

GOLF COURSE DESIGN

– An Evolving Art Form

Not only was the United Kingdom the source of the origins of golf as a recreation, sport and pastime, it was in the environs of these early courses that select people began to consider themselves as golf course designers. The original Links courses, such as St. Andrews and Prestwick, were usually the work of nature.

As interest in golf and the demand for more courses emerged, it was from St Andrews that Old Tom Morris and his followers became designers. Finding sites was not difficult. Ample adaptable or suitable land was at hand. Little was expected except for a flat area to tee it up and another flat area with a hole to putt out. In between the two flat areas generally remained in its natural state.

In the early decades of the last century, more sophisticated expectations led to a more focused emphasis on the design of a course. In part, golf was spreading in popularity beyond the borders of Scotland. Lands without the Links character were available within forests, heathland, or farm fields closer to the cities. Now, more thought was needed to get 18 holes placed upon the land as these sites were not 'natural' for golf. Harry

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to learn*

Colt was an early practitioner. James Braid, Alistair MacKenzie, Hugh Alison, Toomey and Flynn were emerging. Charles Blair Macdonald was establishing his reputation as well as Tillinghast.

Golf remained a sport and, for some, an obsession. Turfgrass was what was originally onsite or was a mixture of fescues or brown-top bent that enterprising seed houses, such as Suttons, were marketing. Mowing was often animal or human powered. Irrigation was at the whim of Mother Nature.

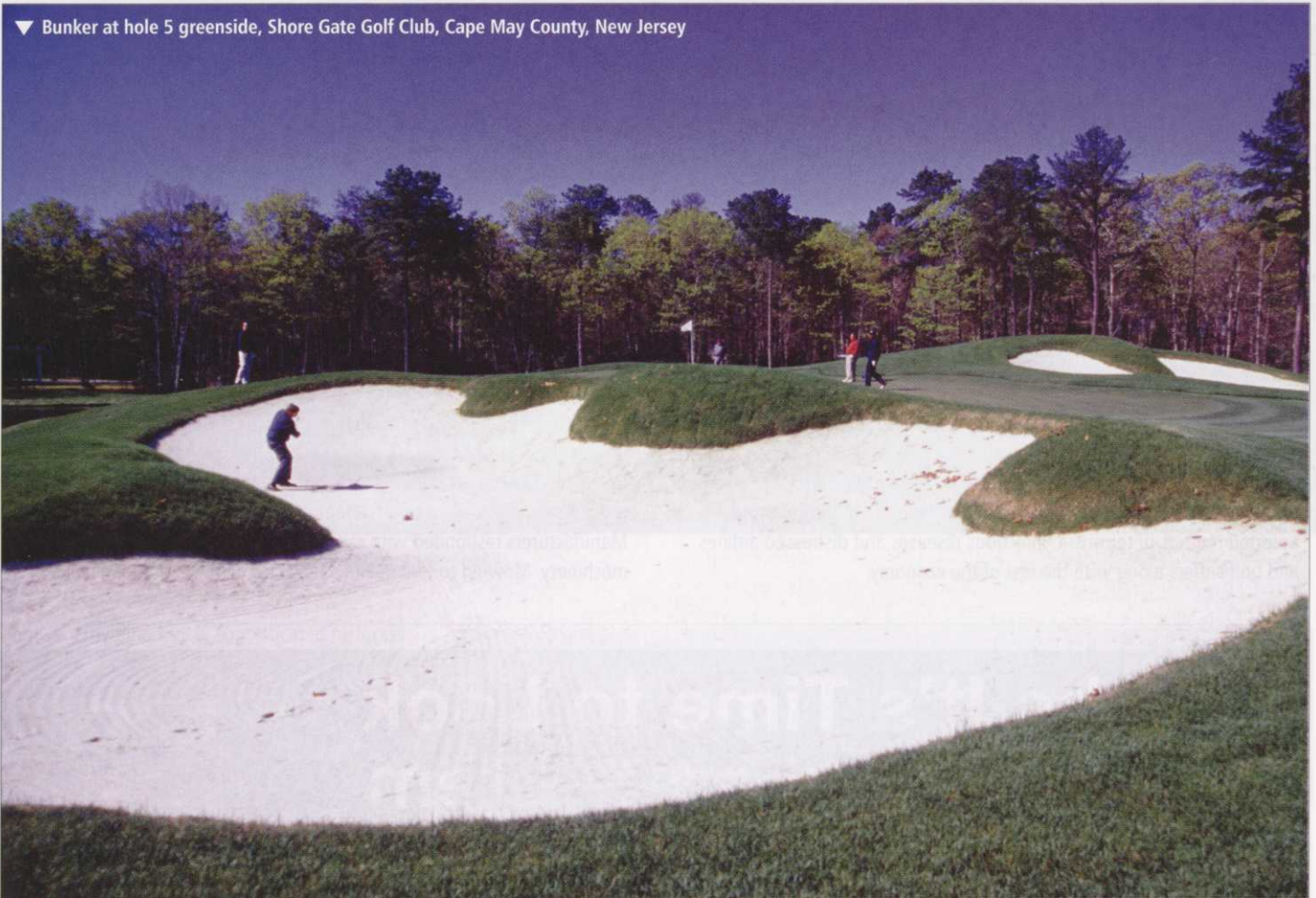
Sometime later, MacKenzie laid down Royal Melbourne, Cypress Point and Augusta National, this with Bobby Jones. Donald Ross began his tenure at Pinehurst. George Thomas did some wonders on the US Pacific Coast. Other golf architects, working between the World Wars, travelled

▼ Bonari Kogen. Hole 3 Greenside. Selected 'Best par 5 hole in Japan'. Mt. Bandai, Numajiri, Fukushima, Japan



Roland Fream looks at the history of golf course design and how a return to affordable golf is the future

▼ Bunker at hole 5 greenside, Shore Gate Golf Club, Cape May County, New Jersey



outward to the colonies and territories promoting golf as others promoted capitalism, empire and occasionally democracy. Simpson, Hawtree and Commander Harris were prominent as professional golf architects.

The 50s and 60s saw an explosion of golf development. Much of this growth was in America, initially driven by images of Eisenhower and Palmer strolling fairways together. Increasing economic well-being, together with political stability, went hand-in-glove with golf. For the most part, courses were modest in image and construction costs. Mowing putting greens at five or six millimeters was considered normal. Yet the numbers of players grew as the number of courses swelled. This was the age of Robert Trent Jones.

Contrary to the development of the private golf club in Europe and Asia during the middle of the 20th century, the American attitude of building public or daily-fee courses broadened appeal by making golf more accessible. The British history of open public golf had similarly encouraged more players. More courses meant more golfers.

In the 70s and onward, the focus shifted to golf as a status symbol and as an enclave for the rich and fortunate. Private clubs multiplied. Status and image became more of a focus than strategic and challenging play. How much to spend was less of a question than how big and grand can the latest private clubhouse palace be. Length became more of a measure of stature than finesse. Maintenance expectations increased annually,

particularly in mid-April following the Masters Tournament at Augusta. The 'Immaculate Perfection' and 'money is no-object' maintenance demonstrated there became the benchmark for other clubs seeking enhanced stature. Cost be damned – build big and maintain big. Luxury and status took command.

This quest for the most, the best, the toughest, and perfectly maintained was nicely joined by the emergence of the professional golfer as the architect. Maybe this was only a throwback to Tom Morris and James Braid. However, eager agents and marketers pushed the necessity of having a known-pro attach his signature to the scorecard or sales brochure as the means of certifying the stature and quality of the golf course. Brand identification overtook logic and financial reason. Affordable golf disappeared. Stereotyped design became common.

Few golfers today, whether they are pro, scratch or double-figure players, have the intellectual and creative components necessary to conceive unique or aesthetically dynamic courses from their own effort. Hitting a golf ball well does not automatically provide one with aesthetic insight, creativity or an environmental understanding. Very good players achieve their talents with repetition, consistency and uniformity of effort. These are only three factors that have little or nothing to do with creative inspiration, artistic perception and insight to the unexpected challenge of nature or geography.

▼ Bonari Kogen Golf Club. Hole 9 – fairway shot.
Fukushima Prefecture, Japan



▼ Shore Gate Golf Club. Hole 9 greenside bunker
– par 5. Cape May County, New Jersey

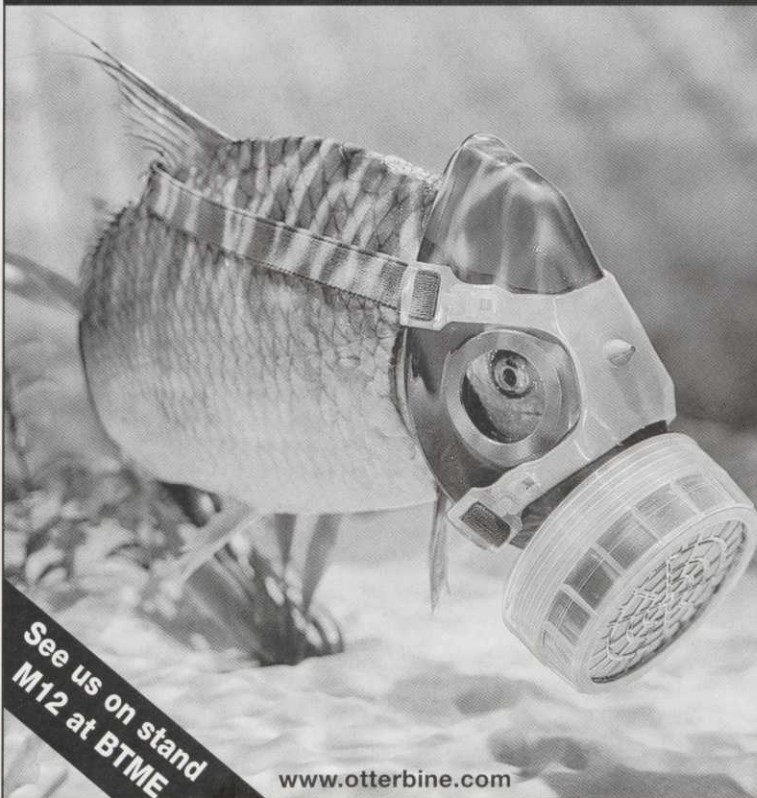


The overall number of golfers has not increased significantly for five years or more. The 1997 economic meltdown across Asia put an end to much of that growth. Six years earlier, Japan imploded due to obscene excess in golf development and membership prices. Even today, approximately half the courses in Japan are technically bankrupt. Hanging a famous pro's name on the course did not help the profitability. Add in assorted matters of terrorism, infectious diseases and distressed airlines and golf suffers along with the rest of the economy.

In Europe and America during the 90s, the urge to join famous name player with big-budget golf often led to bankruptcies and empty tee times. Having huge clubhouses only added to the profit drain.

Having a name brand pro attached almost insured the owners' quest for costly Augusta-style immaculate perfection in maintenance. Turf breeders sought and delivered finer grasses that could be cut closer. Manufacturers responded with even more sophisticated and demanding machinery. Mowing to two millimeters is not a job for grandad's push-reel

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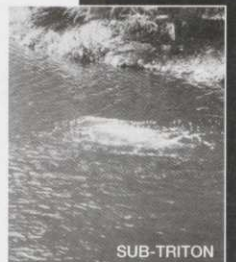
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▲ Bonari Kogen Golf Club. Hole 17 from rear of green – par 4

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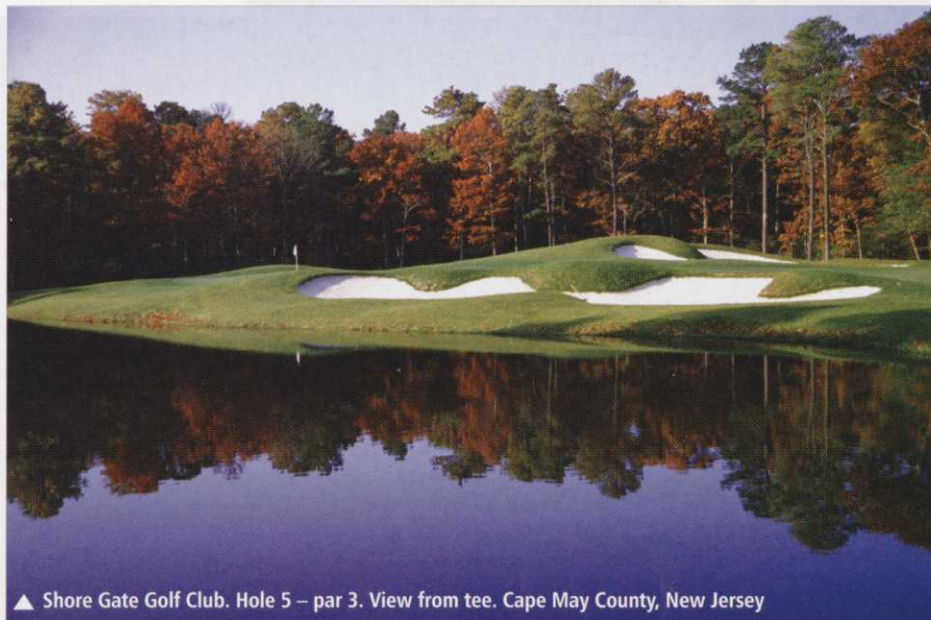
Declining play in the late 90s into the 21st century continue to point to the culmination of brand name design, excess cost to developers, excess of clubhouse and excessive maintenance goals.

High cost to create and maintain courses pass directly through to the golf club membership and annual fees. High costs pass directly to greens fees at daily-fee courses. Triple digit greens fees do not encourage additional play in most markets. Needing a substantial three-figure greens fee to pay off the construction loan, the maintenance costs and for clubhouse operation has been harder and harder to realise as play volume moderates or decreases.

Recent technological 'advances' in golf ball, club, shaft and expectations are contributing to the decline in play. Costly equipment combined with high greens fees leads to fewer rounds being played.

To succeed, golf must be a profitable business. Those exceptions where the golf course is a status trophy for a wealthy individual and profit is not the goal are few and far between. For the majority of owners, making a profit is the only way to keep the doors open and the greens mowed.

Those in the golf industry now need to consider what can or should be done in the



▲ Shore Gate Golf Club. Hole 5 – par 3. View from tee. Cape May County, New Jersey

coming years. Moderation of the inter-related golf costs will be the only way to connect with the next generation of potential new players. Playable turf should be preferable to immaculate turf. Increasing play now is more important than building new courses. Improving existing golf facilities to counter and accommodate technological advances is a prime need. Renovation, remodeling and repositioning to counter green creep and ProV1 ball advances will keep golfers satisfied so long as the cost to play is reasonable.

The golf architect leads and follows the trends in golf. Golf architecture clearly evolves. Now is a very good time to reconsider what is a good and desirable product. Moderation has its place. Affordable, enjoyable golf is attainable and essential for the future of this fine game.

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