



THE VISIONARY

Colorado's Jim Engh has made a career out of creating one-of-a-kind golf masterpieces

A blank canvas. It stares back at even the most accomplished artists and causes a slight pang in the heart.

It's the blank page that glares down a novelist, the white walls of a room that greet an interior decorator and the untouched staff paper that beckons a musician.

It's part opportunity, part challenge, part the potential for utter failure.

Every artist knows the feeling, the temporary panic that strikes at the outset of any new project, hoping that the dreaded block won't set in and refuse to go away.

But for Jim Engh, one of the leading course designers in the world of golf, that's the part he enjoys the most.

"It can get a little frightening at first, but it's a cool part of the process," Engh explains, displaying the casual, seemingly carefree demeanor that seems to exude from every pore.

Chatting with Engh is like sitting down with the Dalai Lama or a Zen master of design. There's an inner peace, for sure. But it's more than that. It's an overall approach to his

work, and life in general, that doesn't seem to fit with today's fast-paced, high-stress, churn-and-burn society.

It's certainly not what one would expect from a designer, a profession that would seem to require traits better suited for exacting detail. He's not uptight. He's not a worrier. He doesn't seem to fret and stew.

Engh is more surfer dude than a board manufacturer. He's the guy on stage playing the instrument, not the one backstage tuning it. He's the artist, rather than the man mixing the paint.

As a result, the creative process doesn't intimidate him. He embraces it.

"When I start into the project, there's always a point of panic. 'What am I going to do with this?'" Engh admits. "I've been through it enough times that I don't panic about the panic anymore. But the first couple of times, I remember going, 'Oh no. I have no idea.'"

Those moments date back to 1981, when the CSU graduate jumped into the golf course design and construction industry. Engh spent time working with some of the best in the business, learning

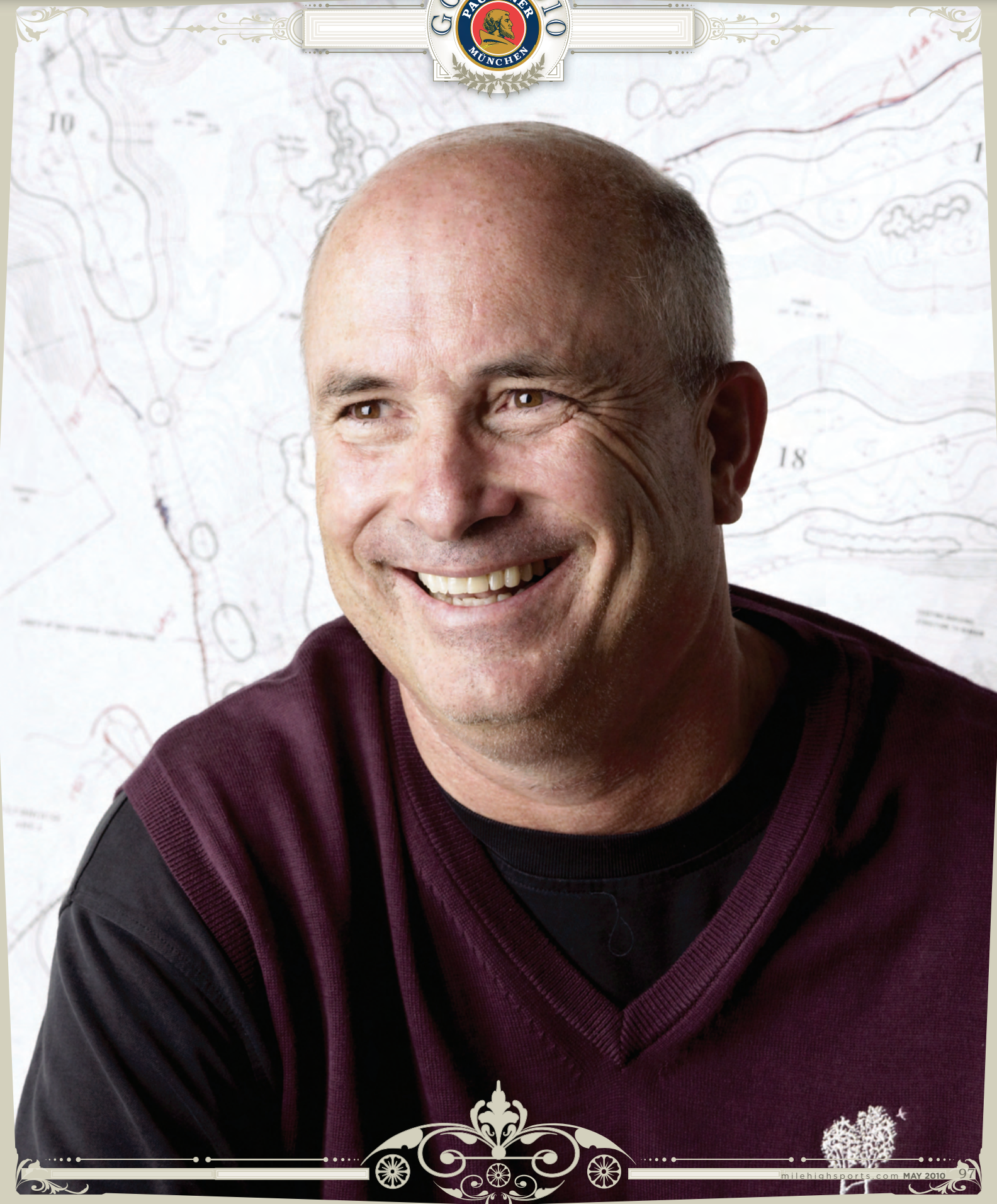
the trade by working alongside the likes of Ken Dye, Joe Finger and Dick Nugent. That was followed by the chance to join Cotton Pennick, the legendary British golf course design firm, a job that allowed Engh to learn every aspect of the industry and work with some of the biggest names in the game.

In 1991, however, the itch to be creative, to be consumed by that process, called him back to the drawing board. That year, he started the golf course design firm that bears his name. Twenty-nine years later, Jim Engh is at the top of the game.

He's the creator of some of the most remarkable golf courses in America, one-of-a-kind gems that stand out from almost every other track. His designs have won numerous awards, including an unprecedented run of three straight "Best New Course" honors from *Golf Digest*. And he walked away with the magazine's inaugural Architect of the Year award in 2003.

But statues on the mantle aren't what define Engh's career. His name being engraved on plaques aren't his legacy.

BY JAMES MERILATT





Engh is a visionary, a man who sees things others don't, who looks at the world in a totally different way. And the results, some of the most picturesque and imaginative golf courses in the world, are monumental achievements.

His courses tell stories. His courses have soul. Rekindling these attributes in golf design are his lasting impression on the game.

Rock formations in the middle of the fairway. Waterfalls surrounding a green. Deserted mining equipment just beyond the rough. Dinosaur fossils in between tee boxes. These are just some of the unusual design elements golfers will see when they play an Engh-designed course.

They're fascinating quirks, interesting features that make a track unique. But they're also unconventional, a fact that makes some traditionalists nervous.

"Sometimes, I get criticized for doing things that are outside of the norm," Engh says about those who knock some of his one-of-a-kind inspirations, without a hint of resentment. "But that's okay."

He genuinely seems to relish that fact that his courses, particularly the signature features and quirks, can rile the golf establishment.

"If I didn't have a couple people taking shots at me about a project, then I'd probably look at myself and think I wasn't trying hard enough," he explains, a slight chuckle adding validity to his words.

It's why he has no regrets about any of his past designs.

"I can't think of anywhere I'd really tweak," Engh says. "The things that you discover that you did wrong are now nuances that give it a little bit of character, of 'non-perfectness.' I don't mind a little, 'What the hell is that?' That's usually followed with, 'I screwed that up, but it's kind of cool.'"

These are the things that have developed into the essence of Engh's design.

"You leave a big kiln smokestack in the middle of a fairway like at Fossil Trace on No. 1, and some people will look at it and say, 'Well, that's just hokey,'" he says. "The fact that you think it's a little hokey made you think a little bit."

And that's what golf is all about to Engh – thinking. To him, the game is more



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THE ENGH MUSEUM

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The Sanctuary – Sedalia (Opened in 1997)

Red Hawk Ridge Golf Club – Castle Rock (1999)

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Fossil Trace Golf Club – Golden (2003)

The Snowmass – Snowmass Village (2004)

Lakota Canyon Ranch Golf Club – New Castle (2004)

Club at Pradera – Parker (2005)

Harmony Golf Club – Timnath (2007)

Four Mile Ranch Golf Club – Canon City (2008)



FOSSIL TRACE #1



FOSSIL TRACE #18

mental than physical. It's not about hitting the ball, as much as it's about figuring out where and how it should be hit.

This goes against the grain of modern golf, a sport that has evolved into the simple act of finding the flag and hitting the ball toward it. Engh chooses to embrace the nuances; he focuses on the aesthetics of the game.

It's a revelation that didn't come quickly to Engh. But once it did, it transformed his approach to golf course design.

"For the longest time, I was always trying to figure out what people liked and then give that to them," he says. "The problem was that you really can't get into people's heads like that. Instead, I needed to figure out what I liked. And the bigger point, because I already knew what I liked, was I had to figure out why I liked it. That was the harder thing. That took me a long time. It didn't hit me until about 10 years ago."

Inspiration came at one of his favorite places in the world – Carne Golf Club in Ireland.

"I'm walking down the first hole and I'm spinning around, looking at stuff, and I'm going, 'Wow, that's cool.' I'm doing these pirouettes," Engh explains. "I get to my ball and my buddies say, 'You know, you were dancing coming down the fairway.'"

That got him thinking. Why was he acting that way?

"I finally determined that the thing I like most about courses was when I'm inspired, when my brain is turned on, when endorphins are flying through it," he explained. "For 18 holes, I've got this huge grin on my face because I'm seeing things I've never seen before, experiencing feelings I've never felt before, and I'm presented with situations I've never seen before."

That experience, one that stimulates the senses in new ways, is what Engh tries to capture with each new course design. To accomplish that, he tries to stick to the game's roots.

"Golf is a struggle against nature," Engh explains. "When the game started, they were going from St. Andrews out to the sea; they were looking for something fun to do on the walk to the sea to go to work, so they hit these balls. Nature presented itself as it was. There was no fair. There was no unfair. There was just the randomness of nature. That really kind of creates a certain mindset, a stimulus in your brain of enjoyment. That's the only rule I have – you have to have fun. I want



to inspire people to get to their creative side a little bit.”

To accomplish this, Engh ignores most of the preconceived notions about golf course design.

“There are some people in my business who follow some rules; I don’t,” he says proudly. “Somewhere along the way, somebody made this book about what a golf course should be. I’ve never seen it, fortunately. I don’t think there should be any rules. The only rule is that I don’t have any rules.”



And he means it.

“People say that you should use every club in your bag. That cliché just makes me ill,” Engh says matter-of-factly. “If you play one of my courses and you use a seven-iron on every single hole, I’m happy with that as long as you have to use it 18 different ways. It’s not the club that’s important. It’s that your brain is trying to come up with a different shot.”

To Engh, golf isn’t about booming drives, great approach shots or a steady putter. He focuses on variety.

“It’s about inspiring people and letting them figure out the game,” he explains. “If you put interesting landforms out there that are going to inspire people, the game will be played 1,000 different ways by 1,000 different golfers.”

As a result, there’s no “right” way to play an Engh-designed hole.

“To sit and say diabolically that I’m going to draw this hole so it has to be played this shot, this shot and this shot, to me, that’s as boring as you get,” he explains.

Instead, Engh strives for an environment that engages the golfer.

“It is the landforms and the space relations,” he says. “It’s the idea of spatial relationships that you have when you’re walking through the canyons at Fossil Trace. On No. 15, you’re just feeling kind of insignificant. That’s the feeling you have in Ireland quite a lot.”

Creating that sense doesn’t happen by accident, however. It’s the end result of a creative process, a formative journey that is dictated by the natural surroundings.

“You get to know a piece of land,” he explains. “You get some aerial photographs.

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You definitely have to get some topography maps. Then, you walk around it and you find these little hot spots.”

Those become the building blocks of a course, the cornerstones from which Engh creates an 18-hole masterpiece.

“Something on the land will strike me, and I’ll start with that hole,” he says. “That’s the first one I’ll do. I take ideas as they come and then I link them together. But you have to do the routing first. I won’t necessarily go in order. I jump from idea to idea.”

It all starts with finding that piece or two of inspiration.

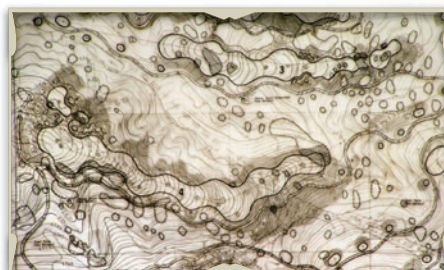
“It’s just this meditation state of osmosis where you’re just waiting for it to absorb into you,” Engh continues. “Once you get one idea, you get another couple and then you’re well on the road.”

But it’s never quite that easy. At some point, roadblocks emerge.

In reality, no golf course design starts with a blank canvas. Instead, there are



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pre-existing conditions – some natural, others man-made – that have to be considered, dealt with and incorporated into the design.

Some would see these challenges as limiting. Engh sees them as an opportunity.

“Experiences have told me that when you are dealt a constraint, 70 percent of the time, you’re going to come away with an interesting, unique solution,” he says. “The constraints made you come up with something different, something that is actually a better design idea, where you might not have been pushed to otherwise.”

One of Engh’s most-famous hole designs is proof of this fact.

“The more constraints that you have, like chimneys in the fairway on the first hole at Fossil Trace, the more creative you can be,” he explains. “I thought, ‘Let’s just leave it.’ It’s kind of cool. It doesn’t really come into play. It’s a little history. It tells people what the course is all about on the first hole; that’s interesting.”

For Engh, solving these types of problems is what design is all about.

“I love to try to figure out the puzzles and put something creative on top of it,” he says about dealing with each site’s unique challenges. “It’s about coming up with something that not just functions, but is inspiring to people; that’s the key.”

Finding a way to turn an obstacle into an integral part of the plan isn’t an easy thing to do. It takes a unique approach, a way of looking at the world through a different lens.

That’s not something everyone can do. And for those who can, it’s not an outlook that exists at all times.

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HARMONY CLUB #13



HARMONY CLUB #6



REDLANDS MESA #5

For Engh, finding that place is just another part of the creative process.

“You have to get in the right frame of mind,” he explains. “I’ll throw on Van Morrison, Keb’ Mo’ or Mose Allison or something. It just frees my mind. Sometimes, you have so much clutter in there that you have to free it.”

This is the moment that Engh cherishes.

“That’s my favorite time,” he says. “Two o’clock in the morning, with some great blues jamming, and I’ve got a couple ideas that I’m trying to get down on paper. That’s the fun time for me.”

Once that occurs, the magic happens. Instead of a guy dribbling paint, he morphs into Jackson Pollack. Instead of some hack pecking at a typewriter, he becomes Ernest Hemingway.

It’s the quiet time when the canvas comes to life. It’s at this point that the art of creating begins, with a totally clean slate.

“I have no ideas; I have no assumptions,” Engh says. “That’s a good thing. I go into it with nothing. I try to blank my mind and go into it and just say, ‘Something’s going to jump at me here.’ It may take a minute. It might take an hour. It might take a week. You’re just starting at this thing, processing.”

It’s that moment that normally strikes fear into the heart of every creative person, that instant when the nothingness stares back.

But for the creative geniuses, the artists who can create something out of nothing, that’s when a masterpiece is born. **MHS**