

**55**TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL EDITION

# Golf Digest

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## 5 Keys for **Solid** Contact

BY BUTCH HARMON

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*Clint, Cruise, Connery & Co.  
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**'How I went 351 holes  
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# Head to head in the Hamptons

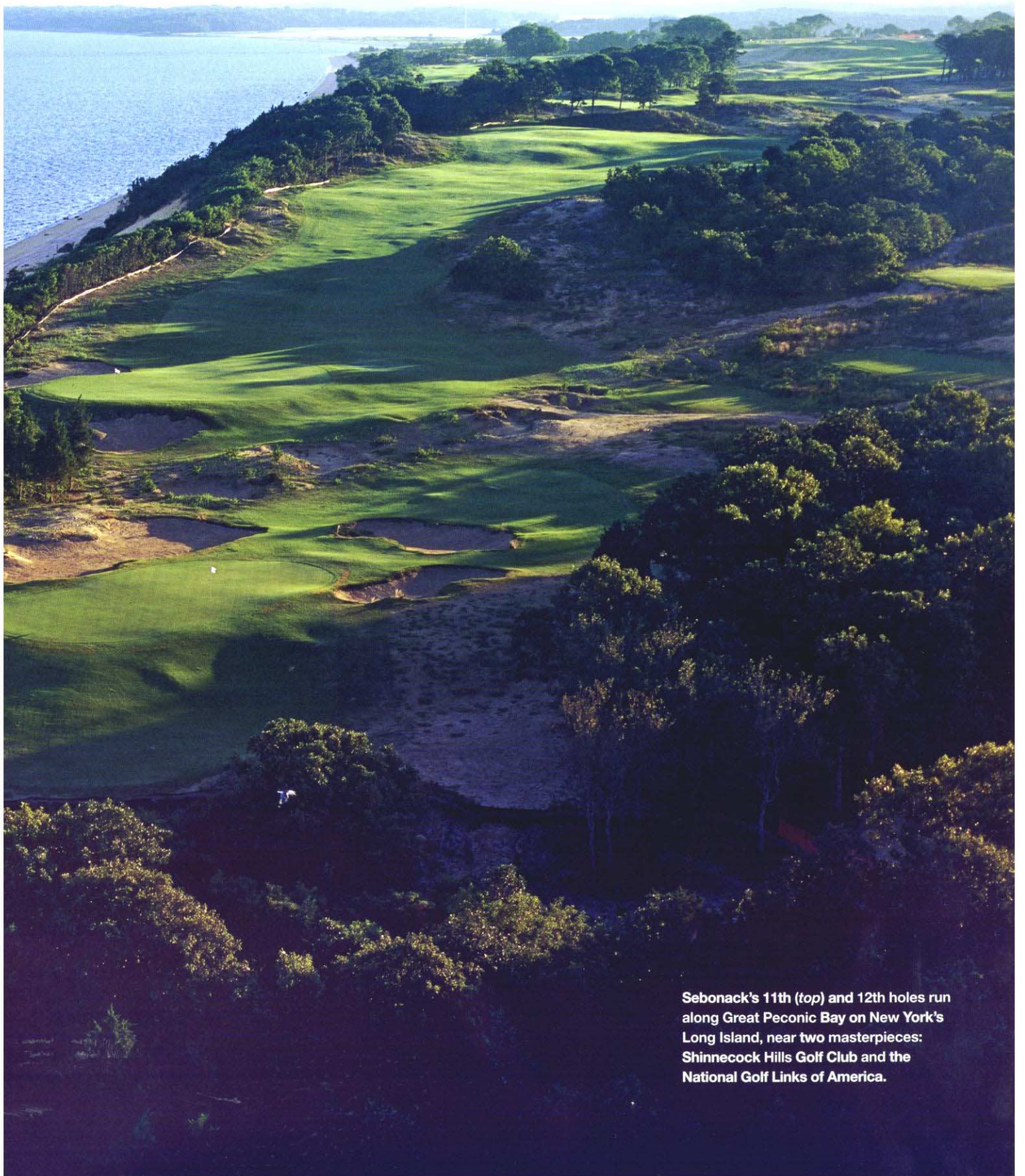
Jack Nicklaus and Tom Doak have their ways of building courses, but as they jockeyed through their collaboration beside two of the most renowned courses in America, they learned something (and so did the guy ponying up \$115 million for Sebonack)



**By Ron Whitten**

**Photographs  
by Stephen Szurlej**

*Editor's note: During the past 14 months, Golf Digest Architecture Editor Ron Whitten made eight visits to Sebonack Golf Club on New York's Long Island to get exclusive access and insight into its planning and construction by Jack Nicklaus and Tom Doak. See what happens when two strong-willed architects meet up with a golf club owner who has plenty of opinions of his own.*



**Sebonack's 11th (top) and 12th holes run along Great Peconic Bay on New York's Long Island, near two masterpieces: Shinnecock Hills Golf Club and the National Golf Links of America.**

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URROUNDED BY AN ENTOURAGE, JACK Nicklaus stands on a slope of a massive sand hill covered in hardwood trees. Some weeks before, a wide corridor of trees and undergrowth had been plucked away (not chopped away, but painstakingly plucked, even the big trees) to establish a fairway for the proposed par-5 ninth hole of the new and exclusive Sebonack Golf Club. Dead ahead, over the hilltop horizon, is Great Peconic Bay, the wide inlet that gives this eastern tip of New York's Long Island its tuning-fork shape. Hard to the right is the

famed National Golf Links of America, with its third hole, and trademark windmill beyond that, visible through gaps between tree trunks. Just southeast of the National is Shinnecock Hills Golf Club, another Top 10 course, even more revered, site of the 2004 U.S. Open.

In this neighborhood, Sebonack won't just be an exclusive club, it will be *ultra-exclusive*. Half a million to join, by invitation only.

Unfolding a topographical map, Nicklaus traces the routing of the hole with his finger, looks at the squiggles that indicate hills and valleys, points to an unused area on the far side of the proposed entry road and offers a suggestion: "We feel like playing maybe to the right of this knob, right in here. This hollow here is fine, drops off here to the

right, a pretty nice thing to have, and then basically get up into here and play around the contour this way up to a green over here. You have any problem with that, Tom?"

Co-designer Tom Doak stares at the map for a moment. It's his routing Jack wants to change.

"No," he says, "the only thing it changes



to me is the character of the place. Now you'll have to go from 9 green over the entrance road or through the parking lot to get to the 10th tee. We're trying to avoid that."

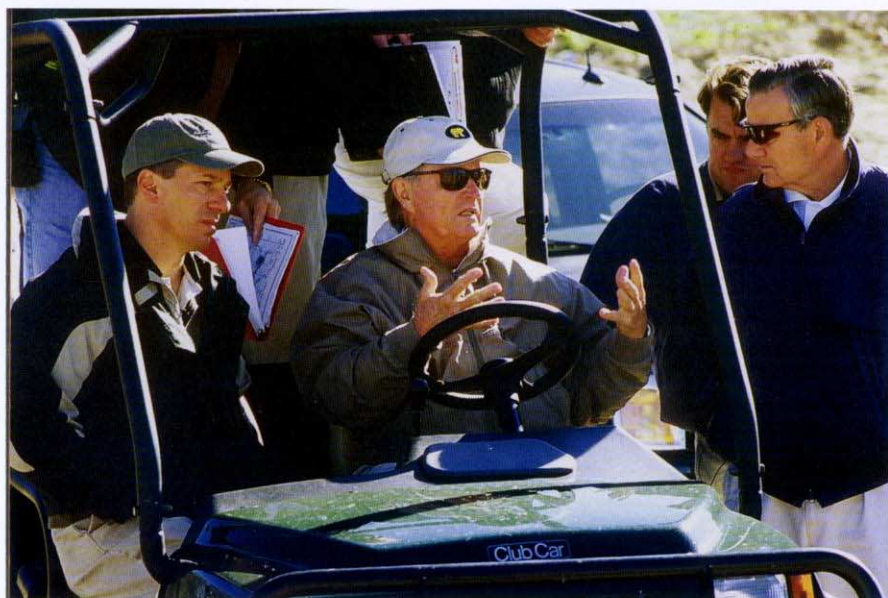
"OK," Nicklaus says, mulling it over. "Let's go look at both of them."

Doak is an unlikely design collaborator on this project. He might be the designer of the hottest course on America's 100 Greatest, Pacific Dunes, No. 22 with a bullet, but in his previous career as a firebrand golf writer, Doak had often been critical of Jack's

architecture. "He puts perfect sightlines and perfect turf ahead of any consideration of natural character," Doak once wrote of Nicklaus. Now they're on the same team, but not necessarily on the same page. Nicklaus wants to build a beautiful, functional, playable golf course.

Doak wants that, too, but he doesn't want to mess up the landscape in the process. In the past, Jack has been known to bulldoze land into submission.

The two and their entourage trudge up



**Doak (left), Nicklaus, superintendent Garret Bodington and Sebonack owner Mike Pascucci talk over another detail.**



**Victory!** Pascucci wanted to finish with a par 5, and when Doak and Nicklaus didn't agree with him, he had the land cleared anyway. The par 5 stayed, and now it's a highlight. Doak design associate Jim Urbina (far left) joins Pascucci and Doak at the site in August 2004.

Tom's proposed fairway, Jack clearly not liking the natural, prominent hump in its center, one that could obscure a view of the green for short hitters. But then they walk into the trees well to the right, trying to determine just where Jack's fairway might be. The land in that area, they soon conclude, isn't nearly as interesting in its contours. As a result, Sebonack's ninth will be built as Doak had routed it, although the knob will be shaved a bit and Nicklaus will prescribe some target and supporting bunkers.

To an observer eavesdropping on many of their conversations during periodic construction visits—the trial balloons, the give-and-take, the decisions reached in the spirit of compromise—it raises the question: Was this how it was back when Bobby Jones collaborated with Alister Mackenzie on the design of Augusta National?

The situations are certainly similar. Like Jones before him, Nicklaus is considered the greatest golfer of all time, until someone proves otherwise. (Jack proved other-

wise by eclipsing Bobby's record in majors.) Like Mackenzie, Doak can be outspoken and outrageous, but he's damned creative. (He's also a big Mackenzie fan. It's no coincidence that a few years back Doak co-wrote the definitive biography of the man, *The Life and Work of Dr. Alister Mackenzie*.)

What's more, Jones and Mackenzie both loved the Old Course at St. Andrews, as do Nicklaus and Doak. Jack won two British Opens there, and chose to close out his playing career on its fairways this past summer. When Doak was fresh out of college 23 years ago, he caddied at the Old Course to absorb its secrets, part of a yearlong study of Great Britain that convinced him that most American course designers—including Nicklaus—were going about it the wrong way, imposing preconceived notions artificially onto the landscape instead of following templates established by nature.

The big difference between Augusta and Sebonack is that Jones, a co-founder of Augusta National, selected Mackenzie

as his course architect. But the pairing of Nicklaus with Doak was a forced arrangement, entered into reluctantly by both sides.

#### The Odd Couple

Skeptics predicted the twosome would never achieve harmony. But during more than a year of construction visits, there was never a thundering clash of wills. Rather, it was a challenge of orthodoxies, a nudging of each other past their normal comfort levels.

"Any reason why that lake is the shape you have it?" Nicklaus asks Doak as they examine the par-3 eighth, playing across one of the two retention ponds required on the property.

"Not really," Tom replies. "We're trying to have it not look like a hundred other ponds on a hundred other golf courses. But as to why it's longer or fatter, no."

"I know what Tom's trying to do," Jack later says in an aside. "He's trying to take this lake and make it into an irregular shape, something different, something you might find in nature. I just don't know how that fits into what we're doing. But we can fiddle with that."

In the course of construction, Jack won't visit Sebonack as often as Doak, although his senior design associate, Jim Lipe, now 59 and

The pairing of Nicklaus with Doak was a forced arrangement, entered into reluctantly by both sides

a fine course architect, will make frequent trips to track its progress. Doak's construction crew, directed by design associate Jim Urbina, 47, will shape the holes. Jack and Lipe will edit them. As the last few holes grow in before the grand opening next spring, Sebonack Golf Club looks more like a Tom Doak design, with lumpy fairways, gnarly bunkers and rumped greens. Even Nicklaus admits that. But every tee shot, every approach, every strategy has been analyzed, tweaked and approved by the world's supreme golfer. Doak admits that he'd never paid much attention to how his courses would play from the back tees. Jack opened his eyes to that.

Their one major disagreement occurs on the 17th. Doak's crew had roughed in a green in a hollow beyond a natural sand dune, resulting in a blind par 3. When he sees it, Jack grumbles that it wasn't where they had agreed to put the green. "The green that I drew and the green that's here are two different greens, I know that much," Jack says.

"I don't remember you drawing any green here," Tom says.

"Well, I do."

Doak, recognizing that Nicklaus, like most professional golfers, hates blind shots, tries to persuade Jack to give the natural dune a chance. "Part of the problem is that the people who would enjoy it the most are

the members, and we've got them down [on a tee] where it's less in play," Doak says. "The guys who it's really blocking a fair amount of the green are the good players, who are less inclined to like it."

"Well, I don't like it," Nicklaus says. "I want to see the flag anywhere on the green."

Within days, Jack gets the visibility he wants. The green is shifted to the left, the dune carved back considerably, but the hole still looks natural. The irony is that early in his career, Nicklaus built a number of par 3s where at least portions of the green were blind from the tee. But even on those, you could always see the flag. Maybe little else, but always the flag.

"Jack designs courses like he plays golf," Doak later offers. "He looks at something, thinks about it really hard, makes a decision, and he's done. He never second-guesses. That's a good way to play golf, and probably a good way to run a business, but it might not be the best way to design a golf course."

Curiously, both Nicklaus and Doak learned golf design under the tutelage of legendary golf architect Pete Dye. Jack, at age 26, a first Grand Slam already in his trophy case, began working on "selected designs" with Dye, back then an obscure Indianapolis designer full of ideas but shy on clients. Their first work together was Harbour Town Golf Links on Hilton Head Island, long considered Dye's national breakthrough and merely something Jack dabbled on as a player consultant. But it was Nick-

laus who landed the job and brought Dye to the project. Jack was a true co-designer, visiting the site every week during its many months of construction.

Several years after Harbour Town opened in 1969, teenager Tom Doak played the course and was captivated. He sought out Dye after his return from Britain, accepted work as a grunt laborer, and eventually moved into Dye's inner circle of associate designers. At 26, Doak got his first solo design in 1987. He's now 44, 21 years younger than Nicklaus and 221 course designs behind Jack. Yet in the design world, his fan base is just as dedicated as Jack's.

**The tiebreaker**

During periodic on-site meetings, Nicklaus and Doak find they have fewer disagreements with each other than they do with the owner, 68-year-old Michael Pascucci. Pascucci, now far slimmer than he was 50 years ago as a high school lineman blocking for future Hall of Famer Jim Brown, pioneered the concept of long-term automobile leasing in the 1970s, later took it public and sold his stock in 1997 for \$660 million.

Without Pascucci's resources, Sebonack would never have happened. He estimates the club will cost \$115 million before it's done. There's the land, a 300-acre Long Island retreat owned by the Electrical Workers Union that had been sold at auction to Donald Trump, who reneged at closing. Pascucci bought it for the same figure Trump

BILL REYNOLDS

**HIGH-RENT DISTRICT**

CLUB	INITIATION FEE
Atlantic G.C.	\$275,000
The Bridge	\$575,000
East Hampton G.C.	\$285,000
Friar's Head	\$300,000
Maidstone	Not disclosed
National Golf Links of America	\$100,000
Sebonack G.C.	\$500,000*
Shinnecock Hills G.C.	"It's over \$1"

\*\$650,000 for guaranteed cottage accommodations





The green at the par-3 17th hole became a major point of contention.

had bid, \$46 million. There's \$5 million spent in obtaining myriad environmental and regulatory permits. He's paying full fare for both architects but won't divulge the cost, though the standard rate is approximately \$2 million for Nicklaus and \$800,000 for Doak. Construction costs of the course will likely exceed \$20 million, and Pascucci will spend \$35 million building a clubhouse and 15 overnight cottages. (He had planned to make the old Charles Sabin mansion the clubhouse but was convinced to raze it because it occupied prime land for golf holes and it was too far gone for renovation.) Asked how he can possibly make the numbers work, Pascucci takes out his wallet and shows how empty it is. "That's how I make the numbers work," he laughs. (OK, but the numbers work better if he achieves his planned membership of 180, at a half million apiece.)

To design the course, which Pascucci called Sebonack after the name on the original land deed, he turned to his Florida neighbor, Nicklaus. ("The best architect on my block," Pascucci jokes.) Jack assigned Lipe to prepare a preliminary design. But then Pascucci's project manager, Mark

Hissey, 43, a native of Wales, suggested that maybe this designer he kept hearing about, Tom Doak, should be involved.

So Pascucci visited Doak's Pacific Dunes Golf Links on the coast of Oregon, which bowled him over. He came back a Doak enthusiast, contacted Tom, sent him a map of the land, and Doak soon returned it with his own proposed routing.

"It completed the puzzle," Pascucci says. Doak's plan had more golf holes along the waterfront, more holes with views of the bay, and required less-extensive earthmoving. Pascucci wanted Doak, so he invited both Nicklaus and Doak to a meeting in Florida and proposed they collaborate. Both were lukewarm to the idea, so he left the two alone for a time. When he returned, they were at ease, even joking with one another. It still took some hammering out, but Pascucci had his twosome.

As owners often do, Pascucci couldn't resist offering design suggestions. Nicklaus told Pascucci his only role would be as tiebreaker, should he and Doak disagree.

But Pascucci challenged that notion early on by insisting on a par-5 closing hole, despite the fact that Jack and Tom both

wanted a long, arduous par 4 along a bluff above the bay. "Tom and I don't disagree here," Jack tells him. "So you have no say."

But Pascucci persists. He argues that a par 4 is anticlimactic. He argues that average golfers would probably double-bogey it and leave the course in a foul mood. He wants a par 5, so his members can have a chance at bagging a birdie to go home happy. Finally, he plays his trump card: not his checkbook, but his familiarity with Nicklaus' and Doak's works. A lot of Jack's courses finish with a par 5, he argues, citing The Bear's Club, Valhalla and Desert Highlands. So does Doak's first job, High Pointe in Michigan, and his masterpiece, Pacific Dunes. Why there, but not here? he asks.

To prod them further, Pascucci has course superintendent Garret Bodington, former superintendent at Bethpage Black, clear a dune behind the proposed 17th green to accommodate a back tee for a par-5 18th. When they discover the work, Doak's people are livid. "You don't sign my paycheck," Bodington tells them.

Ultimately, Pascucci wears the architects down. The closing hole at Sebonack becomes a 570-yard par 5, with a deep cross

bunker in a hole left by removal of the former retreat's swimming pool. The green is near the crest of a hill, positioned directly beneath the flagpole of the National Golf Links on the horizon. It's a nice touch, as the National's par-5 18th also plays toward that same flagpole from the other direction.

Buoyed by that triumph, Pascucci tries other suggestions, every one of them rejected by a united front. Doak usually defers to Nicklaus, whose friendship with Pascucci makes it easier to needle him. While Jack and Tom discuss the merits of a bunker at the par-3 12th green, Pascucci steps in. "I'm ending up with too much redundancy on the shots around the greens," he says.

"What is 'redundancy on the shots around the greens?'" Jack laughs. "You figure

that one out all on your own, Mike? Or did you have to go to a dictionary for that?"

Urbina is pulled off to the side and asked if he finds the owner's constant desire to play golf architect annoying.

"No, I understand where he's coming from," Urbina says. "He wants something on this course that he can point out to his grandkids and say, 'See that? That's mine. I put that there.' We haven't given him that, and he's running out of holes in which to get that done."

"He got the 18th hole he wanted," Lipe later remarks. "He can always point to that."

### Judgment to come

It's far too soon to decide whether Sebonack Golf Club deserves mention alongside Shin-

necock and the National. It definitely has the length and challenge to be a tournament course, but it's hard to envision the U.S. Golf Association leaving storied Shinnecock and awarding a U.S. Open to Sebonack. A PGA Tour event wouldn't be out of the question, but the club faces the same dilemma as Shinnecock—access by just one major highway. (The two clubs and the National share one other distinction, a lawsuit recently filed by the Shinnecock Indian Nation, which claims title to the land of all three.)

What is certain is that Sebonack bears little resemblance to either of its neighboring courses. It is a unique design, with bayside holes nearly devoid of trees and exposed to the wind and much of their perimeters re-landscaped as exposed sand dunes. Inland, on the leeward side of a ridge, holes are still tree-lined and much tighter. Standouts include the downhill par-4 11th, the "postage stamp" par-3 12th, the once-contentious 17th and Pascucci's par-5 18th.

Possible weak links include the opening hole, a short par 4 squeezed between trees and out-of-bounds on the right (the National's caddie shack and golf shop just beyond) and the hillside soon to contain overnight villas on the left. Also the par-3 eighth, which despite Doak's desire, looks like a hundred other par 3s over water from a hundred other courses. One observer has already suggested that golfers skip that hole and instead play the unique pitch-shot "bye hole" (a 19th hole suggested by Bodington) that closes out the round, a green out on a bluff point, a wonderful location that just never fit easily in anyone's routing. (To play it, one must shoot across the first fairway. Only at an exclusive club with limited play would such a crisscross hole ever work.)

Doak and Nicklaus say they learned much from one another during the experience. For Doak, it was mostly affirmation that he wasn't that far apart in strategic ideas from Jack. Meanwhile, Jack confirmed that he'd gotten more quirky in his green contours, such as The Concession, his new club in Sarasota, Fla.

"I like imperfections in greens," he says. "I just didn't know how to get them done. That's one thing I've learned from Tom, how to do that."

That might be the biggest impact Sebonack will have upon the golf world, should Jack Nicklaus' designs start looking more like Tom Doak's, and Tom Doak's designs start playing more like Jack Nicklaus'. ■



### SHINNECOCK HILLS

Just down the road from Sebonack, Shinnecock is ranked No. 3 on Golf Digest's list of America's 100 Greatest Golf Courses.



**NATIONAL GOLF LINKS OF AMERICA**  
The National is ranked No. 9 among the 100 Greatest.