

# Golf Architecture

A WORLDWIDE PERSPECTIVE

VOLUME SEVEN

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# Tara Iti Golf Club, New Zealand

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When Brian Slawnik and I first visited the site in November of 2011, Tara Iti was a commercial pine plantation, developed by the Te Uri o Hau tribe of Maori after they had been given the land as part of a government settlement. The trees were planted so densely that we could seldom see more than 100 yards in front of us. The sole outward view toward the ocean was at the corner of a logging road, where the project manager, John Darby, had cut a narrow swath to highlight the view toward some islands several miles off-shore, known as the Hen and Chicks.

Ric Kayne, our client, posed just one question: could we build one of the world's best courses on this site? If it wasn't going to be special, the project wasn't worth doing, and he'd keep looking for the right piece of ground.

Before we answered, Brian and I spent two full days hiking the property, searching out the dune ridges that looked interesting on our one-metre topographic map and taking stock of them; inching us towards the bones of a course-routing plan.

After two days, we had the better part of a routing. The part we couldn't answer was the bright red line on our map: the 'ONL line', which stood for Outstanding Natural Landscape. Sometime

between the development of Cape Kidnappers and Tara Iti, the New Zealand government had drawn such a line all around the country, putting big swathes of beautiful land forever out of the reach of development. The line was too jagged for a setback line; instead, our walks revealed that it had been drawn based on an aerial photograph, matching up with a windbreak of trees that had been planted to get the pine plantation started—trees that were falling over *today*. If we could make the case that the line was arbitrary, and receive some flexibility over the boundary, we thought we could build something special.

Fortuitously, the other part of Ric's team was John Darby: the New Zealand landscape architect turned golf architect, who has built several of the best courses in the South Island; some in partnership with Bob Charles. Actually, it was John who found Ric on behalf of the Maori tribe as a potential buyer; and John had enough experience working with the permitting authorities to believe we could make some trade-offs. So, we were in business!

Even so, it is a great leap of faith to tell a client that a [global] top-fifty golf course can emerge when you can't observe a single hole from tee-to-green. While I can read a topo map with the



Connected turf areas: It is difficult at Tara Iti to discern where one hole ends and another begins.

The fifth hole, a par-5, culminates in the green shown at the bottom of the picture. (Photograph by Joann Dost)

FOLLOWING PAGES  
Seventh hole: Originally planned as a long par-3, this short par-4 plays back underneath the clubhouse set on a small ridge. Its tiny green is difficult to hold even from close range. (Photograph by Joann Dost)







best of them, contrary to what my friends imagine I don't have a 'vision' of a finished product from day one. The creation of a great course is a process, with multiple contributions along the way. I just have faith in our process—because it has been consistently successful—and faith in the people assembled to help.

From the beginning of my company, and earlier during an apprenticeship under Pete Dye, I've understood that the way to do great work is to enlist great help. Tara Iti is not just my vision. The end product is the hard work of eight others I brought to New Zealand with me. Brian Slawnik, my lead associate, helped me sort out the routing on that first visit—some 100 potential permutations of it—as we cleared the trees and began to appreciate the off-shore views at our disposal. We re-routed the third and fourth holes, and turned the fifth into a crossover, after John Darby volunteered that the Maori might be willing to surrender more oceanfront land if that's what we needed to build a great course. We changed the seventh hole from a long par-3 to a very short par-4, tucking its small green into a corner at the foot of the dune ridge where the clubhouse sits; ensuring that difficult second shots are demanded of all golfers. We extended the eleventh hole

(further down and to the right), following our eyes toward the view of the Hen and Chicks. Additionally, the twelfth was extended, so that the big climb up-and-over a dune ridge would act as part of a golf hole, instead of just as a walk between two holes. And we shortened the fifteenth hole to a par-3 (instead of a short par-4), to stay well clear of a shell midden site that would have limited our shaping of the green complex, and possibly forced golfers to take free drops away from the sensitive archaeology.

To better manage the crew, Brian Slawnik spent the best part of two-and-a-half years on-site, having earlier uprooted his family to live in the small town of Mangawhai. He did a lot of shaping at Tara Iti, but spent even more time putting holes back together after my departures—invariably, when wind wreaked havoc upon the approved holes before irrigation had secured them.

My other two associates: Eric Iverson and Brian Schneider, was each running a job of their own for most of the duration of Tara Iti. But on most of my construction visits, one or the other would accompany me for a week or ten days at a time, so that I could be working on two fronts at once, trying to complete four or five holes and approve them for irrigation before departing. Eric, Brian and



Brian have been the primary shapers on every course I've built since Pacific Dunes, and they remain the *fastest guns in the West*.

Regarding the green sites, I am more of an editor up to half of the time, letting my associates have the first crack at shaping the green as they think it should go. Hopefully, the two most critical components are already sorted: the green in the right place, having started at the right elevation to make everything tie-in. At Tara Iti, the only green that isn't at the same level as the ground we started on is the punchbowl green at the par-4 third.

Most of my own efforts are concentrated on the greens, the approaches and the bunkering. But another 100 acres of golf course exist! My minimalist approach reflects not disturbing any more earth than necessary; but on a site like Tara Iti, where all of the native vegetation was cleared and a lot of smaller contour destroyed in the process, we required a small 'army' to put it back together. Brian Slawnik's chief lieutenant for the rest of the work was Kye Goalby, who's always been independent of Renaissance Golf Design but who has worked on a dozen different projects with us over the years. It was Kye and Brian who undertook nearly all of the bulldozer and excavator work required in the fairways, and

who found places to bury the remnants of the pine trees. In the process, new dunes were created in the landscape to complement what nature had already provided.

On a sandy site, we do much of the smaller shaping and the finishing work prior to seeding the course with sand pros and hand labour. To supplement a local crew, three young men were seconded to help who just happened to have the right citizenship to be able to get a work visa in New Zealand. They were Mick Henderson, an aspiring architect from Australia; Clyde Johnson, a young Englishman who had worked on our crew at Dismal River; and Pete Zarlengo, who had previously interned for us, and since married an Australian. Brian Slawnik calls them 'the art department', and it was they who added the small contours through the playing surface, and determined its edges in between my flags. When you play golf at Tara Iti today, consider that the last person to touch those fairways and greens prior to seeding was one of those three, or Brian Slawnik.

The guy on the other end of the seeder was CJ Kreuscher, the golf course superintendent. We'd worked with CJ building Old Macdonald in Oregon, and appreciated his attention to detail and







his working knowledge of fine fescue. We wanted a true links sward at Tara Iti, and we were confident that CJ knew how to establish one. Being such a good golfer, he understands exactly how we want the playing surface to work, and he's stubborn enough to maintain it on the bare minimum of irrigation and fertiliser.

And last, but not least, we had Ric Kayne as a client, who had faith in our process and enthusiasm as the course started to emerge from the sand box, at great expense. It took me a while to understand the importance of the right relationship with my clients; there's a fine line between pandering to them and ignoring them, and walking it requires spending time getting to know what they really want, before they insist on meddling with the details.

**Eighteenth hole:** Calling to mind the famous fourteenth at Royal Dornoch (Foxy), Tara Iti's par-5 finishing hole has a natural plateau green falling away into a trough along the back left. (Photograph by Joann Dost)

#### OPPOSITE

**Seventeenth hole:** Aligned to the Hen & Chicks Islands off the north-eastern coast, this par-3 has the 'pucker factor' that client Rick Kayne sought. (Photograph by Joann Dost)