

A

COURSE

FOR THE

LONG HANDICAP

PLAYER

by

JOHN STOBBS

I hope the Editor will forgive me if I turn aside this month from American trends in greenkeeping to look at an unusually interesting topical point in course design over here. Unusually interesting, it seems, simply because that difficult-to-arouse lot, the golf writers, found it so, and because of the reaction their articles brought from golfers in general: on the subject of the new course opened for Harlow New Town at Canons Brook, and designed by Henry Cotton.

Thinking of Cotton's career, and the calibre of golf and courses upon which he has made his reputation as our greatest modern player, over the last three

decades of British golf, you might expect that he would have designed a very devil of a tough, tight, course, beset with troubles and challenges all the way along: the sort of course to suit his own game, in fact, with its long straight driving, impeccable iron play, and craftsmanlike pitching. But, No! Cotton has done just the opposite.

He has, of course, recognised the needs of the sort of golfer who'll do much of the playing upon a New Town course. But he's then carried that approach to design right to a logical conclusion.

The four major features which stick in the mind about Cotton's design are:

1. There's no rough at all, to speak of.

2. He's placed bunkers hazarding tee shots, in general, out of range of the beginner or longer handicap golfer, so that they don't affect him on his drive at all.

3. The greens are enormous.

4. The challenge to the low handicap player consists essentially in the full and testing length of the holes, and in the more aggressive bunkering around the greens.

Theory

The theory is that the beginner, rabbit, or middle handicap man can thus play easy, relaxed golf around Canons Brook, can open his shoulders to try to hit his longest ball without worrying overmuch about keeping it straight, and, however long the slog may seem to him up the longer holes, once he gets in range he finds a large green to aim at. He should thus be able to develop his game in as pleasant a way as can be offered to him—and he may also be expected to get round the course in considerably less time than he would take on a more traditional layout, quite an important point for a course likely to be much used, and often crowded.

The low handicap man, pro. or amateur alike, is still going to have a tightish job to get round in a good score. This is because the hazarding to the tee shots is aimed directly at the longer hitter; and because in order to get near enough to the pin with his second shots to make sure of his "par" on hole after hole, he's going to have to strike them

truly and accurately. For him, too, the openness of the course and the lack of rough is going to offer a chance to relax and open his shoulders in a way he can't often do—especially if he is a very long hitter—on most of our traditionally finest layouts.

At this point I rather wish the Editor himself was writing this article instead of me; because only a professional golf course designer can see the whole picture, from course to course and from country to country, and put things properly into perspective. (Perhaps he could take up the topic next month?)

It seems to the layman that although obviously the Canons Brook type of course (even as tightened up by the vast numbers of decorative trees Cotton intends shall be planted there over the years to come) won't for one moment become a blueprint for future courses, it does suggest how some of the huge unsatisfied demand for golf amongst ordinary people may be taken up in the future.

More Difficult?

It also raises once again the old question of to what extent many of our older courses have become, with the years and the lengthening of the distance a ball will go, more difficult for the bad golfer than for the top class player. Whether they should be is, of course, a matter of opinion. But many longer-handicap men find the game quite difficult enough in itself, without any need of hazards arrayed against them. Much of the time the problem of hitting the ball straight enough, far enough, is quite capable of exercising their best efforts, without any extra help from penal-type hazards. Yet on most older courses the main hazards from the tee, and often through the green as well, are arrayed far more to trap the sort of not-too-bad shot he's likely to play, than they are to affect the tiger, who has to hit a real stinker (for him) before he lands anywhere near any of them.

The best compromise between extremes, and one towards which many courses move hazard by hazard and hole by hole, is one in which our best courses remain very tight for the low-handicap man who hits the ball a good distance,

but are made milder at about the length, and in the sort of areas, most used by the rabbit and beginner.

Take a single hole of some 450 yards (from the point of view of playing-value and ease of maintenance alike): suppose you have a clear area between the tee and the first artificial hazards at some 230 to 260 yards from the tee; then a tightly hazarded stretch for some twenty or thirty yards at the range where the long-hitter's tee shot will pitch; then a comfortable opening up again, both to reward the man who has hit an extra-long, accurate drive, and to offer plenty of room for the long-handicap man's second shot; and finally a fairly tight hazarding of the entrance to the green for both the tiger's long second shot and the rabbit's third shot.

Keep the Pattern

It is precisely because so few courses do space their hazards in this way, or have altered them with the years to keep the pattern despite changes in clubs and balls, that the point is worth noting and deducing. There are too many holes, perhaps nowadays, where the long hitter can clear all bunkers from the tee on the carry, so long as he hits the ball fair and square; but where the line is twice or three times as tight for the shorter hitter. There are too many, perhaps, too, where the worst rough lies in front of the tee or at the sides up to some 200 yards from the tee, precisely where it can torment the duffer all the time, but never affect the tiger at all.

Often, too, old-fashioned cross-bunkers and such like lie at exactly the range of two of the rabbit's best shots; but 50 to 100 yards short of where the long hitter is going to pitch.

Henry Cotton's extreme example may carry a lot of precept for thought even if it makes no common model for imitation.

MISCELLANEOUS

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