

David White looks at the glamorous life of the Golf Course Appraiser



# In search of. praise



The life of a golf writer is often envied. "How exciting," people will say, "wouldn't I just love your job." It's the most well-worn phrase a journalist has to contend with, yet for every day spent in the field (you know the sort of courses we tackle; a muni' built over a reclaimed rubbish tip one week, a multi-million dollar, over-the-top designer nightmare in South Carolina the next), there remain several days when the glare of a computer screen is as near as we get to sunlight. So, please, cut out the envy. Remember, like gluttony or sloth, it's a deadly sin.

For real envy, and a task I'd give my eye teeth for, fantasise for a moment and picture yourself in the exotic

world of 'The Golf Course Appraiser'. This pastime, (by nature of the reward package it can hardly be called a career), calls for amateur golfers, not necessarily of Walker Cup level, but competent, to play their way around the globe, followed by their filing of a judgmental golf course star rating, each following a set criteria, yet with each Editor setting different criteria for their own readership.

What set me thinking was prompted by a round played recently with an American chum, who'd been gifted one of these assignments by a US publication. After sailing the Atlantic on QE II, he set off around the coastline, ducking west, then south and east, the midlands, north and over

the border, playing and assessing a possible wish-list of courses. Three months and over 60 courses later, not a single track had failed to dent his game or indeed his enthusiasm for what he described as 'our unique Britishness.'

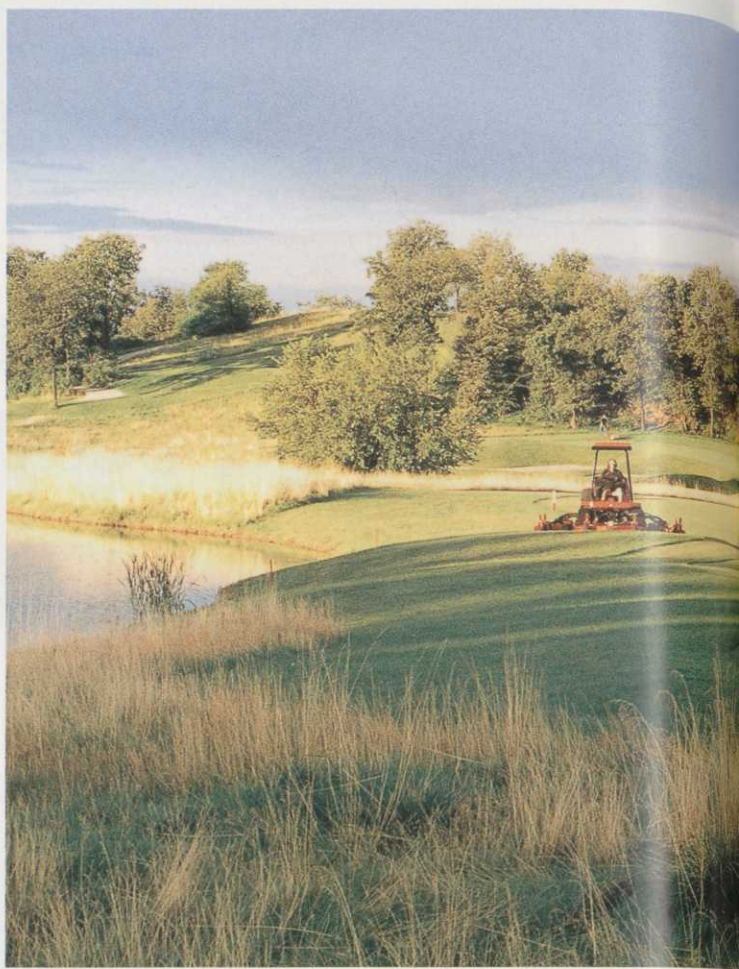
Comparing notes, we considered the interest these so-called 'top' lists generated, while agreeing that one should not put too much stock by them. No surprises either, that we chose to differ on several of those earmarked as greats, grands, or also-rans. As he put it, "the golf hole that makes me quiver might reveal nothing to you, while your favourite may do nothing for me. And while seven good holes won't necessarily ensure a

course gets into my top 100, one fabulous hole alone, even one exceptional green, just might."

The word 'art' kept cropping up, yet opinions regarding the place a golf course has in the world of art differ widely. Some architects splutter with indignation at the very idea of golf architecture as an artistic pursuit. Many, however, will cite aesthetics as being important, while suggesting also that aesthetics - the prettiness that distracts, if you like - can fool a golfer such that he will not notice the things that really affect how the hole plays.

Others, Desmond Muirhead in particular, believe that since golf courses should be approached as works of art, all these lists become speculative and superficial. Further, Muirhead uses a clever example in his put-down of the star rating system by drawing comparison between paintings and golf courses, suggesting that though a Rembrandt scholar might skillfully authenticate a painting, he wouldn't dare have the temerity to rank quality into a first, second or third category. Yet, by playing (or, sometimes, merely walking) the fairways once or twice, golf courses are judged and graded, and not always by the golfing equivalent of a Rembrandt scholar, either.

My friend is nothing if not an Anglophile, so his comments carry more weight than any first-time Yankee tourist. He's guided more by local knowledge than any preconceptions he may have, thus it was encouraging, knowing that all of his rounds were played incognito and many were return visits, to hear him talk about courses being 'pulled around' or 'brought back from the brink'. He particularly cited Carnoustie, saying, "It was never pretty, though always a great test of



Above right: Attention to detail on the course demands that all areas receive attention, including grading rough and, for aesthetic reasons, contouring fairways.

Below: Graded rough, while bringing a degree of parity back into the game, is pleasing to the eye. It can also create a fiendish optical illusion



golf, now it can be acknowledged as transformed; almost an art form of restoration. Those revetted bunkers are awe-inspiring." So, take another bow, John Philp!

Take a bow, also, the Hendon Golf Club, who with artistic input from architect Jonathan Gaunt, plus a dedicated greenkeeping force who did most of the work, have revitalised Harry Colt's battered and ancient bunkers, bringing them back to their former artistic glory.

So, we're back to art again; or at least art forms resting in the eye of the beholder. Yet who's to say that Jackson Pollock is a better artist than, say, Titian, or Van Goch?

Golf architecture, my friend opines, is artful sculpture rather than rocket science and therefore invites criticism. The art, he believes, is found in subtle things like swales and interestingly contoured greens, perhaps

the gentle colour changes of heather and gorse, rather than fancy waterfalls, contrived flower beds, indeed any artefact that sticks out like a sore thumb. He quotes from Dr Mackenzie's "Golf Architecture" published in 1920 all artificial features should have so natural an appearance that a stranger is unable to distinguish them from nature itself."

So, regarding the turn-ons and turn-offs, what lessons might the greenkeeper take from these? First, the concession is made that golf courses tend to be situated in handsome places, and handsome adds a bonus. The curl of a hillside, bluebells at the edge of a copse, the aroma of new mown grass in spring, musty leaves and haze in autumn; if these could be bottled they'd sell them in Harrods!

My friend's turn-offs are man-made gimmicks, especially moonscapes and humps bordering fairways where humps just should not be, his judgement firm that courses which have stood the test of time were constructed without artificial mounds all over the place.

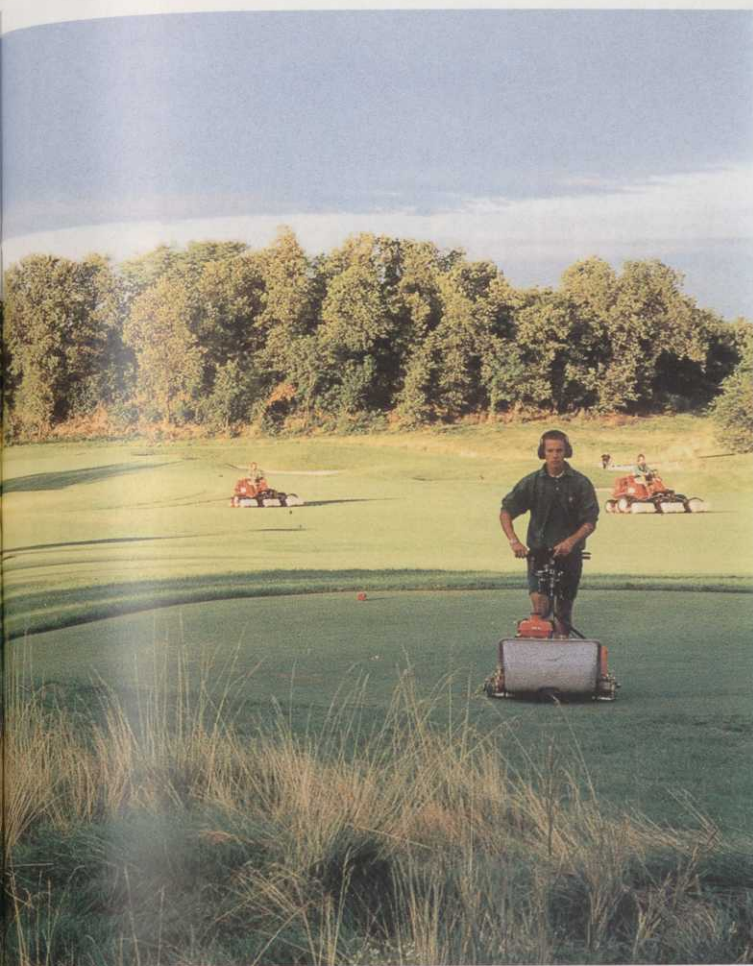
He'll downgrade any course that has the mark of reproduction upon it, you know the ones; created by computer, churned out like boxes of chocolates and formulaic to the point where a player is confused by the location. Like, where am I, Berkshire or Bali? Those that ignore topography: that desecrate nature - such courses also are almost always deficient and without soul. They get low marks, no matter how well spruced-up they may be.

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But in his book there must be no comparing apples with oranges. His grading makes allowances for environmental factors; links versus heath or parkland, turf composition, the age of a course and the traffic it bears, while he is not above sneaking a look into the maintenance sheds to see what resources are available. Brownie points go to the greenkeeper who presents smooth as opposed to sparse though excessively rapid putting surfaces.

For chipping and pitching to the green he appreciates grass cover, though certainly nothing lush, which produces 'fliers'. On the other hand, bone hard lies bereft of turf, especially where a wedge is called for, will lose a few points. Having said all that, his opinion (shared also by many others involved in the ratings game), suggests that a fine course ought to be bulletproof, so that if the weather has been rotten and the sward isn't up to its usual standards, the course will still remain playable. And as he so succinctly put it, golf isn't meant to be fair, anyway, though it's good to start with a properly aligned tee!

Recovery, the ability to recover or at least have a chance to recover from a bad shot, is rated as very important. Don't take away the strategy of the game by leaving those a little bit off line without any chance. This brings the ratings round to all that grass through the green, as opposed to the putting surfaces, which can be manipulated in just about any manner. On fairways it is accepted that a height of half an inch or less than three quarters of an inch will give the ball just enough support to prevent

grass interrupting the contact of club with ball.

Provide grass where the ball settles down and you're making the game more difficult. Nobody likes a flyer. And just as rough is a hazard, a punishment for missing the landing zone, today's thinking leans toward having the penalty fit the crime. No golfer, missing the fairway by a few inches, should be penalised as harshly as one who misses by 60 feet.

In strategic design (and maintenance) off fairway grading is tackling the golfer's error and giving back some element of recovery. Meting out punishment according to crime means three cuts of rough, the so-called friendly rough, cut usually at one and a half to two inches, the intermediate rough at two and a half to three inches, the rest as condemnation for misdemeanours with the driver!

Of course, it's the architect that gets the kudos, yet the real rating, the only one that counts, is the one that says to visitor and local alike, I want to come back! That, we are all in agreement, is so often down to the man at the sharp end; our friend, our ally, our unsung hero, the greenkeeper.

The author, Alexander Omatt, promotes the work of golf course constructors. His all-time favourite course is Tobacco Road, designed by former greenkeeper, turned course shaper, turned architect, Mike Strantz, who is described as Alistair Mackenzie reincarnated.

