Is this the way forward for Golf Course Architecture?

Fred Hawtree looks at current trends in the confection of new courses and yearns for a classical revival.

They are at it again, as you have no doubt noticed. I refer to professional golfers. In times gone, they designed the world’s earliest golf courses. Then, as the purses got bigger, they concentrated on their own game while Colt, Alison, Morrison, Simpson, MacKenzie, MacKenzie Ross and many others, all amateurs, developed a profession and set out a few rules on how to do it best. Now, just when the purses, the prizes, the sponsorships and the rewards for endorsing somebody’s tee shirt have anything up to five noughts on the price tag, the pro’s are back with a vengeance and a few more noughts are being added to the price of today’s new lay-outs.

Well, it’s a free country with a market economy and we all like to see our lads doing well even if we ourselves pay for it in the end. But I am bothered by those extra noughts and by some of the reasons for them appearing on the bill. There is no need for me to declare an interest as we of riper years can rise entirely above all that is petty, envious or malicious. I refer to the price tag, the pro’s are declaring an interest as we of riper years can rise entirely above all that is petty, envious or malicious. I refer to the price tag, the pro’s are declaring an interest as we of riper years can rise entirely above all that is petty, envious or malicious.

Let’s first take a look at where all these extra noughts on the cost of today’s golf courses are coming from.

First of all, the top names in golf, the Seniors’ Circuit will now help him to prolong the season but the principle remains the same. The best hay is made before the seedheads start to appear. But then a name in itself is not an isolated item on the bill. It has to be emphasised, publicised and maximised. This process, besides requiring more payouts, involves other insidious erosions of the bank balance. To justify an expensive intervention, the design of the golf course spreads a nasty rash over the countryside. This will be due to so much sand, so much water, so many rockeries or so many mini-mountains that the visual effect is outlandish: one used to be able to describe a layout in broad terms as ‘links’, or ‘park’ or ‘heath’. Not any more. Eager to engrave a strong signature on a piece of ground which he may well only see two or three times in his life because he has little time to spare from other commitments, your ‘professional’ golf course designer will do his damnedest to ensure that, when the dust settles, the result is as unlike any other golf course as he can make it, except for the number of holes. (And I am not so sure that even the mystical figure 18 is sacrosanct any more).

The result will be interesting though puzzling for archaeologists in the 21st century but not always much fun to play in this one. And expensive... just listen to this. In order to transform a little piece of Britain into a displaced section of the Gobi Desert, the first thing these rascals do is to strip the top-soil off something like 50 acres. It may be 100 in practice but 50 will do to start with. Now this morning at 10.00 a.m. the price of this operation by your friendly contractor was 250p per square metre. A quick sum in your head calculation suggests that when we spread all that top-soil out again, we shall be spending another £50,000 on top of the first. And now we can start building the golf course. So it’s no wonder the green-fee has to be £25 and upwards and you can’t always get a comfortable round.

But don’t rush off to get your clubs yet. There is more - much more. All those exotic earthworks have got to be maintained because they don’t really belong in their new situation and do not easily adapt to our native routine. I am indebted to Donald Steel, current Chairman of the British Association of Golf Course Architects who ferreted out the vital figure while he was covering the Ryder Cup at Muirfield Village for ‘The Sunday Telegraph’. The reason, his article concluded Muirfield Village’s condition was so perfect is its maintenance budget of $850,000 a year, including salaries for 43 greenkeepers to give it tender, loving care.

See what I mean? A whole new golf course every twelve months. He also said that it was a mistake to compare any aspect of American and British golf. I am not so sure about that if they are attacking us in our own back-yard although the general premise is very true. It has taken at least fifty years to get rid of the image of golf as a rich man’s game. Then just as it is finally shed, along come super-luxe developments which risk putting out of reach of the new wave of enthusiasts. What we really need is more developments along
Another sobering thought occurs to me - this anonymous character in the background who draws the plans and instructs the contractor between the annual visits of his overlord. Who is the real designer? The pro? Or the chap who sweats it out on the site? The wheel has come full circle. When James Braid or Harry Vardon used to lay out a golf course in a day’s visit, it was the greenkeeper or local contractor who had to make it work afterwards. And very little credit he got for it. It was not such a big deal in those days. But now that a new project needs the full publicity treatment to create maximum ‘impact’ why do we never hear the name of the man who is doing the real work while the big name poses for ‘pix’ holding a spade, of all unlikely implements. They simply don’t use them any more. (If you find this scenario a trifle far-fetched, turn back to a recent issue of this magazine for confirmation…)

And still another thing. If the invisible man is clever enough to translate a few lordly waves of the hand in between air-port transfers, why does he not put his own signature on the result? He certainly deserves as big a medal as the part-time pro. Most ghost writers in golfing literature (With one possible exception) get a mention in such titles as “The Day I won the Open” by Fred Hawtree with Joe Bloggs”.}

JOHNNY MILLER

TO GET YOU GOING, HERE ARE A FEW SUGGESTIONS FOR OUR CHRISTMAS LIST:

Yorkshire: Ganton
Lincolnshire: Woodhall Spa
Norfolk: Brancaster (I don’t know it myself)
Suffolk: Ipswich G.C. (Purdis Heath)
Essex (?): I’m open to suggestions
Kent: Knole Park
East Sussex: Crowborough Beacon
West Sussex: Pulborough
Hampshire… O.K., now you take over

Greenkeepers — Why don’t we take a leaf from the leading golf publications and compile our list of top ten natural courses?

Pick your ten in order of merit and send to: The Editor, Golf Greenkeeping, P.O. Box 12, Wetherby, W. Yorks.

The Results will be published in 1988

© GOLF GREENKEEPING Nov. 1987