Dye takes technology, developers to task

In the last year, the debate over technology in golf has intensified, with the American Society of Golf Course Architects calling for more regulation of golf equipment in order to keep golf course length—and by extension costs—from spiraling out of control.

Pete Dye has seen a lot of changes in his more than 40 years designing courses, including technology. Never one to temper his opinions, during a panel discussion at the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America conference in Atlanta, Dye appealed to the USGA and other organizations to take a more heavy-handed approach to regulating technologies.

"[The industry] needs to get together and try to stop the golf ball for the great players," Dye said. "This hitting a golf ball 400 yards is ridiculous. You can't make ball today goes one inch farther than the ball they made 50 years ago," he said. "So Martha Burk ought to be yelling at the golf ball manufacturers that they're discriminating..."
Augusta uncrowned

Continued from previous page
and co-designed by Dr. Alistair MacKenzie were, as Horton Smith said, “a cause of character, individuality and personality.” Over the years, modest changes were inserted into the original design. In recent years, cosmetic changes became common but remained modest. The most significant changes evolved as the standards of maintenance improved. The growth of turfgrass maintenance, agronomic knowledge and equipment sophistication led to the recent years’ “immaculate perfection” standards - not a blade of grass unkempt.

The four recognized major golf tournaments of the year, only the Masters is played year after year at the same venue. This continuity of site helped enhance the legend of famous players, famous holes, famous shots and famous victories. Past shots and past scores could fairly be compared and certainly were. These past glories are obsolete now.

Throughout the years, the basic playing character was more or less true to the original design and the founders’ original intent. The continuum was in place. Now, in an effort to counter or defend against recent technological advances by club and ball manufacturers, as well as the unique ability of Tiger Woods, Augusta is undergoing a vigorous redesign that has dramatically changed many of the holes. Where now are the continuum, the tradition and the playing link to the course Jones and MacKenzie produced? In fact, if Jones or MacKenzie were alive today, they would not recognize the Augusta National of 2003. Whatever great shots, superb lightning-fast putts or grand Sunday afternoon final nine charges that were the stuff of legends and so faithfully documented will now be a continuum and link to past performances. The new course may well look like another Tom Fazio course, one of many, but not one of one. Lengthening and moving tees, bunkers and approach shots bring new golf not directly comparable with Masters tournaments of 2001 or before. Growing a “second cut” or semi-tough to hinder slightly wayward tee shots removes the long and proud distinction of not having rough at the Masters. Adding instant trees surely has altered how some of the holes were previously played. It is different now.

Will Augusta National still be automatically ranked as one of America’s truly great courses or is it now actually one of several long, demanding courses set into surrounding woodlands? Augusta was never a course of unique natural setting or spectacular and memorable vistas. The pine forest actually became more claustrophobic as trees grew taller and wider and were joined by new additions of trees. The glory was in the link to a historic source of original design and a masterful management of the early legends.

While the “splendor, splendor, splendor” of the early legends will return, it will surely be difficult now to claim the legacy or compare the scoring traditions of earlier Masters. From 2003, it is a new course, a new tournament and a new record to establish. Will Augusta National again warrant its lofty stature based upon its illustrious heritage? Perhaps not. Perhaps now Augusta National will be another rolling, long, pine tree-lined course with nice spring flowers that merely hosts a prominent tournament and still provides enviable immaculate perfection in turfgrass management. While modern technological advances are helping the individual golfer’s length of play, technology is doing nothing for the memories and traditions of golf, which are too few as it is.

Construction slowdown

Continued from previous page
said. “You always like to have that unfair advantage. People get aggravated about it, but that’s just business and that’s the way these things get done sometimes. You just have to accept it and move on.”

With course openings declining in 2002 (GCN, March 2003), the picture looks to get worse before it improves. Financing is often tough to come by, so builders have to get creative and competitive with their bidding. “Financing has been difficult for our clients,” said Quality Grassing general manager Robert Price. “As a result, there has been an increase in joint ventures and partnerships for private investment.” To combat rising insurance premiums, Quality Grassing has also had to get creative, relying on some of those business relationships and staying on top of the situation, Price said. “Insurance rates continue to rise while our bonding costs have stayed the same, so we have established close relationships with our insurance and bonding agents,” he said. “We continue to compare their performance and rates with competitors.”

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