

Designer's forum

By Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan



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Luck or Skill

The best players of the game are programmed beings that have spent untold hours and dollars becoming mechanical "men". These creatures possess powers and skills to control the spin and flight of the golf ball in an almost mystical fashion. One needs only to visit the practice tee before any big tournament and marvel at the expertise of both the famous and the unknown.

Since there is so little real difference between the hitting skills of the best players, it becomes obvious that the real "separator" is mental attitude and luck. In few instances is one able to design or maintain a golf course boldly enough to mentally intimidate the best players. For even if we took the best players and would allow them to play golf holes like the ones depicted in the now famous drawings called "The Most Infamous Holes in Golf" by Bud Chapman, they would do so with a veracity that would have made the Spartans proud. Perhaps some pros would even play these holes under par.

But why then are there some courses where historically winning scores hover near par? The answer is luck. These golf courses are so constructed or maintained so that skill is no longer the fair "separator", but

rather the winner is selected not just by the rub of the green but by the vicissitudes of Lady Luck.

What then permits some courses to be viewed as tests of luck instead of skill? To be specific and to use proper names would be extremely unpopular, if not totally construed as a miscarriage or defamation. I would prefer to allude to physical elements of some of the more notable examples and let you decide which ones they are.

The first indicator of a luck golf course is where some of our very mechanical artisans of the game shoot 69 on one day and come back with an 82 on the next. None of these professionals go off their game that much that quickly. So one must ask what caused their game to be so dramatically affected as to result in this major inconsistency. Sometimes it is the easily understood factor of nerves or strong gust winds or rains that causes the lucky to prevail. Other times it is the artificial use of heavy, matted rough that denies the execution of a proper golf shot. Roughs such as this must be considered in the scope of luck for a well-played shot may be only a few inches off the fairway but yet to advance the ball with skill is forfeited.

The same may be said of a water hazard or sandtrap, but these are considered hazards expected to exact a penalty and rarely extends on both sides of the fairway from tee to green on every hole. Roughs immediately bordering fairways should, therefore, not be considered and developed into penal hazards. Actually, I endorse the philosophy of Dr. MacKenzie who used no rough at Augusta National or alternatively a friendly rough that is cut at an intermediate height between the fairway and the heavy rough. But the greatest perpetrator of luck has not yet been discussed and that is unfair putting greens.

A few years ago, the U.S. open was held at a prestigious club and because of the high scores, that even was to become dubbed as the "massacre". The reason for these soaring scores was not the length of the course, its roughs, hazards, or climatic factors; but rather it was because the greens were impossible to putt.

A review of the souvenir program from that tournament would show contour drawings of the greens with as much as seven percent fall across the green, while the commonly accepted pitch of a green today is about three percent. These old greens were not considered abnormally steep in 1923 when they were built, because it was common practice to seed greens to mixtures of bentgrass, fine fescues and redtop. In addition, during that period we did not have the overall technology to maintain greens much shorter than $\frac{3}{8}$ ", so the height of cut and grain of the grass was matched to the slope and these slower greens permitted control over a putted ball.

Within the last decade, with our modern maintenance procedures we can double cut our putting surfaces down to $\frac{3}{64}$ ". The net effect of all this was that the greens during this open were made so fast that luck was more important than skill. It was not uncommon for a putted ball to pick up speed well after it left the putter blade. The result was that the golfer could exercise little, or no, skill in controlling the ball. When the likes of Nicklaus, Player and Palmer have a 20-foot putt and leave the ball many feet beyond the hole, skill has been obviated.

Such an analysis is not meant to tarnish the image of the victor, for he indeed may have been the most skillful player on the course those four days. But you cannot help but wonder if our fetish to protect par has not led us to maintain facilities that separate players on some basis other than skill.

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