

# God's greatest theatre

The question is often posed; who is the ultimate judge of a golf course, especially its design? Could it be our mythical Mister Average? Therein lies the rub, for while there may be several accepted methods by which a golf course can be judged in its technical sense, in its adequacy so to speak, there is no way on earth that our by-no-means-mediocre-though-essentially-rather-average golfer can be objective about the charm, grace and splendour of a golf course. Beauty, golf buffs are led now to believe, is in the eye of the fellow who holes a big percentage of his putts; the standard applying as much to par-busting giantkillers as witless thrashers. Individual taste remains the only gauge, a player either likes a particular course or he doesn't, while the vitriolic outbursts of the tournament professional – more common by far than praise – will usually be governed by his fortunes: how well he has just played. After all, how many desolate experiences does a player care to remember?

What is a great golf course? The most unequivocal thing you can say is that it will possess the very breath of life; a personality, character and (sometimes) antiquity that is clearly its own. Many certainly have the stamp of ancient history about them, while there are scores of great courses that are positively youthful. Still more are mere infant prodigies, yet destined for great things. Most of these admirable courses will hold the distinction of having been created; designed by a golf course architect. Further, though most golf courses are conceived with the object of testing the few to their limit, if their architects' are anything like the artists we know them to be, they will in addition have painted the broad canvas especially for the average golfer; those who will sustain the course in the greatest of numbers.

Dr. Alistair Mackenzie, in his book *Golf Architecture* (1920, reprinted 1982), under a chapter titled 'Plans for the perfect golf course', suggested that:

- A really great course must be a constant source of pleasure to the greatest possible number of players.
- It must require strategy in the playing as well as skill otherwise it cannot continue to hold the golfer's interest.
- It must give the average player a fair chance, and at the same time it must require the utmost from the expert who tries for sub-par scores.
- All natural beauty should be preserved, natural hazards should be utilised, and artificiality should be minimised.

Placed somewhat inappropriately at the tail-end of his book under 'Hints on Greenkeeping', though aimed (with tongue in cheek), perhaps at green committee chairmen, Mackenzie further suggested: *'Never follow the advice of a golfer, however good a player he may be, unless he is broad minded enough to disregard his own game and recognise that not only has the beginner to be considered, but also that a very high standard of golf architecture improves everyone's play. Golf course construction is a difficult art (like sculpture) and still in its infancy. Endeavour to make every feature indistinguishable from a natural one. Most courses have too many bunkers. They should be constructed mainly from a*

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*strategical and not from a penal point of view. Fiercely criticised holes often improve the standard of play and ultimately become most popular.'*

Scotland's Donald Ross, who progressed from clubmaking at Forgan's workshop in St Andrews, while also studying golf with Old Tom Morris before becoming pro-greenkeeper at Royal Dornoch and, finally, the most active and sought-after golf course architect in America, put his opinion thus: *'It is obviously the function of the championship course to present competitors with a variety of problems that will test every type of shot which a golfer of championship ability should be qualified to play. Thus, it should call for long and accurate tee shots, accurate iron play (and let me say here that I consider the ability to play the longer irons as the supreme test of a great golfer), precise handling of the short game and, finally, consistent putting. These abilities should be called for in a proportion that will not permit excellence in any one department of the game to too-largely offset deficiencies in another. Likewise, penalties should not be unduly severe nor of a nature that will prohibit a full recovery by the execution of an unusually well-played shot. These are the problems presented to the golf architect when undertaking the design of a championship layout.'*

## 'Nature must be preserved both with dignity and integrity'

Though Donald Ross's object lesson for would-be architects, amateur or professional, was written several decades ago, at a time when the choicest plots of land were still available to golf course architects, its premise holds good today.

How interesting it is to learn also of Mackenzie's likened the art of golf course construction to that of sculpture, for sculptor and artist are clearly the closest of partners in golf, both working subtle intrigues with nature; soothing the beleaguered player while at the same time offering irresistible temptations.

There are those who claim that golf was never invented; certainly its lowland origins remain ambiguous, while the first golf course architect quite likely was a hacker from East Lothian called Old Father Time. We know that bunkers were simple scars on the links caused by sheltering sheep, that greens were born in the 1700s at St Andrews, that tees didn't exist before 1875; and that the century had turned before Willie Park Junior first shifted soil in fashioning elevated and contoured putting surfaces at Sunningdale. We know also that every player fancies his chances as a golf course architect.

For all that, the designing of golf courses is a youthful occupation. The title *golf course architect* was unknown until 1902, when Charles Blair Macdonald coined the term, while according to architect/researcher Geoffrey Cornish, co-author with Ron Whitton of *The Golf Course* and *The Architects of Golf*, there has only been in the whole of the

chronicle of mankind some 600 or so recorded golf course designers. This figure, of course, takes no account of 'dog' tracks, whose perpetrators undertake their 'designs' on the back of a fag packet, but if nothing else it demonstrates the exclusivity of such a profession. Six hundred? Surely there have been more astronauts launched into outer-space than that?

Exclusivity there may well be, but in Britain today the British Institute of Golf Course Architects (BIGCA), founded just 21 years ago, is ensuring that this does not also mean anonymity. Throwing open their doors and letting the world see what they are about has proved a grand start, followed by their becoming the only teaching institute in the world for 'would be' golf course architects. Their 1995 post-graduate diploma course through Kingston University is full to overflowing, the belief held within informed circles that this will become the architectural qualification, ultimately recognised throughout the world.

Already we are seeing the results of their other entente cordiale activities, first with the signing of a protocol of co-operation between the Institute and AFAG, the French architects' group, second with a declared desire for closer co-operation between all other organisations involved in the world of golf, including those professional players who have embraced design as a new, often secondary, career.

Finally, the Institute is staging a two-day conference and seminar programme, the first of its kind, at the Wentworth Golf Club on April 20-21. Looking always to the future, the seminar addresses several likely problems head on. A session on ecology will be staged, ie fitting the modern course into a natural image, plus discussions on game improvement, with regard to both human frame and modern implements. With golf balls being hit longer and harder (though not necessarily straighter), there is a greater need for safety and this issue also will be addressed. There will be sessions on design concepts for the modern age, how to make new courses maintainable, how to keep them (economically) watered, plus discussions on the equation that everyone seeks to get right first time – the financial market place. The finale, the icing on cake so to speak, will be when Dr. Alistair Cochrane discusses how we might balance modern day technology with the strongly held traditions prevalent in our beloved game.

Seventy years ago Tom Simpson summed up the need for architectural simplicity: *'The educated taste admires simplicity of design and sound workmanship for their own sake rather than over-decoration and the crowding of artificial hazards.'* Thank God, Britain's architects have only very rarely been required to enter the (mainly American) frenzy that has real-estate sales as its bottom line. Our finest continue to uphold the traditions that are deeply rooted in their profession, knowing that nature must be preserved both with dignity and integrity.

● Readers interested in attending the BIGCA two-day seminar and conference can obtain further details from the BIGCA secretary. Tel: 01883-712072.