



INSIDE THE ROPES

by Brian Hewitt

The Confidential Guide to Tom Doak

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It has been 11 years now since tiny Sleeping Bear Press published the collected golf course wisdom of a brash, young, aspiring architect named Tom Doak.

The title of the book was 'The Confidential Guide to Golf Courses.' It was slightly smaller in size than most coffee table books. Its initial suggested retail value was \$45. And it soon acquired cult status among golf insiders who knew of names like Tillinghast and Colt and Flynn and places like Macrihanish and Huntingdale and Kittansett.

Doak shot straight in his book, pulling no punches. And his comprehensive list of course reviews was a refreshing change in a publishing field characterized by too much frothy prose and obligatory pablum. The content also validated former Golf Magazine editor George Peper's prescient decision to put Doak in charge of that magazine's course ratings when Doak was just 23 years old.

To be sure, Doak gave credit where credit was due in his Guide. But he wasn't afraid to say this about Augusta National:

"...there's so much interest in the course they feel they have to be downright rude to all those who enquire."

Or this about Quaker Ridge: "...a bit of a letdown on the back nine."

Or this about The Olympic Club: "...too many nondescript (though testing) two-shotters in the middle of the course for it to rank as highly on my scale as it seems to on everyone else's."

Anyway, in the ensuing decade Doak made a name for himself creating brilliant designs like Pacific Dunes, Cape Kidnappers and Lost Dunes. And his book, now out of print after only 12,000 copies, has skyrocketed in price.

If you are lucky enough to find 'The Confidential Guide to Golf Courses' in a bookstore, buy it immediately even if you don't know Crystal Downs from Crystal Gayle. If you want to procure it through eBay, be prepared to pay more than \$1,000 for a signed copy.

"I guess I should be flattered at its collector value," Doak informed me in an e-mail. "Hard to imagine why it costs as much as it does on eBay. I just wish I had some more of them in the basement. I did not even have a box full when it went out of print."

A source at the Valuable Book Group explains the phenomenon this way: "If you are going to be bold, you'd better be good. And Doak has proven that he is good.... We carry the book when we can, but it is difficult to keep in stock."

Doak says he has retained the copyright and has “seriously considered” republishing the book in its original form. “I don’t want to stir up more controversy by rating newer courses—including my own,” he adds. “But I am sorry that people can’t find the book just to read and use it as it was originally intended, as an opinionated travel guide. I’m also surprised that no one else has tried to publish a similar book.”

What remains is a huge interest among the golf cognoscenti for a 2007 Doak update on Doak circa 1996. Isn’t going to happen, he says.

“The key is that the original book was written just for a few of my friends. I’d love to write a new edition just for those friends where I could be equally blunt, but it would wind up being photocopied as before and it would open the whole can of worms again. Really, the book was partly the observations of a frustrated designer who had plenty of ideas and no place to use them. Today, I’ve got plenty of opportunities to design courses on my own, and I’d prefer to lead by example.”

A noble thought. And an inarguable one.

It’s just that so much of today’s sports media—written and produced—is designed to effect controversy for the sake of controversy. And so much of it is predictably and transparently artificial and empty as a result. Yes, Doak opened a can of worms. But thanks to his candor, it was well worth watching the worms wriggle onto the printed page and imagine how they made the poohbahs squirm.

“When the book was first published I was beholden to no one,” Doak recalls. “And I wasn’t well enough established in the industry that anyone could mistake my criticisms of modern courses as trying to take work away from Jack Nicklaus. Now, though, I have a hard time being so critical because people take it so seriously. And anything I said about my fellow architects would be viewed in a different manner.”

So Doak is a member of the fraternity now. Good for him. And good for the future of golf course design. But the price his loyal readers have to pay in lost hopes for bluntness in future course reviews is even steeper right now than the current bids on eBay for his seminal work as an author.