

MESSING ABOUT WITH THE COURSE

by PATRICK SMARTT

MOST golfers are dissatisfied with their game. That should be sufficient. But there are always some who are dissatisfied with the course. Not its condition, but its layout. They suffer from an ineradicable urge to alter holes.

Protests are met with the accusation of being old fashioned, reactionary. This platitude betrays shallowness of thought.

No one with any knowledge of golf and in his right mind would quarrel with the removal of out-dated bunkers sited to punish the indifferent strikers. Their unnecessary presence adds to the cost of upkeep. Some defeat their purpose in serving as useful range-finders for the better players.

Let us get one thing clear. With the exception of those clubs which cater for the professional "circuit", the object of a committee is to keep the greatest number of members contented. That has been said hundreds of times; it is not always remembered.

It is reasonable to assume that a man joins a club because the course suits him. No matter how attractive the social side, it is the course, particularly if he is no longer young, that influences his decision. I know. I have been a secretary. Someone asks if he may have a look round: "Too hilly; too tough; can't stand lush grass for rough; too flat and dull," or he likes it. Having made up his mind and joined, it did not occur to him that someone was going to come along, bursting with ideas, and muck about with a layout that he has been subscribing to for years because he *liked* it. You can multiply "he" by a hundred.

What to the likes of him does a blind hole here and there matter. The odds against his getting closer to the hole when he can see the bottom of the pin

are long. There was a time, many years ago, when in receipt of a stroke I could keep a scratch player on his toes. I remain sceptical that it makes all that difference to them. There is the added interest, even excitement, of wondering where the ball has finished as he walks forward. That statement is based on the archaic notion that golf is a game and not a mathematical exercise.

Furthermore, there come to mind two of the finest links in these islands that offer blind strokes.

One hears talk of a bad hole — whatever the definition of that may be. To me, only a dull hole comes within that category, and offers the only good reason for re-siting a green. A new fetish is raising its ugly head, that of lengthening holes, and this not on courses that entertain the tournament "circuit". For some reason perfectly normal people become disturbed if under the Standard Scratch scheme their course is rated at 70 or less, a state of mind that is beyond my comprehension. I once heard talk of putting the tee back at a long and good 4 hole. It tested the good player, the long handicap man could not get up in two but he had his handicap to help him.

The expression used was "to make it a proper 5". What is a proper 5? The good player, if he cannot reach the green with his second will get down in a chip and a putt. He still gets his 4. The more 5s there are on a course the more the low handicap man likes it — he is being offered birdies. The unfortunate remainder are faced with a longer third stroke, a longer walk and inevitably a tendency to press in the understandable desire to reduce the distance and thereby increase the accuracy of that third shot. This

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endeavour will lead to a series of wild lunges and a score of 7 or 8 and more.

The redesigning of a golf hole is an expensive business. Under no circumstances should it be attempted by an amateur. It does not follow that a good player is a good architect. I can think of one, an international amateur and a good friend of mine now dead, whose alterations were a failure.

When bitten by the alteration bug a club must seek the advice of a professional golf course architect (who need not be a professional golfer). This is not given free. Apart from experience in design and an "eye for country" — some courses have been planned in thick woods — he has a knowledge of soils, grasses, and most important — drainage. These the amateur lacks.

Then there is the cost of construction. If the local green staff are given the job the rest of the course will suffer. Even in winter there are storm

drains to be cleared and machinery overhauled.

I have in journeys round the country seen courses, or holes that have been "improved" — some by experts. It would be an exaggeration to say that these have always met with the approval of the double-figure handicaps who, it cannot be emphasised too often, keep a club in being.

Once a thing is done it is done. It cannot be reversed without a further outlay of large sums. To amend Shakespeare:

"If it were done, it is well it were done slowly".

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