



MIKE NUZZO

FROM THE SPACE RACE TO A CATTLE RANCH. THE AMAZING STORY OF A
DESIGNER WHO IS RESHAPING THE RULES. BY **SHAUN MCGUCKIAN** PICTURES BY **NUZZO GOLF DESIGN**

Mike Nuzzo has only designed one golf course, which, for a profile, could prove problematic. So, I asked my friend and editor of Golf Course Architecture magazine, Adam Lawrence, for advice. After all, he's played Wolf Point, the course Mike created.

"Not only is it probably the best first course by a modern architect that I have seen, but it is also a living case study for the future of golf design and construction," said Adam. And, trust me, he's not a man to get carried away.

So who is this man who, during the course of our conversation, tells me there's aliens out there, that he'd love to have dinner with Tom Waits, Ernest Hemmingway and Ghandi and references leftfield journalist Malcolm Gladwell in his personal articles?

Perhaps we had caught a star in its ascendancy here. A phrase quite apt where Mike is concerned. As before he was a course designer he was an astrospace engineer. Mike worked in the antenna division of Lockheed Martin. You might know the company from their attempts to break the world land speed record or their warships. Prior to that, they were also a major player in the Space Race between Russia and the United States.

"I was in the Astrospace division and the company were the first to launch a commercial satellite during the space race. We were making some government and some civil and military projects, but we were



Mike Nuzzo

Age: 43
Residence: Houston, Texas
 All over the place now. I haven't turned in a score in at least five years, because I only play matchplay. I have not broken 80 around Wolf Point yet. I'm close, but that's the next goal. There are some holes that just get to me now. I can't get myself around the 14th mentally.

primarily a commercial satellite manufacturer.

"For example, my last project was a \$650m satellite that provided telephone coverage for all of China, Indonesia, India and Japan. It was a very large, very expensive satellite that could handle 32,000 phone calls at a time. It's still up there now."

So, is he a rocket scientist?

"I suppose you could say that. It turned out to be a fascinating career. You get a weight budget when you start a program and your goal is to beat your weight budget. So the goal was to make things as efficient as possible through material selection. Hence why all exotic materials are developed out of the aerospace world is because the goal is to make everything as light as possible."

"The less weight in components, the more fuel you could put in the tank. For example, our launch weight was 13,000lbs, so, if we made a satellite for 8,000lbs, then we could put 5,000lbs of fuel in there. The more fuel, the longer it lasts and the more revenue a client makes. You wouldn't think of it as being artistic, but it was very creative as we sought to be as efficient as possible."

This begins to explain why Mike has only designed one golf course. I mean if someone gives you \$650m to send things into space, then why would you? Mike's job allowed him to invent new materials, freeze things 300-degrees below zero, shatter items with sonic booms. Short of an orange spacesuit and a ticker tape parade, it's pretty much a dream gig. Right?

But Mike is a golfer. "On the slow, boring days at work I'd look for jobs on the internet and everytime I searched in golf." He played in the back garden with

his grandfather, down the pitch-and-putt with his dad and in his adult life married his passion for the game with his love of the arts in golf architecture.

When Lockheed Martin started downsizing, he saw an opportunity to carpe diem and knew his engineering background would be helpful as there was already a need for CAD (computer aided design) drawings in the golf industry.

"Most people don't understand CAD the way we aerospace engineers do. We pushed everything as far as it could go. You don't need that when you're building a golf course. You have dirt and bulldozers. You don't need to worry about grams and thousands of an inch. I kinda went at it blindly. My wife and I moved to Houston and I thought it would be fun."

This would normally be the part where Mike explains that he started working at an established architect firm, paid his dues and waited his turn, but then nothing has been normal about this so far. He decided to put a little trick he learnt at Lockheed into action called design for manufacture. It's where you study the tools and implementation of products to see ways you can improve.

"I did it in the machine factories there and the same in golf. I decided to start following everyone else. From developers to golf photographers."

It was at that point that Mike caught a small break. A wealthy local businessman had decided to build his own golf course over a cattle ranch he owned and was researching architects. Everyone from big national firms to small locals was asked to contribute.

"After we met he thought that having someone nearby would bring a greater commitment to the project. In the beginning he said, 'you can stay at the

guest quarters all you want. Have free reign of the place.' A month into the project he took me aside and said, 'Look, I didn't realize you were going to be a full-time resident. You're can't stay here every day!'"

But the bread had been broken. The client was looking for passion and adventure and Mike had them both.

"Our motives were one: a golf course that was challenging and two: not having to spend time looking for lost balls. That was it."

"So, not much long grass, lots of room to play, windy conditions. The Old Course just immediately popped into my head. Now, that's not normal in Texas. It's all long, bowling alley fairways and target-orientated golf."

"So, we started sketching and researching to get a sense of what the client liked and disliked. He actually turned round to me and said, 'just go ahead and I'll tell you if I like it when its finished.'"

Mike turned to Don MaHaffey, a finisher he'd met on the website Golf Club Atlas. They had become friends sharing ideas and concepts they were now able to put into practise.

"Initially, we were going to get contractors in to help us to the job, but our client didn't have a schedule, which is the chief reason to get contractors in. So why pay the premium? We decided to build it on our own."

"Part of Don's belief was to create the team that was going to be maintaining the golf course as soon as possible, so we went out and got a bunch of local farmers to help us build the golf course."

"They took care of everything. Don doesn't just see hole shapes and land shifts, he sees the completed project. So these farmers were clearing



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Top Five Favourite Courses

- Old Course
- Pine Valley
- Cypress Point
- Royal County Down
- Sand Hills

trees beyond the golf course so that airflow would be better and there would be fewer mosquitos. We trained this crew up from scratch and they take care of that golf course today like it was their own.”

Coupled with Don’s natural eye, Mike’s engineering experience introduced something that will have many designers spitting into their coffee. He ditched CAD.

“I never thought that CAD was suitable to golf. Superintendents use AUTOCAD but they don’t really know what to do with it. I mean why would they really need to know how to use what is actually an advanced engineering tool?

“I was aware that Adobe Illustrator was a program that was vector based, just like CAD, but it’s designed for artists instead of engineers.

“A lot of guys drew things in the field and then had their ‘CAD Monkeys’ digitize what they drew. I just didn’t see the point in that. So, I drew everything digitally on a tablet with stylus. I could update my drawings and record all the changes as live.

“I take my initial drawing and plug them into my GPS unit and mark out with flags and map it into the ground with my handheld unit. It’s expensive, but it is in my hand. As we built, I recorded what we did.

“For example, if we move a bunker then I update my drawing. That night I change and update my irrigation plans and the next morning the irrigation contractor has fresh plans and can get going. We did weeks of work in just a few days. I just believe it’s a more efficient method.”

It wasn’t the first time that Mike had used his knowledge of software to ruffle a few feathers. In one of his first jobs out of school he suggested an ‘inter-net’ system so people didn’t have to keep leaving their desks all the time and at Lockheed, he introduced a digital system that ripped up the rulebook on how satellites were put together, allowing departments to create a cohesive digital model as they worked.

“When they found out that some rogue had ripped up the rulebook and they would have to get on board and spend a fortune doing so, they were pissed. But it wasn’t about them. It was about the client. If your goal was to help the client then, I think, it makes things easier.”

In terms of Wolf Point things were certainly easier. The client got an easy-to-maintain golf course for \$3m and Mike and Don’s system

worked. They produced an efficient, pragmatic, natural-looking and challenging golf course.

“When you looked at the golf course in its dirt form right before we grassed it, it looked beautiful. It had a polished sheen to it. Everything was blended in all together. That’s how natural it looked. There were no goofy bunkers or anything.

“Our soils weren’t great, so we didn’t have great drainage. So we didn’t perch a whole lot of things up, like tees and greens. There’s a lot of design out there that sits very proudly. Thing is when you do that with greens, you’ve got to make them tilt back to front for drainage. They are a monster to maintain. Every design decision turns into construction, which increases maintenance.

“The way we built the golf course, the green cavity and the surrounds are constructed the same way. Most golf courses have sprinkler heads that point in and heads that point out because you have two different growing mediums (fringe/green). Don wanted to eliminate your in and outs and use 360s. That chucks out 100 sprinkler heads right away and saves you a fortune. Using native materials created firmer approaches, better maintenance and very practical. It looks all one colour and more natural, which was my intention.

“There are a couple of green sites along the creek, which have developed superbly. The 15th is a case in point. The green was built on a rare land swale giving it a hidden ridge. There was a bunker originally on the plan, but once we saw this green we deleted it. We actually did very little work other than aesthetics, but the playing experience is so cool. Folks aim straight at a middle flag and it hits the green and bounces hard left.

I love it. It looks benign, plenty of room to play but if you get too aggressive then you can end up with a 100ft putt and no chance of a two.”

The playing experience of Wolf Point may not be something many outside of Texas have experienced, however, reading Adam Lawrence’s review in Golf Architecture is what Texas Golfer magazine reported as, “A revelation”.

A fast-running teaser that brings to mind the best that McKenzie, Colt and the great history of links can conjure up. Sadly, one that few of us will see while it is the plaything of a private owner.

But the silver lining in this raincloud is that Mike Nuzzo has been unearthed. A designer who brings a progressive practicality to the table and does so with great success. So where does he go from here?

“I go very slowly helping as many different people as I can. I love the game so much more having done Wolf Point and I understand that point more acutely as a result.

It’s pretty muddled out there in the golf world and trying to get people to change is pretty hard. The things that we’ve achieved aren’t really appreciated. Some people think we’re pretty nuts.”



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