



**Golf courses that have had the foresight to manage their landscapes are without doubt the most attractive and inspiring to play, says Andrew Vaughan. Catch up with a thoughtful tree planting programme.**

**A**nyone connected with the management and upkeep of a golf course will be aware that virtually all courses are currently in the process of being measured to upgrade their Standard Scratch Score.

As the deadline on 31 December 1995 draws ever closer, at the time of writing some 30% of courses have yet to be measured and surveyed. Of those already completed, approximately 50% will remain unchanged, 30% will have their Scratch Score raised by 1, 10% raised by 2 and 10% reduced by 1.

Although the assessment procedure is rather complex (if not mystical) an understanding of the Rating System could allow the Scratch Score to be maximised.

For the uninitiated, the Standard Scratch Score and Handicapping Scheme originated in 1925, and was last upgraded in 1983 when the system used by the Australian Golf Union was

# Up to SCRATCH

introduced, based on all scores returned by players under Medal Play conditions. However, this still did not address the problem of uniformity of Scratch Scores or the portability of handicaps, and as a result the Course Rating System of the United States Golf Association is now the basis on

which golf courses are to be assessed. Under this system the Standard Scratch Score is the score which a scratch player is expected to return in ideal conditions over a Rated course.

Before assessment and measurement begins, the course is provisionally rated by standard

length (the sum of the horizontal distances from the medal tee to the centre of each green). The Provisional Scratch Score is then adjusted up or down depending on a number of physical factors that affect the playing length, namely; roll, changes in elevation, forced lay-ups, dog-legs,

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prevailing wind and altitude. Secondly, the obstacles that affect playing difficulty are evaluated and scored to give a final adjustment.

The basic USGA Course Rating is therefore based on the performance of a scratch golfer, whose better half scoring average will equal the Course Rating in normal conditions. However, more interestingly the USGA System also provides procedures to determine the Bogey Rating, based on the performance of a Bogey Golfer (handicap 17 to 22, or a player who cannot normally reach the green on a hole exceeding 370 yards in 2 shots).

Such a rating could help deter poorer golfers, or at least reflect the anticipated difficulty (or cost in new balls!).

Besides driving the ball much shorter, the bogey golfer is much less successful at hitting fairways and greens. He/she plays long

par-4 holes as a par-5 and is not nearly as effective in getting up and down from rough or bunkers. Thus the areas (and angles) they play differ from those of a scratch golfer.

While the Rating system adjusts for the bogey golfer, no account is taken of an obstacle being more difficult for them to escape, or because they cannot recover as well as a scratch golfer. Overall, the system converts obstacle ratings to stroke values by multipliers of 0.26 for scratch players and 0.11 for bogey golfers (because scratch players avoid and overcome obstacles more than twice as easily as bogey golfers).

In the process of rating a course, and a typical hole, an assessor will consider the following (roughly from tee to green):

■ Chute – consisting of trees that are positioned such that they can interfere with the early flight path

of a shot, where on average, the ball must pass through a narrow opening. Difficulty is rated on the width of the gap between extending branches, how far the opening is from the tee, or for a subsequent shot, from the landing zone. Other factors include foliage density, where might the ball drop and how well can the player recover.

■ Extreme Rough – classified as vegetation that will either make it likely that the ball will be lost, or can only be advanced with great difficulty (eg. long grass, heather, gorse, tree roots, marram grass, underbrush).

■ Landing Zone – defined as the area from where the shot hits the ground to where it comes to rest (length) by the fairway width. Generally, Landing Zones are rectangular, and obstacles are considered to be near when within 20 yards.

■ Layout – Forced – where obsta-

cles cross the fairway or reduce the width in the normal landing zone to less than 15 yards.

■ By Choice – where a player decides to hit less than a full shot to allow a subsequent full shot to the next target (usually a green).

■ Obstacle Squeeze – occurs when obstacles within 20 yards of the centre of a Landing Zone prevent a player playing away from either obstacle.

■ Shot Length – assuming players hit straight shots, the average distance covered after two shots can consistently vary by 100 yards between Scratch and Bogey golfers. Therefore assuming obstacles apply to all golfers, is often not the case.

■ Transition Zone – the area just beyond the average distance of shot expected to be hit with consistency. On the drive, 10 yards, from the fairway (2nd/3rd shots) 20 yards. Where a green lies within a transition zone, a golfer



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has a 50% chance of reaching the green. Placing an obstacle close by can determine how the "average" approach shot is played (eg. lay up by choice with short approach to give a full shot to the green).

■ **Accuracy Pattern** – an Accuracy Table indicates the average target size that can be hit with 67% of shots over increasing distance. This is used to evaluate the effect of an obstacle around the target or Landing Zone (usually a green).

■ **Combining and Weighting** – In some situations an obstacle can have a greater effect than would otherwise be the case, particularly where two types combine (eg. extreme rough under trees or crossing deep rough to a green surrounded by bunkers). Also severity on one side of a Landing Zone can differ greatly from the other, or indeed where one "hazard" varies in severity (eg. well maintained grass under trees in one section, heavy rough in another).

Ten types of the most common obstacles have been identified that will affect play namely; Topography, Fairway (width, nearby hazards, hole length), Green Target (difficulty of hitting green), Recoverability and Rough, Bunkers, Out of Bounds/Extreme Rough, Water Hazards, Trees, Green Surface (Putting difficulty) and Psychology (cumulative effect of obstacles on a player's score).

Other than major changes to

the layout of a golf course, the obstacles that are most easily influenced by course management are greenside bunkers, rough and trees.

Missing a green is twice as significant as missing a fairway, thus increasing the difficulty around the green is likely to be the favoured option when tightening up a course. This also generally coincides with the largest area of "dead" ground.

While increasing the acreage of heavy and semi rough will almost certainly be opposed by many club members, the planting of trees is gaining popularity. Many courses considering tree planting not only seek an immediate "woodland", but also one which is designed to provide an attractive and pleasant backdrop to the course. Although shelter is an obvious benefit, trees also provide security to players/passers-by/neighbours, help divide the course in a natural manner and influence how the course is played.

Very few courses are prepared to be really bold in making certain holes more difficult, as with increasing player numbers and pressure, slow play (and exasperation) is often the result.

Accordingly, designing woodlands for golf courses is fraught with difficulty, not least as golf balls are one of the best tree pruning devices available.

Previous attempts at tree planting on an informal basis very often prove to be an expensive

and wasteful exercise as either tree protection and maintenance are non-existent, or they are sited in the wrong place. There is no instant way to establish trees, and although many courses plant six to eight feet high "Standards", they are initially expensive and establish slowly, while smaller, trees quickly establish and can soon overtake their larger counterparts.

Provided minimum area criteria are met, grants are available from the Forestry Authority to plant small woodland copses that by careful design can benefit the playing of a particular course (and cover 30-80% of the total cost). Coupled with planting individual trees scattered between larger areas, the effect can be very natural and attractive.

When designing the layout of new planting, the following criteria are especially important:

1. Landing Zones off the Tee should generally be given a wide berth, as there is no point making a particular hole impossible to play for the poorer player. Also, as tee shots are the most erratic trees close by the landing area are likely to be bombarded at regular intervals making establishment difficult.
2. Trees will eventually occupy significant space as the canopy broadens and matures. Thus, strategically placed young trees will increasingly interfere, with play.
3. Creating Obstacle Squeeze

for players approaching the green is the most likely method of deliberately affecting play, not least as this usually corresponds to the largest area of dead ground, and is the one shot that is under control (reducing damage to trees). However, maintaining adequate aeration and light to the playing surface must also be considered.

4. The location of open space and vistas is just as important as where trees are located. Reducing space around the green/tee area will increase wear and tear as player traffic concentrates in a narrow through-route.

5. Tree planting need not be completed all in one season. Not only will this spread the cost, but it allows for the player/tree interaction to be gradually increased.

6. Work out a grass management regime before tree planting, identifying who does what and where. Green staff need only be concerned with areas potentially in play. Maintaining closely cropped grass in between hundreds of young trees is not realistic.

7. Where possible try to use site specific native tree and shrub species. This should ensure rapid establishment and promote the long term vigour and viability of the trees into old age.

8. Plan for dropping zones (and the necessary local rule changes) such that the tree bound shots are properly but fairly penalised.

9. Secure the support of club members/players, or at least attempt to educate them about the problems of tree establishment and the damage they can inflict.

10. Be prepared to maintain newly planted trees for three to five years, ensuring that a prescribed maintenance programme is rigidly applied.

Those golf courses that have had the foresight to manage their landscapes are undoubtedly the most attractive and inspiring to play. Therefore, golf clubs wishing to plant trees are initiating a major change in how their course looks and plays, and seeking specialist guidance is crucial to getting it right. Happy planting!

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