

Nicklaus keeps returning to South African golf courses

GOLF



Michael Vlismas

IN 1982, when Jack Nicklaus returned to play in the second Million Dollar Challenge as it was then known, a newspaper carried the headline: "When Jack comes back, it's got to be right." And Jack has been coming back to South Africa for decades.

Most recently, it has been to oversee Steyn City's 18-hole championship Nicklaus Design golf course in Midrand.

The course is set to open early next year, 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 gates.

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

"When apartheid was abolished, I wanted to be a part of the new South

Africa," Nicklaus said. "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 South Africa, so I thought our presence here was important.

"We have been fortunate over the past 20 years or so to have worked with some wonderful clients. The result has been some very nice golf courses all around South Africa.

"As both a player and a designer, it's been wonderful to watch the game of golf grow in South Africa.

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

"You can keep naming names down the decades, up to today, and the plethora of talented golfers from South Africa 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 said he would hate it if a golfer knew immediately on 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 consistent in solid strategy, shot values and aesthetics."

Nicklaus said his design philosophy had undergone its own evolution. He now sought to design courses that were 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."

Jack does indeed predict he will keep coming back to South Africa.

"It's just one of my favourite places in the world to visit and work."



JACK NICKLAUS