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Northumberland Links has an ideal setting for mowing patterns that resemble the old traditions of the game.

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# SIGNATURE vs SHAPER

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The construction or renovation of an 18-hole golf course is an enormous undertaking, often requiring the design and preparation of more than 100 acres of ground. While many contemporary golf architects have successfully created brands, dubbed 'signature designs', that seem to infer there's one mastermind behind each course, the creation of every golf course involves collaboration between the principal designer, his associates, shapers, greenkeepers, and clients. However, the quality of these relationships have varied greatly, over time.

Golf courses built before WWII (pre-1940) evolved slowly, allowing architects to cultivate their designs as construction progressed. Through the assemblance of a talented team of passionate individuals, projects benefited when those most skilled remained onsite. Pine Valley for example, the perennial No. 1 course in the world, benefited from the vision of owner/designer George Crump who solicited advice from an extraordinary number of collaborators, including Harry Colt and A.W. Tillinghast. Even Stanley Thompson, for example, utilized design associates Geoffrey Cornish and C.E. Robbie Robinson to oversee the evolution of projects in his absence. Since that time, construction technology and computer-aided design practices have allowed much of the golf industry to transform into a 'cookie-cutter production line' of sorts.

Modern golf courses have typically resulted from an extensive process of earth-moving. Designers have imposed their style onto any site, regardless of the inherent attributes of the existing landscape. Considerable maintenance effort and cost are used to maintain patterns that conflict with natural processes. These increased costs are a direct result of the overarching design process and have resulted in higher green fees and fewer people entering the sport. However, in addition to these larger impacts on the game itself, increased technology has also distanced the artist from his/her true canvas – the golf course. In essence, the proliferation of signature design has allowed golf architecture's practitioners to detach themselves from nature.

The world's best golf courses all share something important in common, a distinctive sense of place. This sense of place is defined by the landscapes into which the game of golf has been synthesized. From Scotland's links, to Australia's Sandbelt, to England's Heathland, to America's Monterey Peninsula and Long Island, to Canada's Rockies, golf is bettered by nature. Hence, when I started my career in golf course architecture I purposely sought out a mentor who employed this sympathetic approach - Canadian golf course architect Rod Whitman.

Mr. Whitman has helped return golf course design to its craftsmanship based roots. Like his mentors, Pete Dye and Bill Coore (Coore & Crenshaw), Whitman understands the importance of detailed fieldwork. He spends an extraordinary amount of time on-site throughout the development of his golf course designs, and continues to personally carry out shaping work (most notably green contouring). Further, like his American mentors, Whitman believes that it is through a team approach that the best results are achieved. In contrast to many of his colleagues, Whitman acts a maestro guiding his company of skilled and knowledgeable 'shapers', on site, to produce distinctive and enjoyable golf courses.



Rod, like many of his fellow Dye protégées, has been dubbed a 'minimalist' designer in recent years. However, the term 'minimalism', which correctly refers to minimal earthmoving, is frequently misunderstood. Many golfers seem to equate minimalism more so with a rugged, natural aesthetic, than with an architect's ability to work with a site, effectively minimizing inputs and costs. Since the ground breaking opening of Sand Hills Golf Club in rural Nebraska, many contemporary golf course architects have jumped on the 'minimalist' bandwagon, attempting to emulate this rugged, natural aesthetic, regardless of the surrounding environment. Throughout my work with Mr. Whitman, our primary goal has been to seamlessly conceal our designer hand. As our location changes, so too does our design aesthetic. This approach is not dictated by any prevailing social tastes, but is instead derived from the sites on which we place our work.

My first exposure to this approach came in 2007, when I joined Mr. Whitman at what would become Sagebrush Golf Club in Quilchena, British Columbia. The golf course is gently nestled onto natural benches on the undulating hillside overlooking majestic Nicola Lake. Sweeping fescue fairways follow the natural contours of the land, and the massive greens artistically match the scale of the surrounding mountains. Whitman's genius routing allowed the holes to be carved out of the native vegetation, with limited earth work needed to allow for golf.



*The evolution of a golf hole – Hole No. 2 at Sagebrush Golf Club*

Following our time in British Columbia, I followed Rod to the other side of the country – Inverness, Nova Scotia. Located on the west coast of Cape Breton Island, Cabot Links has been dubbed Canada's first and only true links golf course. Rod Whitman's design incorporates the rugged Nova Scotian landscape, dramatic seaside, undulating terrain and sandy soil. However, while many complement our work and suggest we inherited the ideal site, what is not frequently described is the fact that the first Cabot site was actually a former coal mine site, of which almost 50% had been graded and capped with clay prior to our involvement to prevent leaching of contaminants onto the beach. The centre area of the site was literally devoid of contour on our arrival. The following photo from the Globe and Mail, published in 2008, illustrates what would become the future location of the double green.



*Future site of the double green at Cabot Links (Holes 8 and 13), as published in the Globe and Mail*



*The double green at Cabot Links (Holes 8 and 13)*

Further, we had detailed instructions from the authorities not to cut into the clay cap during our work. This meant that our detailing had to be done above a set plane, instead of the normal minor cut/fill process to create contour. Rod and I worked tirelessly (with our great but small team) for three years to give the site the natural appearance people now assume was always there. Here is a photo of the double green now.

Currently, Rod and I are working to renovate the historic Algonquin Golf Course in scenic St. Andrews, New Brunswick. Whitman's proposed redesign aims to reconnect the course with its Scottish heritage. With a distinctive bunker scheme replacing the signature styling, the course will have a more dramatic and strategic facelift. An extensive tree clearing program will re-establish historic ocean views as well as benefit turf maintenance. Further, new tees at holes 12 and 13, and a new green at hole 11, have been positioned much

closer to the water's edge. A revised routing has allowed for two of the least favoured par 4 holes to be replaced with a new long par 5 and a new long par 3 (Redan style), adding to the overall variety of the holes. In total, 7 new green complexes will be completed. Rod Whitman, and our team of shapers, aim to revitalize this stunning coastal property, embrace its historic past, and re-establish a ground game that uses the wonderful contours of the course. The results will surely be worth a visit.



*Renovation Master Plan for the Algonquin Golf Course*

Keith Cutten is a Canadian golf course architect based in Cambridge, Ontario. Keith has worked with Rod Whitman ([www.rodwhitman.com](http://www.rodwhitman.com)) since 2007. For more information on their projects, or questions regarding their availability for work, please contact Keith at 226-750-3855 or visit [www.CuttenGolf.com](http://www.CuttenGolf.com)