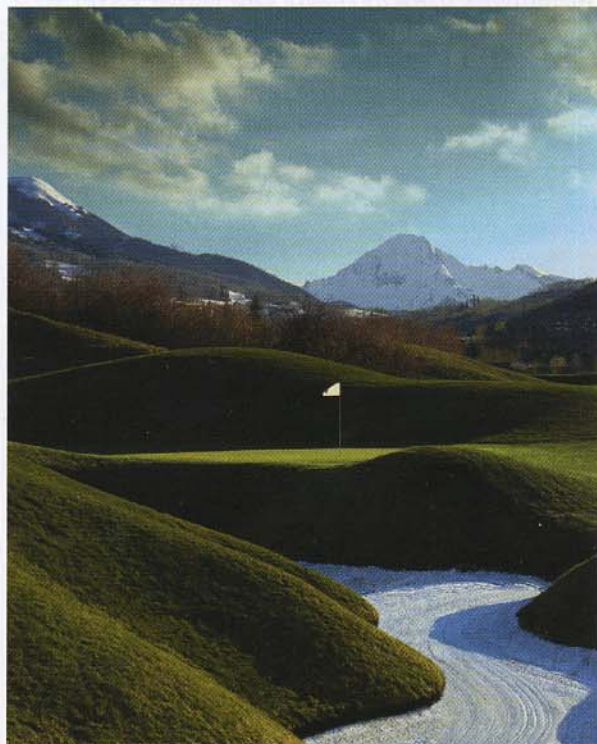
How did you get your start in golf course design?

I started out working on maintenance crews at a little 9-hole course in North Dakota where I grew up. My dad was a John Deere dealer, and was one of the guys who helped build the course. He brought the tractors and with his friends went and laid out a course. They were all flying by the seats of their pants with the design. So maybe it was in my blood a little bit—my mom and dad are also both very good players. From there, I entered the architecture program at Colorado State and eventually switched over to landscape architecture in order to get into golf design. I also spent my summers getting as much construction experience as I could.

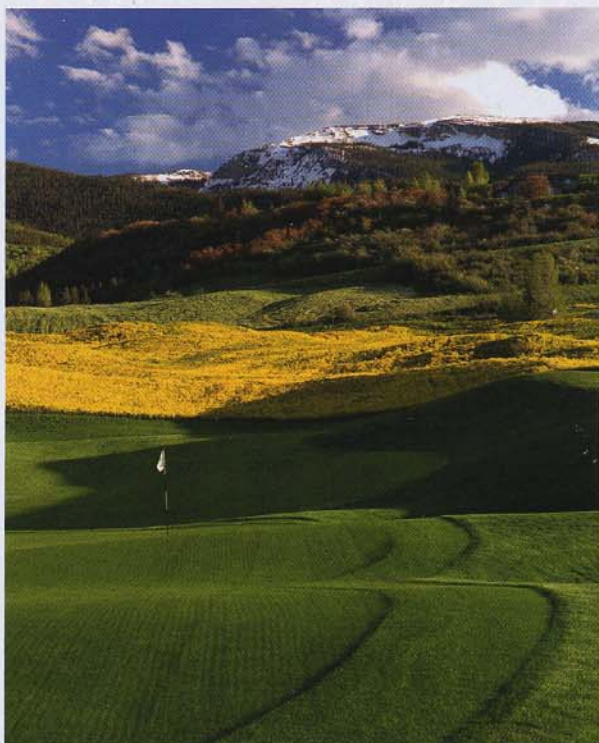
You're based in Colorado and have worked extensively in the Rocky Mountain region. What are the challenges that face an architect creating a course in a mountainous environment?

Well, the biggest challenge is the most obvious—the terrain itself. Sometimes you have a site that allows for more or less typical design methods, and other times you end up with a wild and wacky place and your job is to make it playable. Mountain golf at its best is such a thrilling experience. The

game has come a long way from its origins in Scotland. At that time, there was one kind of golf experience—the links. Gradually, as the game moved south to England, a second type emerged—the heathland course. Today, because of the places we are able to go, including deserts and mountains, there are so many more mediums for the art form to be expressed. That's the real beauty of golf to me. I'm not saying that one setting is better than another, but to be able to offer an exciting golf experience in the mountains—which is probably the most radical medium of all—is something that I have a lot of fun with.



The Snowmass Club



aren't that difficult to walk from tee to green. It is the distance between holes that is usually the issue. We are trying to work on offering cart caddie programs at some of my courses, where players can still walk and just hop on the cart for the really difficult climbs. Ultimately, I think you have to judge a course based on the strength of its golf holes, not what happens in between them.

How do you design a strategic golf course at high altitude?

At Snowmass, we designed a course at 8,000 feet, so obviously the ball goes a lot farther. But thin air isn't any less of a natural strategic element than wind. Because golf originated in low-lying, dunes areas, wind is seen by some as central to the golf experience, but we're really just talking about air. I think the strategy of golf actually is fascinating at altitude, because players see how far the ball travels and their normal sense of what makes for safe and risky shots comes into question. Can I carry that bunker at this altitude? Am I over-clubbing on this approach shot? All of those things come into play.

"On mountain courses, you can see all the options at hand from the tee and you try to play a chess game with the course."

In the past, with a few exceptions like Stanley Thompson's work at Banff and Jasper Park, mountain sites were generally considered ill suited for golf. What changed that?

Technology has improved a lot of the tools at our disposal—everything from drainage to excavation to maintenance equipment. But the biggest thing is probably the cart. Golf carts are often considered a big taboo, but at the end of the day, they open up so many different possibilities for the golf experience. I don't know that I'd want to build for carts all the time, but I can appreciate, as a golfer and a designer, the ability to get into some of these natural places and explore the nuances that the land has to offer.

Some critics hesitate to call a course great if it is difficult to walk. Is this unfair to courses that feature major elevation changes?

Oh, sure I think it's unfair. I think walking is an integral part of a certain kind of golf experience. But, if I have to use a cart to get around a truly exciting golf course, if that's the tradeoff, I'm happy with that, because you get rewarded in so many other ways. The thing is, mountain courses often

On mountain courses, you come to the tee on a par-5 and because the landscape is so rugged and you are so high up and you can see all of the options, you try to play a little chess game with the course.

What were the major influences on your design philosophy?

I spent a great deal of time in Ireland. Exploring the courses there opened my mind to a philosophy, a willingness to accept ideas that might be a little



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different. There are some weird elements on the ground at a place like Ballybunion, that may or may not work in another context, but they are always good to keep in mind. I like to think that my courses are golfing adventures, more than anything else, because you are always exploring and finding new things. I have a phrase we use around the office—"trap doors and hidden fairways." I got this from an experience I had in Ireland, touring a castle in Donegal. We took the public tour, and the next morning all the other guys were late getting up, so I went back and toured the castle again—except that this time, after the tour ended, I kind of wandered off into one of the back hallways. I started finding all of these amazing things—trap doors and hidden stairways, passages that most people never see. I started thinking about how that could be applied to the golf experience. I don't want people to figure out one of my courses after playing it once, twice, or even ten times. I want golfers to always have a unique experience. The depth of an experience is always so much greater when you leave something to the imagination.

Can you describe a golf hole that illustrates the concept of trap doors and hidden fairways?

The fourth hole at Sanctuary is one. I've counted the number of ways to play this hole, and there are at least eleven. It's a par-5, and there are three landing areas off the tee that all have different second shot strategies. Then there are two more second shot landing areas, and there are all kinds of launching pads and different lies and elevations out there. Playing it for the first time, you are really overtaken by the scenery. Over time, you begin to study the strategy and all of the possibilities. I've played the hole dozens of times and I'm not sure if I've even figured it out yet!

You've been quite busy lately creating a new nine at Carne Golf Links in the west of Ireland.

Yes, we've got a great new routing over there. How do you say this without sounding pompous—it really pushes the envelope. The terrain is jaw

dropping. We actually had to change the original routing when we found a prehistoric gathering area in the dunes where people would build fires and cook snails. In today's world, we have many more constraints than designers in the past, but that's part of the business. We're excited with the adjustments we made, and I was able to trust my values and even try out a few bizarre ideas. The detail of these links areas allows for so much creativity while still remaining playable. The sandy soil allows for the fescue grasses to grow naturally—you don't have to saturate the course with irrigation. Drainage occurs naturally, and that influences the process. As far as greens go, you have to consider that they will be drier and firmer, the silty sand will make the ball bounce, so you have to create your style and strategy to accommodate more for the running shot than for the aerial approach. It's not every day that you get to work in a landscape like Carne, so we are really excited to see how it will turn out.

As one of the rising stars in golf course design, what goals do you have in the future?

I'm happy to have the reputation of pushing the envelope a little bit. I like to design holes that might turn some heads. But that's the beautiful thing about all the stuff that is happening today. There is such a great variety. If you look at what Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw are doing, or Mike Strantz, or Tom Doak—everyone has a different style for these different kinds of golf experiences. •

