



# In Bounds

By Jack MacKenzie, CGCS  
North Oaks Golf Club

Those who know me well and have golfed with me over the last two decades remember how I feared my woods and carried them only for something to put my head covers on. Having developed a strong disdain for my persimmons and love affair with my one iron, I truly had no need to use anything but. That is of course until two things happened to change my way of thinking.

**The first, it is the fact of life that I am getting older**, and just cannot hit my one iron as I used to be able to. Maybe I am just not as dexterous or my body isn't in the shape it used to be in, or perhaps I think too much when I am playing. Regardless, I cannot spank the ball anywhere near the distance I once could.

**And the second is that last winter I was treated to the gift of a Taylor Made 3-Wood**, metal that is, titanium head with a stiff shaft and a soft supple grip. It fits in the palms of my hands as if it is a part of me. The first date we went on exposed me to a new game of golf.

**It began as an explosive drive**, 280 yards carry, down the center of the fairway. The ball smoked off the face of my 3-wood and I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't in a dream. I had never hit a drive as far in my life, and straight no less! It was even beyond the fairway bunker placed to capture errant drives of above average distances. My new abilities gave me an incredible appreciation of where technology, in club and ball design, has taken the game of golf. And thus the dilemma of players, such as myself, who are now able to overcome the challenges designed into golf courses by many golf course architects.

**Different golf course architects have different styles.**

Donald Ross designed random bunkers off the tee, scattered for directional effect. New technology has little impact upon his courses other than shortening the course dramatically. Stanley Thompson on the other hand designed risk/reward bunkers for the first shot. His style dictated that if the player wanted to challenge the bunkers and was able to overcome the test, a great second shot opportunity was set up.

**Today's technology** basically eliminates this type of design feature in golf. Longer and more controllable drives have changed the game. And in order for older courses, often land locked, to keep pace with these changes, something has to be done.

**I am fortunate in that I am employed at a very progressive club.** In the mid eighties we were at the head of the pack implementing the "contour" style of mowing designed to "create" target areas through the use of imaginative mowing patterns. Off the tee this concept was logical and although not always aligned with physical challenges such as ponds and bunkers, it served the purpose of challenging the better players to aim for a defined target. Unfortunately for the average and beginning player the "contour" mowing features that progressed down the fairway

would often compromise their second, third and even fourth shots up to the green.

In the '90s the club, in an effort to temper the dissatisfaction of many players, regressed to the original mowing program and retained an architect to create a long range plan. A structured guideline adopted into the bylaws with the intent to prevent any individual or group of individuals from radically changing the course without member approval.

**Brian Silva was brought on board to develop this plan.** In the process we learned that our course was special in that the architect, Stanley Thompson, is regarded as one of the masters in the industry. Mr. Silva felt that any grand changes would detract from the gem designed by Thompson. His recommendation was to restore the club back to the original risk/reward architecture.

We did. Trees were removed (over 350), double hazards eliminated, greens enlarged and the bunkers were reshaped back to their original specifications. The changes were immediate and quite stunning. Long missed vistas were recreated and opportunities to generate more creative shots again realized.

The "Silva Plan" was a huge success. But of course it should have been, he was restoring a classic course back to the architect's original design.

**The new millennium brought with it major changes in equipment technology.** Hitting an accurate and greater distanced shot has given the average player wonderful satisfaction. And it is surreal to watch the Pros on TV consistently drive through the fairway challenges with record-breaking length. Sadly, the old classic courses have become less and less of a test of golf for the long hitters due to the neutralization of many inherent design features.

**To combat this assault of technology** and anticipate with appreciation the standardizations of distances attained by today's equipment, North Oaks is again enlisting the aid of a golf course architect to assess the design of our course. At the time of this writing four qualified designers have toured the track and made proposals to eliminate our dilemma while contributing to the quality of golf for everyone who plays North Oaks. I have been impressed with the similarities of each visitor.

**Like Brian Silva, each of the specialists appreciated the talent of Stanley Thompson** and agreed that any changes should emphasize his design features. That is, duplicate fairway bunkers beyond existing ones and tucked more into the fairway in an effort to challenge the long ball, lengthen tee boxes where ever possible to bring challenges back into play and create a shorter set of tees to accommodate those learning the game or who desire a different kind of strategy. None of the golf course architects recommended the rebuilding of the greens (much to my relief!).

**The search process has been an education for me.** Again I have been treated to new perspectives of Stan Thompson's design. Nuances have been brought to my attention and design style re-emphasized. I am excited about working with another architect as we conquer the challenges brought about by the technology revolution.

But on second thought, maybe not; I have had a blast rediscovering my game. Technology has brought a measurable amount of delight back to my style of play. I am hitting the ball further and straighter. My confidence level has raised tenfold and I am having fun. Isn't that why we play the game?

*My new abilities gave me an incredible appreciation of where technology, in club and ball design has taken the game of golf.*