MODERN DRAINAGE ISN’T SO BAD

This past November, another industry magazine featured an article about modern golf course drainage written by a golf architecture columnist and historian. Its main points were: (1) The good-old days of golf design were perfect; (2) modern architecture sucks; and (3) golfers don’t like catch basins in prime play areas.

The first point is open to debate, the second ruffles my feathers, and the third requires deeper thought. I’ve discussed the basics of how to design drainage (see my October 2004 column) but would like to address why modern golf courses seem to need more drainage than older ones.

The aforementioned columnist believes older courses magically drained themselves, and modern golf course architects just can’t figure it out. Fact is, most old courses drain well now because superintendents have installed new drainage throughout the years. The columnist admits old courses have added much drainage throughout the years, blaming it on wholesale redesigns intended to wipe out the original architecture.

Earlier generations might have accepted soggy turf in wet swales, probably because they sensed technology and/or budgets couldn’t prevent it. Nostalgia aside, playing wet courses couldn’t have been as pleasant as some might imagine viewing old photos. Nowadays, golfers don’t accept the idea that a course takes several years to get in great shape. More importantly, owners and bankers know the value of good drainage to a golf course business plan that depends on:

- Making great first impressions on opening day and beyond. This garners awards, buzz and good word-of-mouth publicity.
- Minimizing down time. Getting back in play immediately after most rain events – especially if an outing has been booked – maximizes the balance sheet.

The advent of PVC drain pipe makes installation cheaper than ever, raising its cost/benefit ratio to where it makes no sense not to use it. It’s easy to imagine Golden Age architects saying the same thing if PVC drain pipe had been available to them. Drain pipe and easy earthmoving wasn’t available, so they used natural drainage patterns more than modern architects. Because we have higher per-