

Are modern courses designed for golfers — or for superintendents?

by Edwin B. Seay

The necessity to control rapidly rising maintenance costs need not overshadow the desire to make golf courses interesting, challenging, and fun to play.

Golf courses were once designed with one primary goal in mind . . . to challenge and excite the golfer.

That was before golf course maintenance costs started skyrocketing out of control. Now, the golf course architect designs with two needs in mind: the golfer's, and the golf course superintendent's.

A recent poll conducted by the American Society of Golf Course Architects reveals that one of the most noticeable changes in the past 10 years has been the development of courses designed for easy maintenance.

Does this mean that the needs of the golfer are being compromised to satisfy the needs of the superintendent and his maintenance budget?

There's always the danger, but members of the ASGCA indicate there is no reason why both needs can't be fully satisfied with modern design.

No professional golf course architect can overlook the "maintenance factor" in his design. As architect Jack Kidwell, Columbus, Ohio, points out: "The annual maintenance cost at a Class A facility has increased from \$4,200 per hole to \$7,900 per hole in just 5 years. Maintenance costs are reaching the point where they are threatening the growth of golf, and it is imperative that architects do everything in their power to face the problem and solve it through innovative design."

Architect Ted Robinson, Palos Verdes Peninsula, Calif., warns: "If we don't reverse the trend of exploding maintenance costs, there will be fewer new courses built. The challenge to the architect now is to minimize maintenance costs without compromising character and interest of the course."

Ed Seay is one of the most popular and prolific golf course architects in the country, if not the world. He is also immediate past president of the ASGCA.

Architect Fred Garbin, Export, Pa., insists: "Good design and easy maintenance are not incompatible. But the blending of the two elements is a complex problem fraught with pitfalls."

For example, architect Robert Trent Jones, Jr., Palo Alto, Calif., points out: "Some new courses have been built around the use of new mechanical equipment to cut down assumed labor costs, but many of these courses violate the traditions of shot value and the game of golf."

Architect William Howard Neff, Salt Lake City, Utah, names one of the most common pitfalls: "Oftentimes, the definition between fairway and rough has been eliminated, in the mistaken notion that this is necessary, or desirable."

Architect Dick Phelps, Lakewood, Colo., feels: "In some cases the character of the golf course is completely lost and replaced by a 'pasture pool,' that may offer easy maintenance, but unimaginative play."

Architect Michael Hurdzan, Columbus, Ohio, feels: "Artistic considerations are in some cases giving way to function in an effort to reduce construction and maintenance costs. This is manifested in the use of fewer traps, and the spacing and placement of traps to accommodate large gang mowers and eliminate time-consuming and costly hand mowing."

Such techniques are generally acceptable to most course designers, but architect Bill Amick, Daytona Beach, Fla., sums up their feelings: "The architect must make every trap count in the strategy and appearance of the course. You don't want traps placed simply to accommodate mowers, just as you don't want wall-to-wall sand because it eliminates mowing entirely, or perhaps adds contrast to an otherwise poorly designed hole."

Architect Don Herfort, Minneapolis, Minn., who sees a serious need for courses designed for modern



maintenance methods, also says: "It takes special talent to achieve this without sacrificing the aesthetics and playability of the course."

Thomas E. Clarke, Bethesda, Md., advises: "This is a difficult professional problem, but there is no reason why interest, challenge, and playability cannot be incorporated into a course that can be easily maintained."

Architect Marvin Ferguson, Bryan, Tex., feels that in the past architects never gave much thought to the consequences of their design. Now they are reconsidering many established design elements, and the result is often beneficial not only for the maintenance of the course, but for the playability, as well.

For example, a serious maintenance problem on older courses is the use of sand traps with overhangs and steep lips which require hand mowing. Once a golfer hits the sand, he has enough of a problem without having to negotiate a tricky overhang. The overhangs add nothing to the enjoyment or strategy of the game, are

simply a headache to maintain, and their elimination is beneficial to both the golfer and the superintendent.

Have golf course architects gone overboard in designing for easy maintenance?

Architect Rees Jones, Montclair, N.J., says: "Perhaps, so. But maintenance costs in many areas of the country necessitate this if golf courses and the game itself are to survive."

Architect Samuel Mitchell, Canton, Mass., says: "With today's high cost of labor contributing to dangerously high maintenance budgets — not to mention the effect on the cost of greens fees — anything that can be done to lower costs is vital to the survival of the game."

Clubs interested in building a new course, or reconstructing an existing course, are well advised to make sure they have an architect thoroughly familiar with problems involved, and one who appreciates the serious implications of design on both the playability and maintainability of the course. □