

Tell Me Something I Don't Know

JOHN STRAWN: COURSE-DESIGN EXEC TURNED MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT

by David Gould, Staff Editor

If asked to name the industry's No. 1 consulting firm, you could blurt out "Global Golf Advisors" and simply see who disagrees. The Phoenix-based think tank and problem-solving juggernaut recently hired John Strawn as a senior executive. Strawn is the former CEO of Robert Trent Jones II and former president of Hills & Forrest International Golf Course Architects. His areas of focus at GGA are "business development, long-term strategic planning and creative solutions to clients' long-term challenges," as the press release on his appointment disclosed.

Readers may recall a Proponent newsletter article from 2012 that quoted Strawn extensively on golf-instruction opportunities in Asia. Well-traveled and well-liked, he remains one of the legit experts on Asia's golf industry, but Strawn is just as well-versed on what's happening in Europe and North America. While there are a dozen industry categories Strawn can speak on with authority, instruction opportunities and trends were the focus of a conversation we had with him as he settled into his new position. It included discussion of the ongoing course-closure trend, about which Strawn said this: When a course is losing just one nine, or being trimmed back in some other way, academy-style facilities tend to come in.

"In the Ft. Lauderdale area, Greg Norman Design has a project that will tear down an old Dick Wilson course—which was very sprawling and had enormous greens—and replace it with a slimmer-profile, Seth Raynor-type design," says Strawn. "The acreage that they free up will make room for a couple of residential towers and a state-of-the-art academy facility." From everything Strawn hears, the companies doing these repurposing or tear-down projects "will absolutely at least consider adding a state-of-the-art golf learning center."

Also discussed was the industry's pivot away from brutally challenging courses, toward a user experience based on fun and recreation. Strawn candidly admits that the field he worked in for so long—course design—bears considerable responsibility for the industry's 21st-

century troubles. "It came down to not challenging the developers, when they would ask for a course that was super-tough, because they figured if it Sloped at 145 it would get a higher ranking," Strawn admits. "Architects took the fees and built their businesses and didn't stop to think about the long-term consequences."

Now he's seeing the pendulum swing toward a challenge that makes golfers feel excited rather than punished.



John Strawn

"There's a leading golf clubhouse designer, a very innovative guy named Doug Frederikson, who is working on a Topgolf-style practice amenity that can be built into club ranges and won't require golf balls with chips embedded in them," John reports. "He's been drawing interest in that concept and you'll probably hear more about it." This is yet another echo of what one hears generally—whatever big or small ways there are to adapt or imitate the Topgolf approach, they'll get attention from people who build and remodel golf facilities.

When your specialty is long-term strategic planning—as Strawn's is—your task isn't to see around the next corner, it's to see around the corner after that. This might explain his interest in Swan Golf Designs, a British firm that is known more for being market-driven and experimental than as artsy sculptors of the soil.

"The Swan group is credited with designing the first footgolf course from scratch, not as an extension or a retrofit of an existing golf course," says Strawn, referring to FootGolf Chester, which is south of Liverpool and surfaced partly with natural grass, partly synthetic turf. "That's an interesting crossover, for a golf architect."

It prompts the question: Could golf academies make the same crossover, and create footgolf training and player-development programs? If footgolf continues its growth, will golf academies hire soccer coaches and tweak their facilities so as to lead the way and eventually "own" footgolf instruction? And if not, why not? Some combination of strategic guidance from gurus like Strawn plus entrepreneurial energy from golf instruction's top echelon will likely provide the answer to these future-oriented questions. **PG**