

Designer's forum

By Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan



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Doctor of Philosophy in Environmental Plant Physiology and his Master of Science in Turfgrass Physiology from the University of Vermont. Dr. Hurdzan is a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, is on that association's Board of Governors. He is also a member of the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation, USGA, NGF and the Golf Collectors' Society. Dr. Hurdzan has authored many articles on golf course design and maintenance and is currently writing a book on the history of golf course architecture.

Cow pasture golf courses

The image of such places would probably be fairly large open fields, with short grass cover, few clumps of trees, occasional tall weeds or rocks and putting surfaces and tees laid on existing grade. There would be little or no maintenance program as the preceding cows had caused only the low growing grasses to persist, there would be very little evidence of irrigation, and the fertilization would be spotty (excuse the pun).

It would appear that virtually no money was spent to build the golf course, the Pro Shop would be slightly larger than a 3-car garage and the greens fee couldn't be much more than one dollar. In fact, if there wasn't a barbed-wire fence between the golf course and the adjoining land to keep the cows on the real pasture, and a few sandtraps scattered about, one could not tell where the golf course stopped and the cow pasture began.

Such was my exact first impression of the famous British Golf Course at Deal, better known as Royal Cinque Ports. This golf course, however, was filled with people who were enjoying fresh air, natural surroundings, warm

friendship, and a lively brand of golf. I saw no golf carts, no bright-but-coordinated polyester golf outfits, and it seemed everyone pulled a trolley (caddy cart). As a Golf Course Architect, I found the scene to be foreign but friendly, and soon I became enchanted with the challenges of the golf course and I relished the feeling of seeing golf in its pure form. Years later, when I visited the oldest club in England, Westward Ho!, these feelings and cow pasture images were rekindled. In fact, at Westward Ho! one had to simply play around or over the sheep and horses which freely roamed the golf course.

This scene was also common in America for the first 40-50 years that golf was played. If this then is what golf is or was, how did we get to where we are in American golf and what have we lost in getting there? I place a great deal of blame on where we are on Madison Avenue hype.

We have been sold or bainwashed into our present perception of what golf and golf courses are by the spectacle of televised golf events from the most prestigious clubs in America and the slick pages of popular golf magazines. The hype to the golfer is computer-designed equipment, built with space-aged materials, famous designer clothes and plush golf courses.

Recently, one popular magazine showed its average reader had a family income of \$35,000 per year, 78 percent went to college, and 94 percent owned their own homes. I admire the magazine for such a select readership for it attracts hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of advertising, and that is not only good business but also that is the essence of free enterprise and the capitalist system. However, I am frightened that this large and powerful tool of propaganda can shape and mold our perceptions of golf and golf courses, so that we normalize the images printed on their pages and golf becomes limited to persons who might fit their average reader category.

In this magazine that extolled the virtues of 1980 equipment and places to play was an article on Lon Hinkle, an accomplished touring Pro. In that article, Lon's father makes a statement

about the course he played on that had a rule: "That kids had to play with an adult. The next year we moved to California and Lon and the rest of the kids could play as much as they wanted. That's when he really began to develop."

Where today can a kid, especially those from the lower and middle income families find a place to play and develop? Is it possible that this means that golf is becoming restricted to only wealthy children and financially secure adults? Is golf going to become an elitist pastime such as polo? I believe it is not only possible but probable unless we can realign our perceptions of what a golf course is and what is the essence of golf.

I am a young man and I can remember spending the best 18 summers of my life on a golf course that had no watered fairways, used minimal fertilization, had no pure stands of grass except on the tees and greens, and was maintained with limited equipment. But it was affordable to everyone young, old and crazy. From that little 9-hole family-owned public golf course came eight PGA Pros, two Golf Course Architects, and literally thousands of dedicated golfers who may never have gotten exposed to golf otherwise.

The homeliness of the term cow pasture golf should not conjure up visions of uninteresting golf. In fact, golf played on less well maintained facilities alone requires a greater diversity of golf shots than does golf played from perfect lies on lush green swards. One learns to play pitch and run shots, he learns to read the "break" in the driving areas for running drives, and he must learn to pinch the ball or he loses his shirt in friendly competition. The truly skilled Golf Architect will maximize the natural features of the golfing ground and will minimize the use of huge earthmoving machines to produce artificialness at an exorbitant cost.

For those who can afford to play golf at those lush, green oases which adorn our countryside, I say enjoy the best. But for those who can afford only to dream about such places and seek pleasure on cow pasture golf courses, I say simply, enjoy.