

This course is too

DIFFICULT!



Dutch golf course architect and R&A member, Joan Dudok Van Heel, reveals some of his pet hates in course design.

The frustrated cry, "This course is too difficult" after hours of thwarted effort can be heard so often by keen and dedicated golfers of the last 20 years when

playing on some of the older, great courses of the world.

A course being too difficult, objectively, is really quite rare. There are always large areas on a

fairway where a shot can land with impunity. This may mean the sacrifice of a stroke but if one is prepared not to listen to that seductive voice of your alter ego

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Pine Valley GC photographed by BRIAN MORGAN



to go for broke, then this sacrifice should be seen as a quite normal reduction of your available number of strokes which is calculated on a handicap based on one's prowess. There is no law that says that 18 pars are compulsory for every golfer. You would, when playing tennis, not expect to play like Sampras, who hits the ball more often and harder over the net than most, and yet play tennis on the same sized court with the same height of the net and both enjoy playing the game.

In most games and sports, not only power counts, but even more cunning, strategy, patience, playing within your limits which you know best yourself.

Establish your own pars, bogeys and double bogeys before you go out with honest modesty, stick to those and you will find not only few courses are difficult but also that you are winning most of your games.

Too difficult according to my experience means unfair and for a golf architect to be accused of unfair design really hurts and should send him running back to the drawing board. Unfair design implies, presenting the golfer with difficulties that are illogical, not to be circumvented, the punishment for a not quite perfect shot not fitting the crime, and not providing the opportunity for the basic chess-like manoeuvring which is such a decisive factor in golf.

This unfairness sometimes gets gimmicky; unfortunately one finds at times that a golf course designer has not sufficient knowledge and experience of the game itself and the wish to be different (and therefore hopefully known) runs away from the subtle dictates of the game and the environment.

I'm afraid having to confess an innate dislike for, and consider unfair, the gimmicky appearance of revetted bunkers with vertical walls. On seaside courses, with prevailing western winds, with bunkers facing East, revetting and fairly steep walls to keep the sand in place can be justified, but does one need vertical walls, to achieve this aim, which will never give such bunkers the appearance of having been created by wind erosion and look utterly unnatural, like a wound in nature, are expensive to build and will often give the unfortunate golfer who

may have just failed to clear such a bunker another "punishment not fitting the crime" with unfair, if not unplayable lies.

I have played at Muirfield since 1946 but yet had to play so often sideways or backwards out of bunkers than during my last visit. My three partners and myself played three rounds which meant between us 216 holes and at least 40 times or 20% during which a recovery from a bunker in the direction of the hole was impossible.

I know that on the short 13th this has always been the case and is one of the features of the course but to have vertically or revetted bunker walls on practically every second hole of this beautiful course seems out of order. Never could it have been the intention of the Good Saint Andrews to punish unfairly in situations which are out of context with the surroundings. If there is a general feeling that the top golfer should be punished for inaccuracy, do so by other fair and not foul means.

To put too punishing bunkers for slightly wayward shots lacks imagination. There are more subtle and architecturally better and more natural ways to make a course difficult and strategically more demanding.

A bunker should look natural, indeed as if shaped by wind and erosion (even if there is no particular exposure to winds!)

The revetted bunker with near vertical walls has certainly no place on non-seaside courses

(sometimes on flat "powder" courses like in the Netherlands a more elaborate bunker construction on the "lee" side has a point) as they are costly to build and too blatantly man-made.

In such situations the epitaph "unfair" is indeed justified.

Pine Valley, considered to be the most difficult course in the world, can also be "mastered" by using one's head and relying on strategy. If anywhere, here one has to swallow one's pride and be prepared to give a few strokes to Par. I ought to know as it took me at least 10 rounds of humiliation (including taking nine strokes to get out of a particular pot-bunker on the 10th, the Devil's Arse hole) to allow modesty to prevail and accept scores varying from 78 to 87! Strategy is the key to a good score: Accepting to play for a probable Bogey with a putting change for a par, instead of an unlikely, albeit heroic par effort which may end in disaster.

A good golf course should never be penal, but reward good course management with the occasional situation where courage and heroic inspiration gets an extra reward.

Neither is exaggerated length necessary nor to be recommended: A short Par 4 cleverly defended, punishes impetuosity more than a long long Par 5, and will give the not so good but cunning player a chance to get his Par. After all, there are no hard and fast rules in measurement at a golf course. Unlike football fields, cricket pitches or tennis

courts, a golf course is dictated by Nature and the creative feeling of the architect to follow the contours and idiosyncrasies of the site. That makes golf a special sport, not only the game itself but the enormous variety of one's environment.

This also applies to the often heard criticism that one should not have two consecutive Par 5's or Par 3's? Although, three Par 4's in a row are considered acceptable! If nature gives a marvellous opportunity to make a really good hole one should take it regardless of the length. Equally one should not forego this opportunity in order to increase the SSS and thereby sacrifice a good hole. A golf course should demand to be played with sound and strategic thinking, which will be rewarded if the architect has done his homework.

Sometimes one hears the complaint that a Par 4 is too long to get on in two shots for the average player. Where is it written than getting on the green in the, for "the par player", required number of strokes should apply to the average player? The fact that John Daly can hit a green of a 632 yard hole in two shots does not make that hole a Par 4!

Once I happened to overhear a conversation in the locker room after the opening of a course designed by myself. Apparently the course was found difficult, but one reasonably senior golfer did not quite agree, "provided you use your head". This remark made my day!