

ALL THAT

Glitters

IS NOT

Gold

If the golf industry doesn't learn that expensive doesn't mean great, then the game's future is at risk

A COMMENTARY BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

Like most other first-time visitors playing San Francisco GC, our group got lost looking for the entrance. When we finally did pull into an asphalt area, we assumed it was the parking lot, although the first tee and pro shop were just a few feet away. We found our way into the dark, musty locker room, and then we found the locker-room attendant. Old enough to have been at Ford's Theater the night Lincoln was shot, he was sound asleep at a desk at 8 a.m.

We thought: What an interesting start! Four hours later, after playing one of the world's most interesting designs, the so-called "experience" took on a charm like no other in golf. The corresponding low-profile maintenance of the wonderful old-course design gave the minimalist facilities genuine, world-class character.

Today's golf industry would have trouble grasping an "experience" so strange, even though this was only a little more than 10 years ago. Modern golf doesn't understand that an old club gets away with such odd experiences, not because of its age, but because the golf on its 18 holes is so timeless.

Virtually no new club or course built in the

last 10 years has learned from the old-style simplicity that emphasizes golf over the experience. The focus on everything but the character of the golf played has sent the game on a collision course with economic failure, even as golf supposedly enjoys more popularity than ever.

The values of modern golf revolve around a slick experience: manicured turf, lavish aesthetics, a costly and shallow obsession with "brand names" and an inability to take advantage of technology to build better, less-expensive courses. Instead, modern courses are built to be run like four-star hotels, with garish design features that in someone's mind look expensive, yet rarely lend themselves to playing golf. Such ephemeral effects fade when customers can't detect substance or genuine value in the product.

Native golf

Golf evolved into a sport because, like fishing or hunting, it was a battle against nature, minus the bloodshed. It was played amidst natural settings, and no one had any inkling of complaining about unfair bounces, brown spots



MIKE KLEMM

in the fairway, unrepaired divots, blind shots or a green's proximity to a town road. Such elements were part of doing battle with the elements and part of the fun.

We will never get back to the purest forms of 19th century "native golf," nor do we need to. However, in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing economic downturn, the golf business — particularly the design and construction markets — faces a rough road. Many of the potholes were created by an inability to understand the values that jump-started the game, many of which the customers who love the game still desire. Everyone who has an interest in the game — and hopes to continue to enjoy golf or profit from it — needs to reassess their golfing values.

Expensive equals great?

The most perplexing mindset in today's golf is the notion that an expensive course is a great course. The second most perplexing notion is that an inexpensive course lacks the thrills and professional experience provided by the pricey one down the street.

You'd think the overwhelming notoriety of Sand Hills GC in Mullen, Neb., and the Bandon Dunes 36-hole resort in Bandon, Ore., would have revealed that "greatness" can still come from well-conceived and inexpensive designs. Their success starts with quality sites,

but only comes to fruition based on how the designs were applied to the land in careful, economically rational ways. The notion that these courses are anomalies is also perplexing when we have heard architects say for years that there are no great sites left and few decent ones either. Then how were these two gems and others by the same architects built for a fraction of the cost many believe is necessary to create a lasting course that golfers will cherish?

Their success (and their ability to maintain such complex-looking courses on reasonable budgets) comes from good, old-fashioned common sense, care, craftsmanship and respect for values that worked in the past.

What is beautiful?

Modern golf has fallen in love with being pretty. Consider:

- "Orchestrating Color" was the title of a cover story on flowers in a recent issue of another magazine for superintendents.

- Ornamental trees, cascading waterfalls accented by bronze statues and garish colors of sand visible from space are imported at ridiculous expenses to make courses "beautiful."

- A half-million cubic yards of dirt, considered minimalist earth-moving today, is shifted so golfers can see an entire hole and not have to wonder if there are any mysteries to solve. In

Continued on page 50

Greatness can still come from a simple and inexpensive design. Sand Hills GC in Mullen, Neb., is a perfect example.

The “pretty” that golf has embraced is entirely artificial and serves only to provide instant gratification.

Continued from page 47

contrast, dirt is sometimes shifted so golfers *don't* have to see something egregious, like a road or community of homes.

The “pretty” that golf has embraced is entirely artificial and serves only to provide instant gratification. Beauty is no longer nature-based, it's the “prettiest” that technology can create.

Golf is learning the hard way that not only is the pretty mentality expensive to create and maintain, it fails to satisfy customers. Golf's idea of pretty also offends environmental agencies that will never warm up to new course development on sensitive sites until golf can learn how to treat nature with better care. Some courses are trying to resurrect the natural, native elements that create lasting satisfaction. Some new courses, mostly forced into action by governmental agencies, use natural contours and respectfully blend golf into the environment.

The kind of fabricated pretty that golf currently admires has a short-lived, effeminate quality. For a game that's so admired for its

fairness in society and the remarkable improvement in golf course maintenance over the past 10 years have raised expectations.

The fairness obsession, no matter how it has evolved as such an important value, is killing the game. Instead of creating thought-provoking golf with manageable yardages that golfers find fun, architects and superintendents are mandated to ensure fairness. Superintendents can't protect the artistic or strategic beauty of hazards because maintenance must protect the golfer's right to receive good lies throughout.

Golf is a recreational pursuit at which some people also make a living. Its mission should be to provide fun, satisfaction, diversion, exercise, laughs and, most of all, a passion to pursue. If this is achieved, both customers and the business win. We've learned, however, that trying to provide “fair golf” is an unrealistic golfing value.

It doesn't make sense when an architect rearranges a perfectly good piece of ground so a golfer can have bowled fairways and superintendents can have two payroll members whose lone jobs are to fill divots. Fairness is an expensive and sometimes ridiculous value in the face of so many other more important matters in life.

Technology management

If golf is going to maintain its popularity and an economic future, it must look at the incredible technology and information it has. Instead of immediately viewing technology as a way to make everyone's jobs easier, technology must first be embraced and refined to make golf better.

Construction equipment should be advanced with an eye toward turning bastardized or unattractive property into natural-looking land, or to maintain the course in a way that exposes a golfer to natural beauty that he can't find anywhere else.

Club equipment technology must also be better understood. Courses are too long because nobody wants to be labeled un-American and antibusiness for suggesting regulating equipment, but what good is new equipment if the courses themselves are going out of business? The golf industry is finding out that few people want to spend \$150 for six hours and 7,300 yards of narrow fairways, when a round should be \$35 for three hours over a generously wide 6,300 yards.

Continued on page 52



GEOFF SHACKELFORD

The multicolored rough at Huntington CC on Long Island stands out. The beautiful maintenance of the fairways and greens allows such “crusty” native areas to be accepted by golfers.

connection to the outdoors, the golf business seems intent on fighting nature and avoiding efforts to recreate natural settings. The artificial form of pretty looks great on paper, but not on the ground when contrasted with nature. The result is that golfers sour on new courses or bad redesigns at existing courses.

Fairness fixation

The obsession with fairness in modern golf results from a combination of watching too much PGA Tour stroke-play golf and listening to inane comments from obtuse announcers. In addition, the overall fixation with

All That Glitters Is Not Gold

Continued from page 50

New golfers are not making golf a game for a lifetime. Even in the face of the best widespread course conditioning the game has had, 3 million people per year drop out because the game is too expensive, takes too long and is too difficult. The National Golf Foundation has reminded industry people of this for years, but we keep seeing new courses constructed that are longer, tougher and more expensive. We keep watching as maintenance and design teams create novelties, whether it's the course with the lily-whitest bunkers or the one with the most intricate fairway-striping patterns.

That's not what attracts and keeps golfers. The traditional values and simple themes of nature have always been and will continue to be the features that enamor golfers while keeping the game affordable and economically healthy — and that's what we have to grasp.

Golf is a brilliant game, and it's our job to figure out how to keep it that way. The values of the game will be strengthened for years to come if we can cast off the fast-food, mass-



GEOFF SHACKELFORD

production, brand-name addiction it has attracted. It's time to create mom-and-pop style operations and embrace the artistic side of the game as much as we currently embrace the scientific.

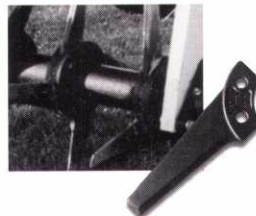
By actively encouraging creativity with a big-picture view of architecture, maintenance and operations, golf could play an integral role in rejuvenating America's spirit of community. ■

Shackelford, Golfdom's contributing editor, can be reached at geoffshackelford@aol.com.

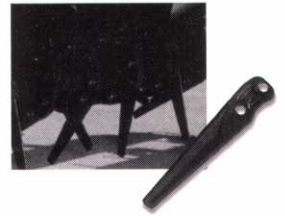
Easthampton GC on Long Island, a new Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw design, feature hazards with a natural look.



Shattertine®



Sportstine®



Finetine®

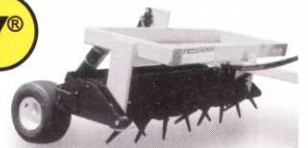
AerWay® offers low cost, low maintenance, long lasting options for all your turf aeration needs!

A Full Family of Tines - AerWay® offers you customized aeration options for your greens, tees, fairways and roughs.

Effective Deep Tine Action - goes to the heart of soil problems by relieving compaction. This results in strong root growth and outstanding drought resistance.

AerWay® Advanced Aeration Systems are cost effective - a complete range of sizes and styles starting at under \$3000.00.

AerWay®



**AerWay® - Effective Aeration
When You Need It - Where You Need It!**

for further information call **1-800-457-8310**

Advanced Aeration Systems

www.aerway.com aerway@thehollandgroupinc.com