SILVA'S GOLD

Brian Silva's design philosophy, built on angles, options, and the opportunity to "fail positively," offers a deeper way to understand the golf holes we think we already know

Story: Steve Derderian

GreatHorse | Matt Hart

Brian Silva might let you talk about course conditions, if you really want to. Sure, you might voice a favorable impression about the golden, wispy fescue that traces the borders of each fairway, or the sheen of a fast, firm green with a gorgeous backdrop that seizes your attention before you've even reached the bag drop.

Silva has never been shy about offering his opinions, and likely wouldn't disagree with such an observation. He might even nod along, but he's already focused on something else. Because in his mind, those are the finishing touches that can vary depending on budget and resources.

What doesn't change nearly as quickly is the thing Silva can't stop seeing once he begins examining a layout. It's the skeleton: how a fairway moves, where a green points, which side of a corridor nudges a golfer toward the better angle.

"If the skeleton isn't right, it requires bulldozers, backhoes, and reconstruction sometimes," he said. "I'm happy when I see a well-maintained course, but it's really not the first thing in my mind today."

As spring arrives in Massachusetts, golfers return to familiar tee boxes with fresh gear, new swing thoughts, and the hope that this might be the year it all comes together. Instead of swing cures, Silva offers a different kind of advice. Don't just aim for the middle. Consider your options. Where's the safe shot? Where might a bolder line reward you with something special?

"Good design," he says, "is not just for the accomplished players who can work the ball. It keeps the excellent players mentally engaged, yet it keeps the hole manageable for the average or less-than-average player."

With a career spanning five decades, the 72-year-old, Massachusetts-born Silva has made it his mission to build structurally sound golf courses with wider contours, sinewy fairways, and strategically pitched greens that allow golfers to benefit from such decision making.

He's long taken great inspiration from the iconic template holes of Charles Blair Macdonald and Seth Raynor, the latter of whom became known for adapting these styles by using thoughtful shaping to lift the design beyond the site's natural limitations. The result is creatively positioned bunkers, hazards turned perpendicular to the line of play, and an eclectic mix of template green complexes, like Redans and punchbowls.

His fingerprints are all over courses Massachusetts golfers know well, from destinations like Cape Cod National, GreatHorse, and Renaissance to public gems such as The Captains, Red Tail, Kettle Brook, and Waverly Oaks. That trust has since carried far beyond the region, with Silva's work taking him to some of the game's most revered properties, including Donald Ross' Seminole and The Broadmoor.

Silva's résumé, and his fine-tuned understanding of how to balance a course's original intent with the realities of modern play, explains why owners and operators continue to trust him. Preserving history matters, but only when it preserves how a hole is meant to function. Other times, it means rethinking it entirely to restore the decisions the hole once asked golfers to make.

"If I could do a course as good as the golden agers, I'd be proud, but sometimes their bunker doesn't work," Silva said in a 2017 interview with The Fried Egg Podcast.

The portfolio commands respect, but it isn't the whole story. Silva's staying power comes from the way he thinks about golf, drawing from the game's strategic lineage to create holes that reward thought as much as execution, and he insists this way of thinking still matters.

Silva never set out to be an evangelist for angles. The realization came mid-career, during a winter trip to La Quinta, California.

One evening, leafing through a program from the PGA Tour Skins Game, he stopped on an aerial image of PGA West's Stadium Course. Looking at the hole from above put into focus something he already understood but had never seen so plainly — how the fairway's movement related directly to the way the green was set, and how bunkers weren't there to punish a miss so much as to influence the next shot. It was all part of the genius intent of the architect, in this case Pete Dye, as expressed through alternating shot demands.

From that point forward, he could not step onto a property without first asking how the ground itself directed play.

In recent years, he has taken that thought, among others, back to the courses he played during his youth to compare his enjoyment to them now.

His first education in golf, though, came through construction. His father worked for J.F. White Contracting Co., operating bulldozers on projects that included parts of Logan Airport and the extension of the Mass Pike. Eventually, that work drifted toward golf. His father and partner began shaping courses and playing fields. Silva spent his teenage years around machines and work crews, learning how greens, tees, and bunkers were built.

At his Framingham home, there were two real bunkers in the yard courtesy of a borrowed backhoe. Silva hit thousands of shots from them. He also mowed crude figure-eight greens into the lawn only to watch as the grass would burn out the next day, not yet understanding why.

St. Mark's Golf Course in Southborough was the first real place he played. For $45 a year, he walked nine holes until dark with

cut-down wooden-shafted clubs wrapped in hockey tape, while his father would work on nearby layouts such as Juniper Hill in Northborough. St. Mark's, now Southborough Golf Club since 2018, is still largely unpolished and lacks irrigation, yet Silva will attest the skeleton of this 9-hole layout is tremendous.

The opening dogleg left is less than 300 yards but offers a choice: lay back short of the stream and accept a poor angle or carry it and be rewarded with a direct angle to the green. When he returned decades later, he stood on that same tee and thought, "Holy s—, is this strategy or what?"

Silva found the course retained many of its characteristics, including its small greens, challenging tee shots, and its bunkering, including a peculiar array of circular bunkers between the 7th and 8th holes.

The par-5 third (465 yards) plays uphill and over a gravel pit from a tee tucked up against Route 85 and the reservoir it crosses. Silva had never reached the green in two during his youth, but one day he decided to go for it. Instead, his ball ended up flying the putting surface and into a neighbor's yard beneath a sign warning golfers to not retrieve their ball. Silva got caught doing just that, but when he explained it was the first time his second shot had reached (and surpassed) the green, the homeowner laughed and offered a pail full of fliers that had trespassed.

By his teenage years, Silva had spent enough time on machines and around work crews but was interested in taking it to a different level. That curiosity brought him into the orbit of architect laureate Geoffrey Cornish, whose name appears on more New England scorecards than just about anyone else's.

Cornish recognized Silva's "undying interest" and offered practical advice: learn the craft from the ground up. He urged him to enroll at UMass's renowned Stockbridge School of Agriculture, work summers on courses, and understand how they are built and maintained before trying to design one. Silva followed that path through Stockbridge, graduate studies, teaching, and eventually the USGA Green Section, the organization's advisory arm focused on agronomy, science, and course sustainability.

During graduate school, Silva saw an advertisement for an instructor at the turf program in Lake City, Florida, and was offered the job. He stopped to see Cornish before accepting. Years later, however, he learned that around that same time Cornish's partner, Bill Robinson, had called about bringing him to Western Canada to work on new design projects. Cornish never mentioned it.

"I didn't want to in any way damage that commitment," Cornish later told him.

The Captains GC | Teddy Doggett

"When I read, 'This is a great course, everything's right out in front of you,' I don't know how much I want to play that course," he says. "If that's what you're after, bowling is your game."

Brian Silva | Photo: Brian Smith

The Captains GC | Teddy Doggett

Top & Bottom:
Southborough GC | Teddy Doggett

"I was just whistling a happy tune during the entire nine holes, and the fact that the fairways weren't as lush and green as places I visit or work at, it couldn't have meant less to me," Silva said on his return to Southborough. "The greatness was how happy I was when I got in the car and I just said, 'this place has still got it.' So, the place is kind of in my soul."

Despite that, Lake City broadened Silva's perspective in ways he could not have anticipated. Teaching required him to organize his thinking and defend it in front of students. In the summers, he visited their placement sites at Seminole, Harbour Town, Pine Tree, Augusta National, and other elite clubs. He saw Bermuda grass up close, studied different maintenance philosophies, and absorbed how championship venues operated.

"It was exposing me to a world of golf that I vaguely knew existed, but it was valuable," Silva says.

After two years with the Green Section, he finally joined Cornish in 1983, armed with a range of experience that shaped the way he would think about courses throughout his career.

Silva also frequented Dedham Country & Polo Club, first as a 10-year-old child watching his father rebuild the 10th green. When he was older, he worked at Woodland Golf Club under Norm Mucciarone, whose twin brother was the superintendent at Dedham. Silva would get the invite to play Dedham, usually late on Sunday afternoons. He was told to park by the road and play holes six through fifteen, the stretch farthest from the clubhouse.

What he found there didn't look like anything he'd seen before. There were greens set on diagonals across hillsides, some falling hard from high side to low; others reversing the tilt entirely. Fairways disappeared behind ridges or knobs, asking for carries into space you couldn't fully see. Centerline bunkers intruded on the preferred route rather than sitting politely to the side. Hillsides fed shots in one direction while punishing those who challenged the wrong edge.

It all suggested the game could be far more inventive than one might have originally imagined.

More recently, Silva was particularly captured by the 3rd hole Redan and its counterpart the 17th Reverse Redan, each with a green angled diagonally away from the tee, sloping heavily from front-right to back-left (front-left to back-right for Reverse Redan) away from a deep bunker. That helped Silva make the connection to Raynor, and while working for the Green Section, he drafted letters to indicate that it was proof Raynor had worked on Dedham himself.

One of Silva's first professional projects turned 40 in 2025. The Captains Golf Course, one of the Lower Cape's most bustling public complexes, debuted to great fanfare, earning Golf Digest's Best New Public Course Award in 1985.

Though still in his formative years as an architect, Silva was already articulating much of the thinking that continues to guide his work today. "What guided our work was that Brewster wanted a course that would stand on its own," he said. "Something different. Eighteen different and memorable holes. You want variety, visually, as well as holes with shot value."

That idea showed itself early, particularly on the original second hole (now No. 14 on the Starboard course), a 378-yard dogleg left that resisted brute force. Cutting the corner or playing safely to the middle left a difficult approach, while a confident tee shot aimed away from the dogleg, toward a distant fairway bunker, opened the hole and simplified the next shot.

It was a concept Cornish published along with Ronald E. Whitten in their golf architecture reference book titled *The Golf Course:*

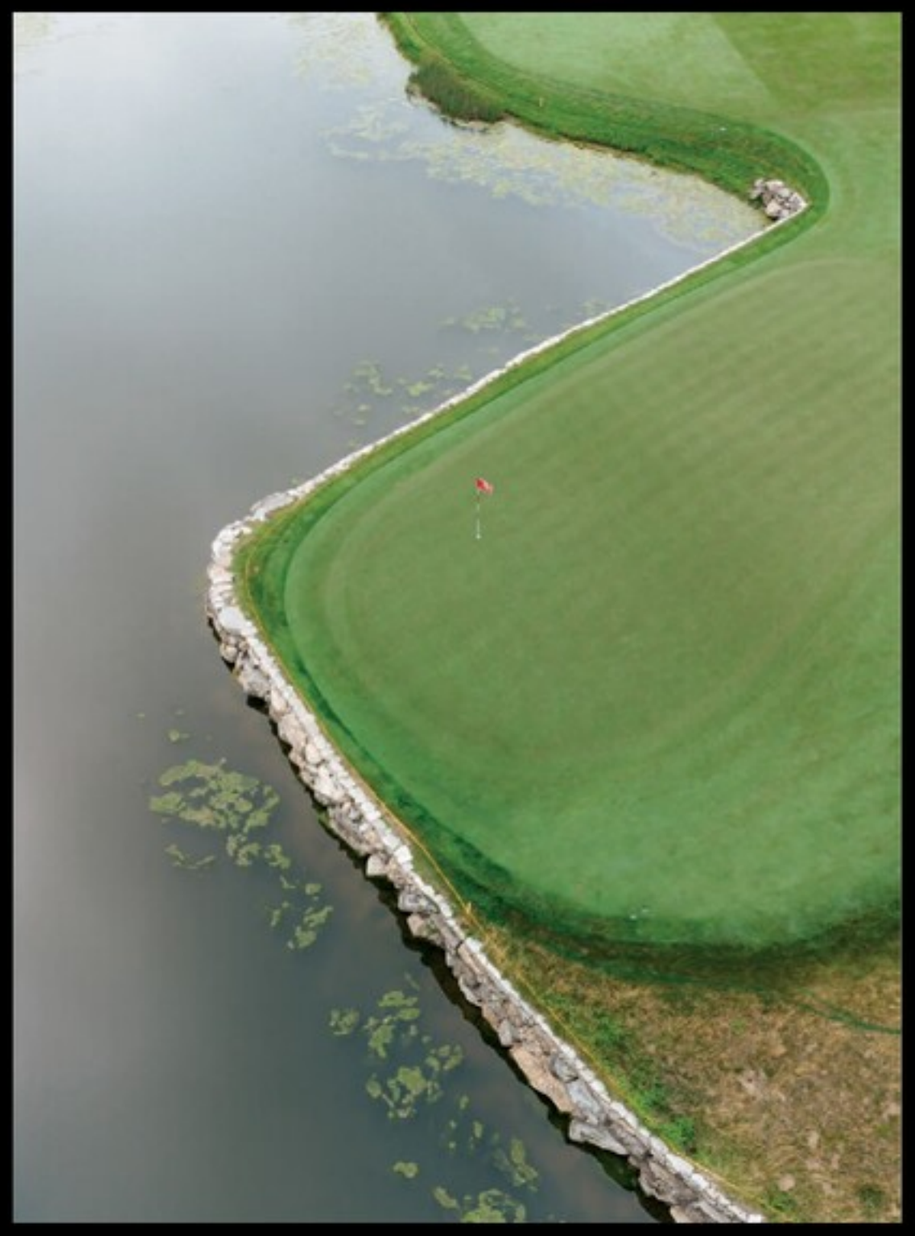
"When you get upon a tee… there is always an alternative; a hard shot followed by an easy followed by a hard. If you elect to accept the risk involved and make the hard shot, the really difficult one, the second shot is comparatively simple; but if you are a little weak-kneed and decide to take the easier shot first, you will assuredly be up against something extremely difficult on your second shot."

Silva looks back on The Captains project with a mix of pride and humility. Engineering the center lines alone took several days as he wasn't entirely sure how to angle the equipment. Still, with a combination of determination and improvisation, he pushed forward.

Then there was the unexpected arrival of Sherwood Moore, a legendary superintendent who had just come off the U.S. Open at Winged Foot and moved to take the Captains job before spending his retirement on the Cape.

Moore raised an eyebrow when Silva suggested seeding bluegrass, rye, and fescue in one pass, then overlaying bentgrass in another direction. "I've never heard of such a thing," Moore told him. "I wasn't sure bentgrass would take," Silva explained, though Moore was quick to assure him that the bentgrass would grow just fine.

To define the fairways, Silva improvised again. He planted pin flags where he wanted the contours to go, ran the irrigation system once to darken the turf, then drove his dust-kicking Chevy Celebrity through the flagged lines so the outlines would pop from the tee. With no one else around, he then seeded the entire course himself.



GreatHorse | Matt Hart

Dedham Country & Polo Club | Stephen Hanjack

"I just very much appreciated how much fun their courses were," Silva said of courses with Macdonald & Raynor influence. "They were very sound. They trip something in your imagination. Maybe you make birdie or par, but you still walk off thinking, 'Wow, that was cool.'"

Dedham Country & Polo Club | David Colt

"I've probably seeded 90% of the bentgrass fairways I've ever designed," he says. "It's kind of a final, 'we're done' moment."

Unfortunately, he ran out of seed after twelve or thirteen holes. When Silva apologized, the contractor just laughed. "He said, 'Don't be sorry. This is the greatest patch of grass I've ever seen in my life.' There's something to be said for over-planting."

"It was a labor of love, and that's one that will always stick with me," Silva said.

That blend of instinct and structure reached its most visible expression at GreatHorse. In its first decade alone, the course has hosted the Massachusetts Women's Amateur, the Massachusetts Open, the Massachusetts Amateur, and a steady rotation of state and regional championships.

The original plan when the Antonaccis purchased Hampden Country Club in 2012 was modest: improve drainage and rebuild bunkers. But once the ground was opened, the questions grew larger. If the bunkers were being replaced, why not address the aging greens? If the greens were rebuilt, why not reconsider the fairway corridors themselves? One phase led naturally to the next. What began as targeted renovation became a $55 million reinvention.

"When we were building the golf course, one thing that we really stressed to Brian is we wanted to be able to build a championship golf course that would be able to hold any events, really, in the country," President and Owner Guy Antonacci said. "The golf course is very fair, but very demanding. There's 18 birdie holes out there, but there's also 18 double bogeys waiting."

Silva certainly wanted a layout that could match that ambition, but it took some back and forth with the Antonaccis to execute a thorough plan.

The site offered more than 200 feet of elevation change, splitting holes between high ground overlooking the Connecticut River Valley and flatter lowland. The risk was a disjointed layout.

Instead of the old tree-lined holes, Silva opened things up to create a thematic and visual unity. He then implemented diagonal bunkering, angled greens, and expanded short grass surrounds to stitch the movements together. Fairways bend around the hazards, including the 207 bunkers, and fronts are open to allow a ground approach, with lateral banks that feed balls onto greens if the approach is properly played.

Grading changes were made along the launching-pad downhill 1st and 10th holes to improve playability. The par-3 9th plays as a mid-length Redan, while the par-3 12th challenges you with a horseshoe-shaped tee and a deep, 50-foot putting surface. Even the longest holes offer width and choice, not just distance.

The collaboration itself evolved alongside the design. "I've said this in front of Guy in meetings that I think he and I had diverse views of what a golf course should be on that site," Silva said. "But I'd say with each passing part of the project, we came closer and closer together. I think at a point it became a joint effort."

Top & Middle:
Red Tail GC | Teddy Doggett

Renaissance | David Colt

Dedham Country & Polo Club | David Colt

Left & Right: GreatHorse | Matt Hart

By the time they reached the short par-3 15th, the final green to be shaped, their thinking had largely converged. They had discussed multiple locations and concepts. When Silva asked Antonacci what he envisioned and suggested he sketch it for the shaper, Antonacci initially wondered if Silva was stepping back. Later, in the car, he told him not to quit on him. Silva laughed. He wasn't deferring. The idea Antonacci described, a slender, fade green suited for a wedge or short iron, was exactly what was called for there.

Where they ultimately refined things was in the bunkering. Antonacci had the green formed, but they felt the surrounding sand needed to match the strategic style that had emerged across the property. They adjusted it together.

"Guy was incredible to work with," Silva says. "He had a shovel in his hand and became a pretty good bulldozer operator. They just wanted to do the best they could, whether it was the practice area, the short-game space, the clubhouse, or the course itself."

At his age, Silva admits he's not immune to pining for the simpler days with his sawn-off clubs. But certainly, the energy is still there.

"I'm pacing around now thinking of another two dozen golf courses I could mention," he says midway through a two-hour phone call.

It doesn't come off as self-promotion. It sounds like true belief, a conviction that golf course architecture, when done right, can change how people experience the game, especially for beginners, by teaching them the value of "failing positively."

Lessons are valuable but could be made even better if an instructor added a 9-hole session dedicated to simply reading and managing a course.

He pauses, then shifts into his favorite metaphor.

"You don't drive your car the way you used to on empty country roads. You've got stop signs now. Hazard lights. Things that change how you move. Same thing here. I just want you to see those flashing hazard lights on the left side of the fairway and prepare, so you can drive your car onto the green."

Another pause. Then, with a half-laugh in his voice:

"It's not some big secret. You do it every day. Just not with a golf club in your hand."