

THE ARCHITECT'S VIEW

“I FIND COLT THE SMART, EXPERT CRAFTSMAN, SIMPSON THE ECCENTRIC, CREATIVE GENIUS”



Dutch designer Frank Pont discusses his restorations of Top 100 courses, reveals his personal favourites to play and compares the work of British design icons Harry Colt and Tom Simpson.

Frank Pont qualified as a civil engineer and earned an MBA at Chicago University before becoming an investment banker with Deutsche Bank. But in 2001 he left London to study Golf Course Architecture at Heriot Watt University and, after apprenticeships with David McLay Kidd in Ireland and Hawaii, formed 'Infinite Variety Golf Design'. It has proved a wise career change, as he now has a reputation for skilful restoration of classics. He is also not shy of expressing candid opinions...

My debt of thanks to HS Colt

People ask me if I make a conscious effort to become a 'Colt expert'? Yes and no. I got my first Colt job at my then home course Eindhoven, and when that was a success the other Harry Colt courses of the Netherlands also started talking to me, and before long seven of the eight remaining Colt courses were working with me. In the end, entering the market from the top was both luck and probably one of the best business strategies I could have devised.

The quality of the Netherlands

The seaside courses – Royal Hague, Noordwijk and Kennemer – usually head up the Dutch rankings, and for a good reason, they are very good. The heathlands – 'De Pan', Eindhoven, Hilversum (and less so Roosendaelsche, Toxandria and De Hoge Kleij) are very good too – but maybe lack the spectacular coastal vistas. The Dutch linksland is simply superb; had Holland been part of the UK between 1860 and 1930, then the world now would have had another 40 world-class links courses.

Given I am a member at De Pan I am of course biased. But if I look at the feedback of leading architects I have shown De Pan to – Tom Doak, Mike Clayton, Brian Schneider and George Waters – it is right up there. Most simply loved it.

Why 'De Pan' is exquisite

I would compare De Pan in character and scale to Swinley Forest or New Zealand. Other famous heathlands are all much bigger in scale than De Pan. But if you force me to put De Pan in a list it

would be just behind the Sunningdales, equal to Walton Heath Old, slightly better than St George's Hill and before Woking. De Pan is very close to what Harry Colt always tried to create.

The place has a great and varied routing, the holes are very memorable, there is a lot of asymmetry of defence and the strategy that opens up. There are quirks, and the greens and their surrounds are typical Colt.

In England, Colt's favourite place to play golf was Swinley; if he had lived in Holland, I am pretty sure it would have been De Pan.

It is the ultimate place for a lazy, late-evening round, a beautiful, tranquil place where you can empty your mind and lose your stress. An American friend once said of it: "If I could play only one more round in my life it would be at Royal Hague. If I had to play golf the rest of my life as a member it would be at De Pan."

De Pan is a special place, and was under the radar for a long time. But in the last 10 years,

COLT v SIMPSON

It is hard to compare the work of Harry Colt and Tom Simpson – but easy to see style differences. Colt's approach was much more methodological and consistent, so it is easier to tell quickly if and where things have been altered; grass-faced bunkers, trees near greens or bunkers, symmetrical bunker defence of greens, the number of bunkers around greens – all are sure signs something happened after Colt left.

Simpson was just much more, well, crazy. One can expect all kinds of strange things, although he had a number of principles, which mostly centred around hole strategy.

I find Colt the smart expert craftsman, Simpson the eccentric creative genius. Simpson's worst holes are far worse than those of Colt, but his best are in my view often even better than Colt's best.

Simpson was better at natural-looking bunkers... but I'd have Colt do the routing.

people in the know have made an effort to come and see it with the other Dutch Colts. I am very lucky to be a member and live less than a mile away. The only problem is I'm so busy with work and raising two boys with my wife that I don't find time to play it as much as I'd like. I pray that changes once the boys get the golf bug.

The legend of Royal Hague

Growing up at Eindhoven, one of the oldest clubs in Holland, people spoke in awe of Royal Hague. This was partly because it was such an established, historic place, but also because of the spectacular landscape in which it lies.

I first played the course in 2002 and from the moment I stood on the 1st tee I was blown away by the course. There is nothing in Holland, and maybe nothing in Europe, that comes close to the landscape on which the course is laid out.

I noted the greens were laid out in very sporty locations and the fairways had massive rolls. The other thing that was striking was how few bunkers the course needed to defend itself.

Most of my work there was rebuilding the greens, surrounds and bunkers, then returning the tees to a style that fits the quality of the links.

My favourites to play

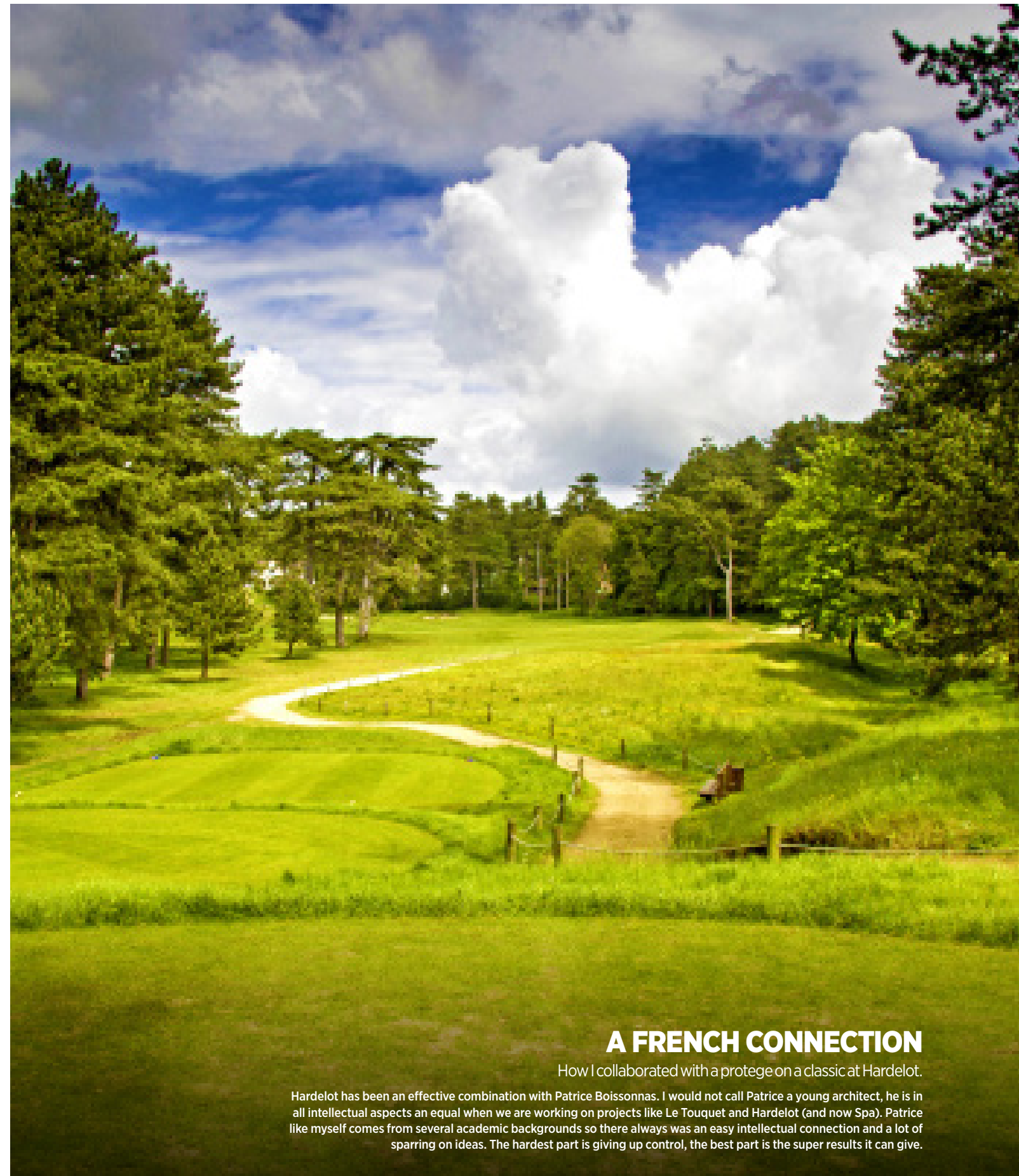
Without mentioning any courses I am connected to, I would select four that stand out.

Fontainebleau in France, because it's a great Simpson course which flies under the radar for many. With a serious tree-clearing program and a sympathetic bunker restoration it could be in the same league as Morfontaine.

Falkenstein (Hamburg) as it's by far the best course in Germany, a mix between Sunningdale, De Pan and Royal Hague, a course that unfortunately far too few people have played.

Penati, a superb first solo design by Jonathan Davison in Slovakia, because of the incredible sandy site and the creative and playful design that makes it so much fun to play.

And **El Saler** in Spain, a tough but subtle and understated links on the Mediterranean by Javier Arana, who deserves to be studied by golf course architecture enthusiasts. ■



A FRENCH CONNECTION

How I collaborated with a protege on a classic at Hardelot.

Hardelot has been an effective combination with Patrice Boissonnas. I would not call Patrice a young architect, he is in all intellectual aspects an equal when we are working on projects like Le Touquet and Hardelot (and now Spa). Patrice like myself comes from several academic backgrounds so there always was an easy intellectual connection and a lot of sparring on ideas. The hardest part is giving up control, the best part is the super results it can give.