

The Golden Touch: A conversation with Architect Gil Hanse



By Seth Jones

September 24, 2014



Gil Hanse

It is graduation weekend, and Gil Hanse's daughter Chelsea is graduating from Villanova's School of Law. People are flying in at this very moment. But Hanse doesn't seem rushed.

Dressed in a pink golf shirt, the lanky architect (he's 6'5" but says fellow ASGCA members Roger Rulewich and Bill Love are taller) is the picture of easygoing. That's a valuable asset to the architect hired to construct the 2016 Olympic course in Rio de Janeiro.

Hanse might not be golf's tallest architect, but he is certainly the game's hottest architect. Along with the Olympic gig, [Hanse Golf Course Design](#) keeps scoring high profile jobs.

We sat down in the Hal Davis Library at the [Applebrook Golf Club](#) in Malvern, Pa. — Hanse's home course — to chat with the architect about the Olympic course, his sudden rise in fame and how he would describe his style.

Golfdom: Gil, thanks for taking the time. I know you must get asked this ten times a day, but what is the latest on the course in Rio?

Hanse: My pleasure. We finally have irrigation turning, it is installed on 16 holes at present and we have grass on ten greens and six holes completely grassed.

All 18 holes are shaped, we finished shaping the last hole in March so they are all ready to go. It's just the function of getting the irrigation in the ground and then allowing us to start doing finish work, which is progressing nicely under the supervision of Neil Cameron, Kyle Franz and Ben Warren from our team.

We'll try to wrap up by November, which gets us to a point that will give them two summers to grow it in. Their summer is opposite ours. If we get grass on the ground in November, that will give them the summers of '14 and '15, and then '15 and '16 to have it grown in. It is critical we get grass on the ground for this coming summer.

Golfdom: Neil Cleverly, the superintendent for the project, did you know him previously?

Hanse: I know him very well now, we have been going through this battle together. You know he is ex-military, so he understands what that means.

We didn't meet him until after he was selected. He was interviewed at the GCSAA show in San Diego, which I did not attend because I was living in Rio at the time. Neil's got a ton of experience overseas, primarily with warm-season grasses. Although he doesn't have experience with Zeon zoysia, which is the primary grass on-site, he's well equipped to deal with it and he has been a Godsend.

During the early parts of construction it was basically myself and a couple of guys who work with me who were down there. We were trying to make our way through the myriad complexities of the project. When Neil showed up he immediately took over as project manager. He is not only a great turf manager, but also an excellent project manager from the construction standpoint. So he has been the rock of the construction part of the project.

Golfdom: Give me an update on what other projects you're working on now.

Hanse: We are just getting started at Winged Foot, completing our restoration of the East Course. I went out to Denver recently for two days, Chris Swim is the superintendent at Lakewood CC. He has been a friend of mine for 20-plus years and Lakewood was the first club that ever hired us, after I left Tom Doak. I just flew out there to shape two bunkers.

I just returned from Dubai, where we are building a course for Donald Trump. Then I'll be down in Mississippi, Starkville area, doing a practice facility for Mississippi State University, and then after we finish that we will start a new 18 hole golf course there that's a private club close to Mississippi State. Then back to Rio.

We're fortunate, we have a lot going on. Some stuff is coming down the pike that we haven't locked up yet, but it's really promising.

Golfdom: Talk to me about your philosophies with working with superintendents. When do you like to see them get involved with construction projects you do?



Richard Brogan, PGA Golf Course Properties, Kyle Franz, GHGCD, Peter Dawson, International Golf Federation president and Hanse surveying progress in Rio.

Hanse: The most humbling thing for a golf architect — and most of us aren't very humble by nature — at the end of the day only about 5 to 10 percent of golfers really appreciate the design and understand strategy and risk/reward and analyze golf courses that way. But 99 percent of golfers appreciate good turf conditions. From that standpoint, the most important person on the project, from the public perception, is the superintendent. And we absolutely embrace that and understand it.

I think when you have a great golf course is when there is a combination of excellent design and excellent maintenance. Then I think everybody understands it. You can't overestimate the importance the superintendent has on a project because we can have all the philosophy about design and strategies, (but) if the maintenance doesn't match up with it then it's all for nothing.

It's critical to have superintendents involved from day one, and as soon as construction starts. I think there are all these critical linkages that occur between design and maintenance, if you can have that team in place from day one, then your construction is going to be better.

Golfdom: It's hard to ask someone to describe their style, it's like asking someone to describe art. And yet I want to ask... Does Hanse Golf Course Design have a style?

Hanse: Well, we give the trade answer 'I hope we don't have a style,' and it doesn't sound sincere. But it's true, obviously there are trademarks to our work, you know (vice president/design partner) Jim Wagner and I believe that the golf course we are building should look like it belongs in that landscape. So our golf course in Boston is not going to look like our golf course in Rio.

The consistent theme through our work is that they feel natural, they feel as if they are a part of that site, part of that landscape. I guess our style would be that we work really hard to try to preserve and maximize the natural advantages that a site gives you. By doing that, we sort of defeat having a style.

Golfdom: What has getting the Olympic course done for your career?

Hanse: It has been a big positive; it has made us a known commodity in our industry. There is a recognition that comes along with it. We are obviously humbled and honored by the opportunity. I think the golf world, in this sort of small world that we all work and live in, we were a known commodity because of the quality of work.

It's helped us a lot, but we are trying not to let it change who we are and how we work. We still want to remain intentionally small and still focused. Still, my favorite part of the job is getting onto a bulldozer and shaping. I think if I lose that then I think we've lost the battle as opposed to being able to stay focused on what is important.

Golfdom: How did you find out you got the Rio job?

Hanse: The Golf Channel concocted this grand charade. They told me that they were sending camera crews to be with all eight of the finalists. They wanted to film (the phone call) because they are doing a documentary, they wanted to see the reactions of the people who didn't get it and the one person who did get it. So they asked Jim Wagner and I, we were at Doral, we had just been signed to do the renovation there. So they asked us to come down at 6:30 in the morning to wire Jim and I up.

Tracey, my wife, and Chelsea, our oldest daughter, were there. We were all sitting on the couch and the phone call was supposed to come at 7 a.m. So 7 a.m. passes, 8 passes, 9 passes and then 10 comes and by this time Jim, who is one of the funniest guys you will ever meet, is being merciless with the crew. He asks 'Are you guys kidding me?' And trust me, I am cleaning that up.

I notice this guy standing over in the corner texting. Finally, at 10:20 my phone rings and everybody jumps with the tension...and it's somebody else. At 10:30 the call comes, it's the people in Rio, "Gil, you've got the job," and I am like, "Oh my God, this is great," and the mystery person leaves. Tears and kisses and hugs and all that kind of stuff.

Come to find out later that they were the only camera crew, they knew we were going to get it. The call was supposed to come from Rio, but they didn't have my cell number! The guy texting in the corner was Mike McCarly, the CEO of Golf Channel. He texted my number to the people in Rio so they could call us.

It was kind of a funny, long morning, but very exciting news when it finally came.



Golfdom: Why do you think they picked you?

Hanse: Nobody has ever told me directly. I sort of heard through the grapevine two things; that our presentation was excellent, we really did a good job delivering the message when we had to deliver it to the group. Secondly was our commitment to move there and live there. None of the other architects were either able based on schedule, or life, or whatever, to do it. So I think that really separated us.

Golfdom: What would be your storybook ending for you and your team for the Olympics?

Hanse: The storybook ending would be that the golf course is well received, but it's not the main part of the story, the story is that there is great competition and whoever plays for the gold medal, that the golf course was a great stage to create drama for that finish.

If the golf course is the main story that probably means something went wrong. If they are all talking about the golf course, generally speaking that's not a good thing. So I'd rather the story mainly be about the competition, and we built something that was able to host a really great competition.

Golfdom: So tell me, how many times in a week are you asked about the progress in Rio?

Hanse: I'll tell you this: We turned "What's going on in Rio?" into a drinking game.