When it comes to golf course design, it is difficult to say what type of player should be rewarded and what type punished. Should the course favour the long hitter or is the quality of play that should be rewarded and design it is difficult to say what type of golfer is the most suited for the game? The general consensus would appear to be to reward the golfer who can do neither. The temptation while always allowing the golfer to attempt a challenge is to allow escape routes for the weaker hitter. The game then becomes an exercise promoting the human qualities of self denial and courage while teaching us humility and the art of careful thought.

I recently had the very great pleasure of attending a BIGGA regional course on course design and construction. This was an excellent course in which we the students were taken into the world of the golf course architect and learnt some of the subtleties, and artistic touches that they use to reward the thinker while at the same time punishing the more wayward amongst us. A strategically placed fairway bunker could guard the side of the fairway to the other. Obviously the subtleties of the course design are somewhat lost on this golfer.

There is another breed of golfer that is not so often seen here at Sludgecombe and that is the power golfer. He carefully selects the ball as to tempt the golfer into biting off more than he should. Even the halved turf of St Andrews came in for this demolition treatment at the hands of John Daly a couple of years ago. St Andrews is a very strategic course in that the accurately placed tee shot that skirts the out of bounds on the right hand side opens up the green for the second. The safe option of going left from the tee allows a longer shot over obstacles and so a penalty is taken. However at the hands of Big John, it was a case of hitting everything half a mile forward and a quarter of a mile left into the vast expanse of adjacent fairway. A short iron with 3000 rpm of backspin from there over any intervening pot bunker, and the target was never in any shape to defend itself.

Now this is obviously golf that is not exactly taxing on the brain but there is one hole at the home of golf that although not being aesthetically pleasing to the eye due to the fact that the tee shot is played over a hotel that owes its design influence to heavy rough it is however one of the most strategic in golf. That hole of course is the 17th or Road Hole. Perhaps not surprisingly it is about the only hole at the venerable links with trouble in the form of heavy rough on the left. Then with the infamous Road Hole bunker guarding the front and left of the green and purgatory beyond the shallow putting surface it becomes the most classic of risk and reward holes. The clever one will hit the tee shot to the out of bounds and rooms on the fourth floor of the hotel, to ease the approach to the green. Take the safe option left from the tee and one is left with 180 yards of carry over heavy rough and potentially toughest bunkers with about two foot of landing area beyond. Now this is a hole that gets a man thinking.

Personally such a hole would not affect my particular brand of golf as it would on this hole involve several of involuntary lashes followed by a desperate search and so once again the subtleties of this classic risk and reward hole would go some distance over my head, but in the hands of anyone that has some control over the balls, final destination, its a different matter.

So how can the course designer and, perhaps more pertinent, we the greenkeepers help in promoting strategic thinking from the golfer? What ever his abilities or lack of them. Well, at the above mentioned course I remember the tutors, the renowned course architects Simon Gidman and Howard Swan saying how in the old days the game was much more strategic due to the fact that the old 1.62 inch ball which everyone used was difficult to elevate and difficult to stop on the putting surface. Add the modern balata covers, square grooves, greens that are watered automatically and rough that can be cut more than about three times a year or what ever was the norm in those days and any incompetent can fly greenside bunkers and the target was never in any shape to defend itself.

Better by design

Sandy McDivot, Head Greenkeeper at Sludgecombe Pay and Play, outlines some of his thoughts on Golf Course Design in...

“A short iron with 3000 rpm of backspin, and the target was never in any shape to defend itself.”

March 1998 Greenkeeper International 65