

Stanford G C: Progress Dearly Bought

By: Geoff Shackelford golf.com architecture writer

Until learning of Stanford's plans to use its historic golf course for student and faculty housing, most of us would assume that the school understands what a treasure its 1930 George Thomas-Billy Bell course is. Most of us would presume that Stanford was comparable to any Ivy League school, constantly working to safeguard the historic architecture that lends so much character to its campus.

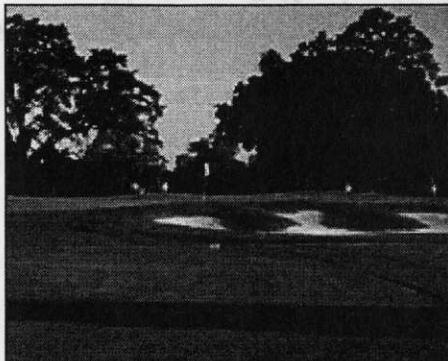
Wrong!

Stanford's administration, as the neurotic but perceptive Alvy Singer mused in "Annie Hall," clearly has no idea what's going on. They have no clue that several of the golf holes pegged for development are only in the school's hands because architects George Thomas and Billy Bell insisted Stanford acquire that land to create a better, more varied design. The administration obviously has no idea what it means to their school's image and attractiveness to have a golf course of this stature so close to the campus. They certainly have not figured out how much wonderful (and free) publicity the school receives for fostering talents like Tiger Woods, Tom Watson, Notah Begay and Casey Martin. And obviously, they have no clue what the golf course means in terms of alumni support or the general atmosphere of Stanford University.

Larry Horton, the school's Director of Government and Community Relations, says the school's future depends on finding a solution to their housing crisis. Almost as if Stanford University would just wither up and blow away if they could not build a dorm room on the first hole, with more to come in the near future. All this is in spite of the simple fact that Stanford has hundreds of acres of their own property to work with, yet they've chosen the golf

course land because it is close to the campus, it's flat and it's seemingly the easiest solution.

Perhaps the school assumes



all Stanford golfers are wealthy and many will offer to donate capital to build new holes in the foothills. However, this is shallow reasoning at best. An effort to build a new nine would take millions and the chances of getting such a course expansion completed are slim due to environmental concerns and the costly earthmoving that would be necessary. More importantly, the school would in effect be taking alumni support away

what it was: the ingenious use and preservation of nature's best features while incorporating the subtle, strategic aspects of golf.

The master architects were genuine artists. As skilled as Olmsted or Frank Lloyd Wright at blending art, architecture, function, engineering and their own personal vision to create pleasurable masterpieces that must be protected and cherished.

Now that we are beginning to see a greater appreciation for the merits of classic courses like Stanford, it's time that golf spend some of its excess millions and use its popularity to protect those architectural wonders.

There is only one organization in the game that has the tradition and appreciation of the game to protect the classics: The United States Golf Association.

The USGA has long been weary of programs that seem

"You know, that's one thing about intellectuals, they prove that you can be absolutely brilliant and have no idea what's going on."

— Alvy Singer in Annie Hall

from itself, and also be stripping its campus and student body of a historic and architecturally significant recreational facility.

How can a school like Stanford, which prides itself on having an Olmsted designed campus, not understand the historic and architectural integrity of their golf course?

Or is it unfair to ask them to understand this when the game of golf does not have a program in place to preserve classic designs?

Only recently has the work of its master architects been fully understood and appreciated for

outside the scope of its duties, and rightfully so. But a program is needed to bequeath landmark status on American golf courses that have architectural and historic significance in the game. It is time that these courses not only deserve recognition for their contributions, but receive a seal of approval and protection from the game's governing bodies. Such a stamp of landmark status might not stop administrations like Stanford's from coming up with hackneyed plans to replace their historic courses with dormitories. But it might serve

as a reminder that they are threatening to undermine a historic golf course and that the game of golf will not stand for it.

Sure, Oakmont and Merion probably don't need another certificate telling them they have been landmark courses both architecturally and historically. But there is a second tier of American courses that have not hosted U.S. Opens, but which have served the game in many ways. They are older courses designed by the renowned master architects. They provide great joy to thousands of golfers every year. Their classic architecture has withstood the ages and is presented in such a way that it elicits an emotional attachment from golfers that merely average designs cannot. These courses host sectional events or merely just foster young talents and fuel their desire to play the game. More often than not, it's their history and architecture that is often the reason these courses inspire people. And those courses must be saved and restored so future generations can experience the same joys.

Is it any coincidence that Stanford Golf Course has been the home to so many great players? Is it a fluke that two former USGA Presidents played the course in college, with two current members of the USGA Executive Committee having been regulars there during their years at Stanford? And sure, Tiger Woods was there for only two years before turning pro, but one wonders if he would have gone to Stanford had they been relegated to playing only the local courses? One has to assume UCLA or USC or the Arizona schools would have looked just as attractive to Tiger had Stanford not had its own classic golf course combined with a lovely campus and a fine academic reputation.

So would the USGA be overstepping its bounds by issuing historic status to courses around the country? Absolutely

not, says Sandy Tatum, a former President and Stanford alum. "I think it would fall squarely in the USGA's mission to preserve the values and tradition of the game and [protecting the golf course] most certainly would not be overstepping their bounds."

Grant Spaeth, another Stanford alum was asked what he would do if such an idea came to him during his early 90's tenure as USGA President.

"Freeway expansion has ruined many California courses and whether such a historic status could have prevailed I don't know. But clearly I would have been open to it as president and a member of the Executive Committee. Now that the USGA foundation has more substance, we would probably have appointed a subcommittee to look at this, study it carefully, and report back."

Spaeth also pointed out that ultimately, the USGA could probably set up such a program and allow the state golf associations to get involved by helping in the designation of worthy courses or in the execution of any necessary protection for those courses.

Peter James, a current member of the Executive Committee, also agrees that such a program would surely "capture some attention,

particularly with other issues in the game also possibly threatening historic courses," he said. "There is definitely room for such a program in the game, and I know its something that would certainly generate interest and discussion among the Executive Committee members."

Would a USGA stamp of approval save Stanford's course from extinction? Maybe not. There are those in golf that would say such a USGA program, started now, would only be happening because so many USGA officials past and present went to Stanford. Perhaps, but Stanford has hosted seven NCAA golf championships and a U.S. Boys Junior Championship in 1960. So it's hard to argue that Stanford has not contributed to the game in every way imaginable: great architecture, home course to numerous golfing greats, and as a historic tournament venue.

Some form of official recognition for classic architecture is long overdue and necessary to protect future situations like Stanford's. Why not take advantage of this dire situation at a course that is so clearly been vital to the game and such a special part of so many people's lives?

If not now, when will golf ever have a better opportunity to stand up for its history, tradition and classic architecture? /

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