

Better by design

When it comes to golf course design it is difficult to say what type of play should be rewarded and what type punished. Should the course favour the long hitter or merely the more accurate among us. Or should it be a requirement to punish the golfer who can do neither. The general consensus would appear to be to reward the golfer who thinks but punish the more heavy handed. To lead one into temptation while always allowing an escape route for the weaker hitter. The game then becomes an exercise promoting the human qualities of self denial and courage while teaching us humility and the art of careful thought.

I recently had the very great pleasure of attending a BIGGA regional course on course design and construction. This was an excellent course in which we the students were taken into the world of the golf course architect and learnt some of the subtleties, and artistic touches that they use to reward the thinker while at the same time punishing the more wayward among us. A strategically placed fairway bunker could guard the side of the fairway that offers the more direct line of entry to the green, that sort of thing. Or perhaps a water hazard could be angled across a fairway so as to tempt the golfer into biting off more than he should in an effort to get closer to the target. Yes, it becomes a psychological art form in which the shrewd intelligent sportsman can plot his way round the course eventually picking off the weaknesses in a golf holes defence and bringing the course to its knees by dint of superior intellect. Well that's the theory but here at Sludgecombe Pay and Play, we have a different breed of golfer. You might recognise the one. He carefully selects the club and goes through his pre shot ritual before painstakingly taking his stance and lining himself up some 23 times. A barely perceptible forward press then paves the way to a power backswing at which point his club collides with his trolley that he has managed to place directly in his path. The offending object is hastily moved and is then proceeded by a long succession of hacks and duffs from one side of

the fairway to the other. Obviously the subtleties of the course designers craft are somewhat lost on this golfer.

There is another breed of golfer that is not so often seen here at Sludgecombe and that is the power golfer. The one that overcomes the designers well placed hazards by simply detonating the ball way over the top of them. Now the designer may argue that any course that leaves itself open to such bullying tactics is not a good or well designed one, but as we can all recall this is exactly what happened to the classically designed Augusta national last year. Even the hallowed turf of St Andrews came in for this demolition treatment at the hands of John Daly a couple of years ago. St Andrews is a very strategic course in that the accurately placed tee shot that skirts the out of bounds on the right hand side opens up the green for the second. The safe option of going left from the tee allows a longer shot over obstacles and so a penalty is taken. However at the hands of big John, it was a case of hitting everything half a mile forward and a quarter of a mile left into the vast expanse of adjacent fairway. A short iron with 3000 rpm of backspin from there over any intervening pot bunker, and the target was never in any shape to defend itself.

Now this is obviously golf that is not exactly taxing on the brain but there is one hole at the home of golf that although not being aesthetically pleasing to the eye due to the fact that the

tee shot is played over a hotel that owes its design influence to Strangeways, it is however one of the most strategic in golf. That hole of course is the 17th or Road Hole. Perhaps not surprisingly it is about the only hole at the venerable links with trouble in the form of heavy rough on the left. Then with the infamous Road Hole bunker guarding the front and left of the green and purgatory putting surface it becomes the most classic of risk and reward holes. The closer one can hit the tee shot to the out of bounds and rooms on the fourth floor of the hotel, the easier the approach to the green. Take the safe option left from the tee and one is left with 180 yards of carry out of heavy rough over one of the world's toughest bunkers with about two foot of landing area beyond. Now this is a hole that gets a man thinking.

Personally such a hole would not affect my particular brand of golf as it would on this hole involve several involuntary lashes followed by a desperate search and so once again the subtleties of this classic risk and reward hole would go some distance over my head, but in the hands of anyone that has some control over the balls final destination, its a different matter.

So how can the course designer and, perhaps more pertinently, we the greenkeepers help in promoting strategic thinking from the golfer what ever his abilities or lack of them. Well, at the above mentioned course I remember the tutors, the renowned course architects Simon Gidman and Howard Swan saying how in the old days the game was much more strategic due to the fact that the old 1.62 inch ball which everyone used was difficult to elevate and difficult to stop on the putting surface. Add the modern balata covers, square grooves, greens that are watered automatically and rough that can be cut more than about three times a year or what ever was the norm in those days and any incompetent can fly greenside bunkers and stop the ball within the confines of the putting surface. In short the

approach shot that has to land short and run onto the green has become obsolete thereby negating the importance of tee shot placement.

Now I have been playing this game for a sufficient length of time to remember courses that had spasmodically watered clay greens that used to dry up something awful in the summer. Any tee shot that left an approach with an intervening hazard and even Seve Ballesteros in his Houdini mode would struggle to hit the green. Going back even further I remember a story Henry Cotton told, of how the parched greens were regularly rolled.

This created a surface with the texture of brick and the speed of lino so it became normal practice for golfers to purposely score the cover of a golf ball in an effort to stop it from continually rolling off the putting surface after any momentum had been imparted.

I am not necessarily advocating a return to those bad old days but maybe we greenkeepers could attempt to firm up our greens while at the same time trying to keep our jobs reasonably long term. Or perhaps fairways could be shaped a little with the original design concept in mind or maybe a tee could be resited as part of a rebuilding programme so as the green becomes slightly offset and thereby putting a greater emphasis on tee shot placement. Just the simple, albeit controversial placement of a small bunker in the middle of a fairway at about driving distance could have an amazing influence on the tee shot of an otherwise plain hole. Instead of an aimless thrash down the middle the golfer would be forced to think, do I go left or right of the bunker and if so which alternative leaves me with the best line in to the flag. Or should I lay up or even have a go at carrying it. In short, to try and create the type of hole so epitomised by the 17th at St Andrews.

Far be it for me a poor Head Greenkeeper to give advice to all you out there, but maybe we could try and introduce back into the game a little of what has been lost over the years. Who knows, maybe one day your members might even thank you for it.

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