

SA's 'wide variety of land' provides canvas for golfing artworks by Jack Nicklaus

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IN 1982, when Jack Nicklaus returned to SA play in the second Million Dollar Challenge as it was then known, a local newspaper carried the headline: "When Jack comes back, it's got to be right".

And Jack has been coming back to SA for decades.

Most recently, it has been to oversee Steyn City's 18-hole championship Nicklaus Design golf course, north of Johannesburg. The course is set to open in early 2015, but a few exclusive rounds

on it have confirmed that it will be among the top-rated in the country when it does open its doors.

For Nicklaus, it is just another bright moment in the long and positive history he has had with SA, from his days playing in the early Nedbank Golf Challenge at Sun City, his many trips into the South African bush and the Colesberg farm of his good friend Gary Player, to his hand in crafting some of this country's most impressive golf courses.

"When apartheid was abolished in the early 1990s, I wanted

to be a part of the new SA," says Nicklaus. "I have had a strong affinity for the country for many decades. My good friend Gary Player is from here, and many great players of our game — past and present — come from SA, so I thought our presence here was important. We have been fortunate over the last 20 years or so to have worked with some wonderful clients and the result has been some very nice golf courses all around SA."

Nicklaus said: "As both a player and designer, it's been wonderful

to watch the game of golf grow in SA. The country already has a rich history in the game, beginning with Bobby Locke. Then, you have, of course, Gary Player and Ernie Els.

“ Nicklaus has overseen the 18-hole championship Nicklaus Design golf course in Steyn City, north of Johannesburg

"You can keep naming names throughout the decades, right up to today, and the plethora of very talented golfers from SA who challenge on a weekly basis and in the Major championships.

"This is a country that continues to produce wonderful golfers and from a golf population that is arguably smaller than many other established markets. Those who play the game here are very enthusiastic about it."

For a man who has designed golf courses in more than 39 countries, Nicklaus is extremely proud

of his South African creations. But as powerful as the Nicklaus brand is, the most successful golfer in history says he would hate it if a golfer knew upon stepping on the first tee that he was playing a Nicklaus Design course.

"We try to avoid using design features that might be tagged as distinctive 'trademarks'. We don't want any golfer to step on the first tee, look down the fairway, and say, 'Oh, this is a Nicklaus Design course'. We want to be unique with each design, but consistent with the level of quality, and con-

sistent in solid strategy, shot values and aesthetics," he says.

Nicklaus says his design philosophy has undergone its own evolution, and he seeks now to design courses that are highly playable for the average golfer.

"The game is meant to be fun. And it's also a game of precision more than strength. It's a thinking person's game. There's no challenge in just whacking the ball. We don't believe in 'tricking' the player; rather, we design golf holes that place a premium on precision in club selection and

execution. A golf course should be enjoyable and offer variety to every golfer, no matter what his or her level of skill or strength."

As for the future, Nicklaus does indeed predict he will keep coming back to SA.

"It's just one of my favourite places in the world to visit and work. It's a great country with beautiful terrain and great variety. There are endless fabulous properties for golf courses. Perhaps that is a unique quality — the variety of land and canvases on which to create great golf," he says.