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MEXICO TO PERU

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BRINGING THE GAME TO NEW PLACES

Mexico is the oft forgotten country in North America when it comes to golf. Cancun is known as spring break central and Puerto Vallarta has become a popular retirement destination, but golf destinations in Mexico? Not so much.

Across Latin America, the story remains much the same. Golf is viewed by most Latin Americans as an elitist sport indicating status — a game not privy to the everyday blue-collar worker and most definitely not a weekend pass time.

Agustin Piza is trying to change that perception both in Latin America and the world.

It is hard to imagine how a child, born and raised in Tijuana, Baja California, would come into the profession of golf course architecture with visions of changing the face of golf within an entire continent. Forty years ago, golf was anything but an everyday sport in Mexico and South America, and to this day, many have never even heard of the game.

Agustin was introduced to golf at a young age and became immediately enamoured. He would go on to become a licensed architect and study at the leading Monterey Institute of Technology in Mexico. He would then complete a Masters Degree in Golf Course Architecture from Heriot-Watt University, Scotland, where he would take advantage of the opportunity to visit and analyze the intricacies of the world's greatest golf courses. He would move on to work with some of the greatest architects in the business, from Tom Fazio to Jack Nicklaus, and now, he is the only Latin American golf course architect to belong to the European Institute of Golf Course Architects.



Agustin Piza at Bajamar Country Club



Agustin giving back and growing the game

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU STARTED TO GOLF AND WHAT PIQUED YOUR INTEREST IN THE GAME?

Well in Mexico and Latin America, this great discipline of golf course architecture doesn't really exist. It was really a matter of finding my two passions, which are architecture and sport.

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU KNEW THIS?

I wanted to be an architect since I was in fifth grade elementary. I don't really know why...it was just a calling I believe. The rest of my life I never hesitated to say I wanted to be an architect.

SO HOW DID YOU COME TO GOLF?

My whole life I have been involved in sport. I played American football, basketball and tennis in competitive leagues and tried golf a bit when I was little. But when I graduated from Monterey Tech, I came back to Tijuana and started working

as an architect supervising an industrial plant. All of the construction managers happened to be from California and because I didn't play football anymore, I decided to dig out a very old set of golf clubs from my parents' garage and start playing more seriously...every Friday afternoon. At one point, the general manager noticed and he said, "Agustin, my nephew works for Jack Nicklaus and he is building golf courses in Cabo." I was floored. I didn't practice that day and just sat there listening to everything he had to say about that discipline and I begged him to tell me how I could meet his nephew. But long story short, this gentleman set up an interview with his nephew over the phone and a month later I was working for Paragon Golf Construction, which did work for Jack Nicklaus at Palmilla and El Dorado in Cabo.

WOW! THAT'S A PRETTY CRAZY SET OF EVENTS...

What's even crazier is that just two weeks later I

got to meet Jack Nicklaus on one of his first walk-throughs of the golf course...just imagine that! It's like hitting a grand slam the first time ever up at bat.

But don't be fooled. I started from the bottom and worked my way up. At the beginning I was bringing the labourers ice, water, towels etc. I started from scratch, but I was extremely grateful for the opportunity and it's what provided me with all my future opportunities.

HOW DOES BEING FROM MEXICO HELP OR MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT TO MAKE IT IN THE INDUSTRY?

Being a Mexican national and doing what I'm doing, you're breaking a lot of molds. The parameters that even Mexican natives have around them growing up, you have to break away from them.

In Mexico, when it comes to golf, everyone thinks you need to be a foreigner to design a golf course and that there is no real national talent.

So there are two things I have to work "contracorriente" as we say in Mexico (against the current). I'm not only trying to make it in the industry, but I'm also trying to break the mold and prove there is sufficient talent and preparation to succeed and make fabulous work with the quality expected from international architects.

YOU ARE PROVIDING YOUR SERVICES PRO BONO IN ORDER TO DESIGN THE FIRST EVER PUBLIC ACCESS GOLF COURSE IN PERU. WHAT IS IT LIKE EXPOSING A WHOLE NEW POPULATION TO THE GAME?

It's just really amazing! The experience is greater than anything I could have ever imagined. The R&A (The Royal and Ancient Golf Club) is involved, The Peruvian Golf Federation, The Institute of Sports for Peru and more. At the beginning it was just a project

with good intentions. Now, all of a sudden, they are speaking my name in the R&A building. It has grown into a very big, bright project with the R&A providing a grant. With that we will now be able to give back even more than we had planned.

I really believe that the only way we can help ourselves is by giving back to others. In my discipline, I can give back to Mexico and all of Latin America by providing my services and bringing the game to places that might not otherwise be able to have the game.

The project will take five years — these sorts of projects are not easy — but in the end we will have a nine-hole par-35 golf course and it will take golf to new heights in Peru. It will resonate to all of Latin America and that's a great thing because golf is not just a sport...it's integrity, it's patience, it's honour...golf is a tool of life.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE STATE OF GOLF IN LATIN AMERICA?

Here in Mexico and Latin America, golf is seen as a stature...not a sport. Golf here is all about status, who you play with, what you do etc. Until the game is seen as a sport, things will not change in Latin America and the benefits of golf will be lost. That is why we need projects like the one in Peru and I've been lucky enough to have a similar project come up here in Mexico.

YOU STUDIED OVERSEAS IN THE U.K. WHAT WAS THAT EXPERIENCE LIKE?

Before going to the U.K. I had been working with Fazio and Nicklaus. Here in North America, everything has to be majestic. It's about moving the earth around like crazy, getting rid of all the trees, replanting everything and making every part of the golf course look absolutely perfect.

On my first assignment towards my Masters degree, I was given a piece of land and I was creating hills, moving lakes and everything in between. On my next two or three assignments everyone was saying "what's going on here?"

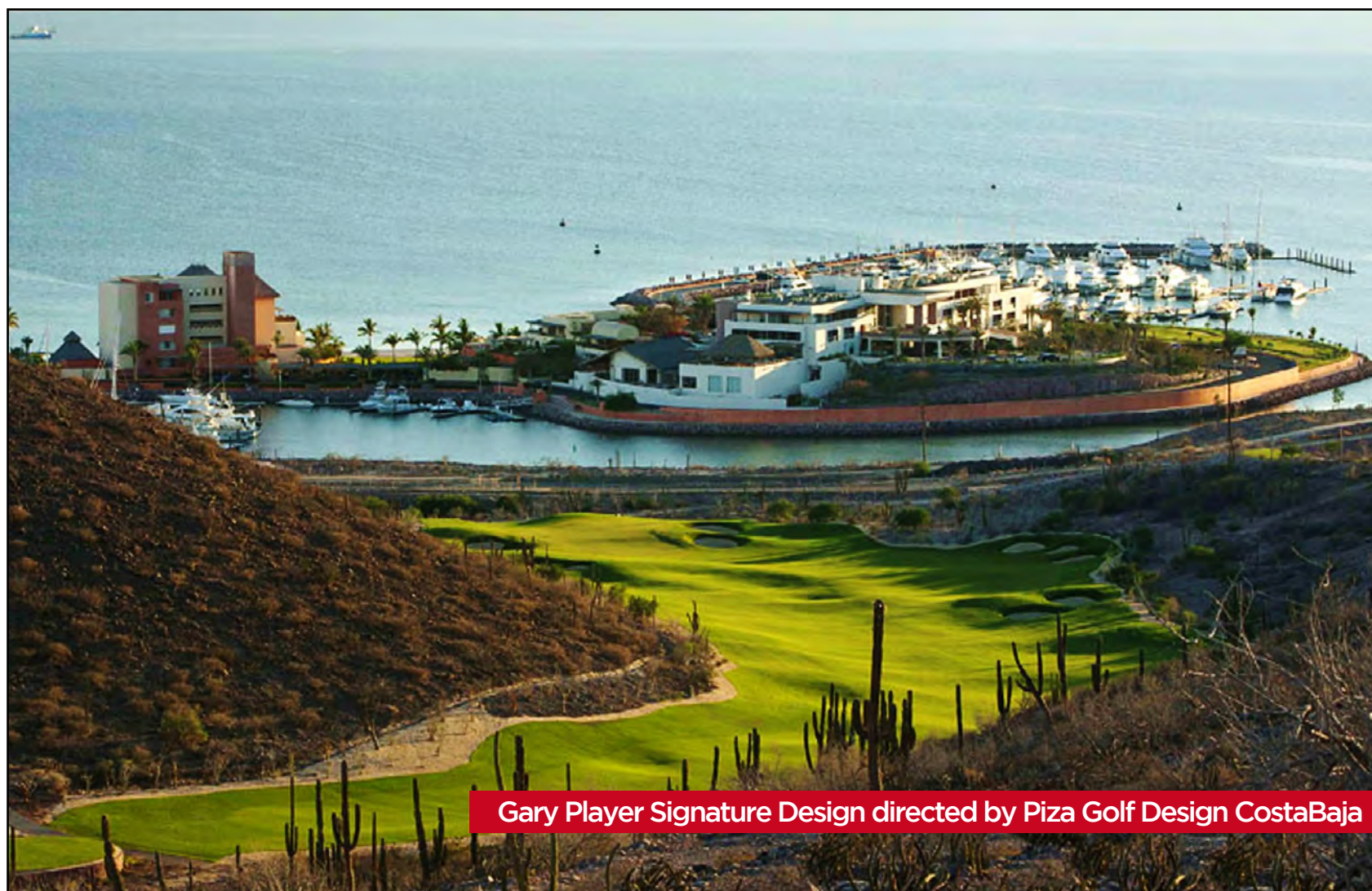
Over in Europe and the U.K., they are used to using the land, disturbing as little as possible...just being natural. So I started reading some incredible books and learning about architects like Tillinghast, MacKenzie and Colt. Doing this, you start to realize there is more of an intellectuality to working with the land than there is to just explode it and do something new.

To be honest, in just the first three months of

my Masters Degree, I was waking up to a whole new mentality in golf course design. Now I can mix the entrepreneur, extrovert design of North America with the conservative, eco-friendly design of the British Isles — it becomes a very good medium.

SO WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT DESIGN PRINCIPLES TO YOU?

Nature is very dramatic and it has a lot of character...that is what I try to create when I design. I respect nature and try to enhance it. Sustainable, eco-friendly golf is more important than ever and we focus on that heavily.



Gary Player Signature Design directed by Piza Golf Design CostaBaja

WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE?

Golf course architecture, and architecture in general, is just observation. We do not design anything that we haven't seen...our brain does not register it. All creative minds create from things we have already seen; we just change them.

It's kind of like seeing a line and then taking that line and curving it. It is very rare that someone comes around and creates a new line. A line is always a line, but you have straight lines and curved lines and multiple lines put together create an image.

It's the same with golf. If you want to be the best at what you do, you have to visit and study all the best golf courses, all the best "lines," and process them in your mind. From there, you come up with ideas. You aren't reinventing the wheel, but creating different interpretations of what a wheel can be.

SAFETY WHEN TRAVELLING TO MEXICO HAS BEEN AN ISSUE. IS THERE TRUTH TO THAT?

In Mexico we do have the war on drugs, but they are in certain key places where even I don't particularly visit. But these sorts of places exist everywhere. I avoid certain areas no matter where I go. If I am in Rome, Italy, there are places I avoid, if I am in London U.K., again, there are places I avoid. You need to be a smart traveller no matter where you travel to. There is a lot of media exaggeration. They have taken certain events and made it seem like it's happening everywhere. Did you know the Canadian government has placed travel advisories on southern Florida? Most likely no. If you travel smart, you're fine...just don't walk down dark allies at midnight and act like a tourist. There are some really great places in Mexico like Cabo, La Paz, Puerto Vallarta and Cancun...it would be a shame to miss these great places.

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR FAVOURITE GOLF COURSES?

I'll answer by region.

In the U.K. or Europe, I absolutely love Cruden Bay. I don't think it's the best all around golf course, but just so much fun to play.

In the U.S., I really enjoy the courses up in the northeast like the National Golf Links of America, but they are replicas of courses in the U.K. Because of that, I won't choose one of them.

Alister MacKenzie is my favourite architect and Cypress Point made my eyes water. The Old Course gave me goosebumps, but I was weeping like a baby when I played Cypress.

In Mexico, there's just a great variety of golf courses and terrain. You can play in the desert, along the ocean, in the mountains, or even through the rain forests. I invite everyone to come down and discover what we have to offer...consider it my personal invitation! ■



Piza Golf Design, Club Campestre Tampico