



Making Golf Courses More User Friendly

A Golf Course Architect's Perspective

Jonathan Tucker provides some invaluable advice on getting a course into proportion for your membership.

Arguments over many years, have raged, concerning the threat of advances in equipment technology to the challenge offered by our golf courses, notably at the Championship end of the spectrum. Are these portents of apocalypse justified? Undoubtedly the advent of drivers with heads the size of footballs and sweet spots to match, allied to golf balls with higher launch angles have served to democratise length. But this process has not been without its trade-offs - increased distance does not equate with more accuracy and indeed usually the converse applies! As Lee Trevino once said: "It's not the bow or the arrow, but the Indian".

One of the main problems is that we can lose sight of the principal end user of our golf courses. It is a fact that we have an ageing golfer population and, whereas golf equipment is helping to maintain the balance, the overall spread of handicaps has not significantly shifted with the average equating to around 18 at the majority of clubs. Golf perhaps more than any other sport exposes the gulf between the novice and the low handicap player and in particular, the professional. This latter breed has evolved almost along Darwinian lines as improvements in fitness levels, strength and conditioning have arguably had as much influence as equipment technology.

If we are to encourage new golfers into the game, which is essential to its long-term survival and ensure that golf is seen as a pastime and not a penance, we must reconcile these differences and make golf attractive regardless of ability.

There are perhaps two main strands to this discussion:

1. The layout of the golf course and associated golf elements.
2. Agronomic issues and course conditions.

Let us first consider the issue of course length. The majority of well-established courses have progressively evolved in an attempt to keep pace with advances in golf equipment and one of the main devices has been the creation of tees placed further and further back - until boundary or internal safety constraints come into force. However, to cater for the wider spread of abilities multiple tees, staggered over a wide area, are the answers.

Given that generally ladies hit the ball only 75% of the distance of the men and lower handicap ladies 85%, courses for ladies should be around 4,800 to 5,200 yards in order to equate with the average men's course of 6,400 to 6,900 yards. This is well short of the general average of a ladies' course of around 5,600 to 5,700 yards. The general system involving a back white medal tee (perhaps a blue championship tee), yellow tee for general play and red for ladies could therefore be expanded to incorporate a forward ladies' tee in addition to the existing ladies' tee. This two-tee system for women would, as a consequence, have holes which would equate to the broad guidelines as in the table



Multiple tees for varying ability

LADIES' BACK TEE

par 3 120-200 yards

par 4 300-380 yards

par 5 420-540 yards

LADIES' FORWARD TEE

par 3 60-150 yards

par 4 240-340 yards

par 5 401-420 yards

The existing back ladies' tee could be made gender neutral so that low handicap ladies, juniors and some senior players can play a more manageable length of course. But I am sure that there will be a certain element within golf clubs that find the suggestion of providing an even shorter course anathema, but it is all a question of flexibility and providing a realistic challenge for all.

Positioning of tees is also inextricably associated with linkage between holes. In the writer's opinion, golf is best enjoyed carrying a bag of clubs. However, long arduous walks between green and tee are undesirable with



Water features can be extremely attractive but should be employed appropriately



Original green at Sitwell Park-Alister Mackenzie

preferably a maximum distance of 60-80 metres between the green and next tee. If longer walks are enforced, try and break up these with attractive landscaping or alternatively open up vistas where these can be had to provide a visual distraction.

Positioning, type and profusion of hazards on a golf course is another contentious topic, which needs to be considered further. The appearance of water features on many of our new courses provides an immediate visual impact and can add considerably to the challenge and sense of achievement once negotiated. But, overuse of water features or inappropriate positioning can simply lead to frustration! Generally, enforced carries should not exceed 75 yards for the weak player. Alternatively, water hazards could be circumvented by providing different routes of play, i.e. strategic rather than penal design or "risk v. reward".

In an attempt to toughen up holes, sand bunkers are often overused. Indiscriminate placement around greens can lead to a form of target golf, which favours iron play and the high rates of spin imparted by the low handicap and scratch player, in order to hold the green. A very well defended short par 3 or short par 4 hole has its place but greenside bunkering should also serve to accentuate the strategy of a hole and define zones of difficulty within the putting surface for pin placement.

Hazards placed prominently in the middle of fairways, for example, bunkers or even feature trees, can also be extremely effective and not just punitive, provided that there are still alternative routes or strategies to overcome the hazard.

Fairway bunkering on many of our old courses has failed to keep pace with advances in equipment and therefore punishes those "who carry their own bunkers with them". Removal and repositioning can redress the balance but this should be done under professional guidance. Bunkers serve several purposes on the golf course including:

- As a hazard affecting the strategy of play.
- For aesthetic or landscaping purposes.
- As directional indicators.
- For retention (i.e. to reduce conflict with adjoining playing areas).
- For safety, e.g. to direct golfers away from vulnerable boundaries.

All the above should be considered in the process of bunker rationalisation.

The role of grass hollows or grass bunkers, should not be underestimated as they can provide considerable playing interest and, compared with a sand bunker, are generally easier to negotiate for the high handicap player. Provided the low spots are well drained and the

smoothness of the contouring is conducive to efficient maintenance, grass hollows are very effective both as part of the green complex and "through the green".

And finally, we come to the influence of modern maintenance techniques and their impact on design. Many of the diverse courses constructed during the "Golden Age" of architecture during the 1920s and 1930s were typified by steeply sloped and tilted greens with gradients, which could be 5-7%. This was acceptable under the management regimes operating at the time but fast-forward to the present with Stimpmeter readings of 11-12 foot on the new bentgrass, cultivars cut at 6/64 inch and putting becomes a virtual impossibility.

Modern greens are constructed with more moderate slopes with a rule of thumb that overall gradients should not exceed 3% for traditional bentgrass/fescue greens (or relaid bentgrass/annual meadow-grass greens) and perhaps 2% for the tightly shaved creeping bentgrass varieties. When it comes to restoration of our classic courses there can be a conflict. This can be resolved by either managing the expectations of the golfers and manipulating greens speeds, so that a degree of control can be exerted or by maintaining the character and essence of the green but moderating the contours. This is a subject for separate debate! Suffice to say, our golf courses are living entities which evolve over time and many of the original contours with greens have either been softened or indeed accentuated over the years by top dressing, green settlement, etc.

Fairway conditioning has also improved immeasurably with the armoury of modern equipment and in particular mowing machinery, now available to the greenkeeper. Lower mowing heights produce more ball roll, but equally, high handicap golfers find it more difficult to sweep the ball off the turf. By contrast, the professional likes a minimum amount of grass between club head and ball for control. Therefore, the main issue is one of balance and sustainability.

Fairway shaping can also have a profound influence on the playability of a hole for golfers of differing ability. For example, a wide landing area of 40-50 yards for the high handicap player can taper to a much narrower section of 20-25 yards in the range of the lower handicap player - thereby placing a premium on accuracy as well as length.

In summary, it is true that occasionally we need to massage the ego of the golfer and provide a fitting challenge on our golf courses. However, a tough golf course is not necessarily a good golf course. An element of fear is no bad thing but the challenge must be commensurate with levels of skill. Therefore, flexibility in golf provision is the key to success.

Jonathan Tucker is a Golf Course Architect for the STRI