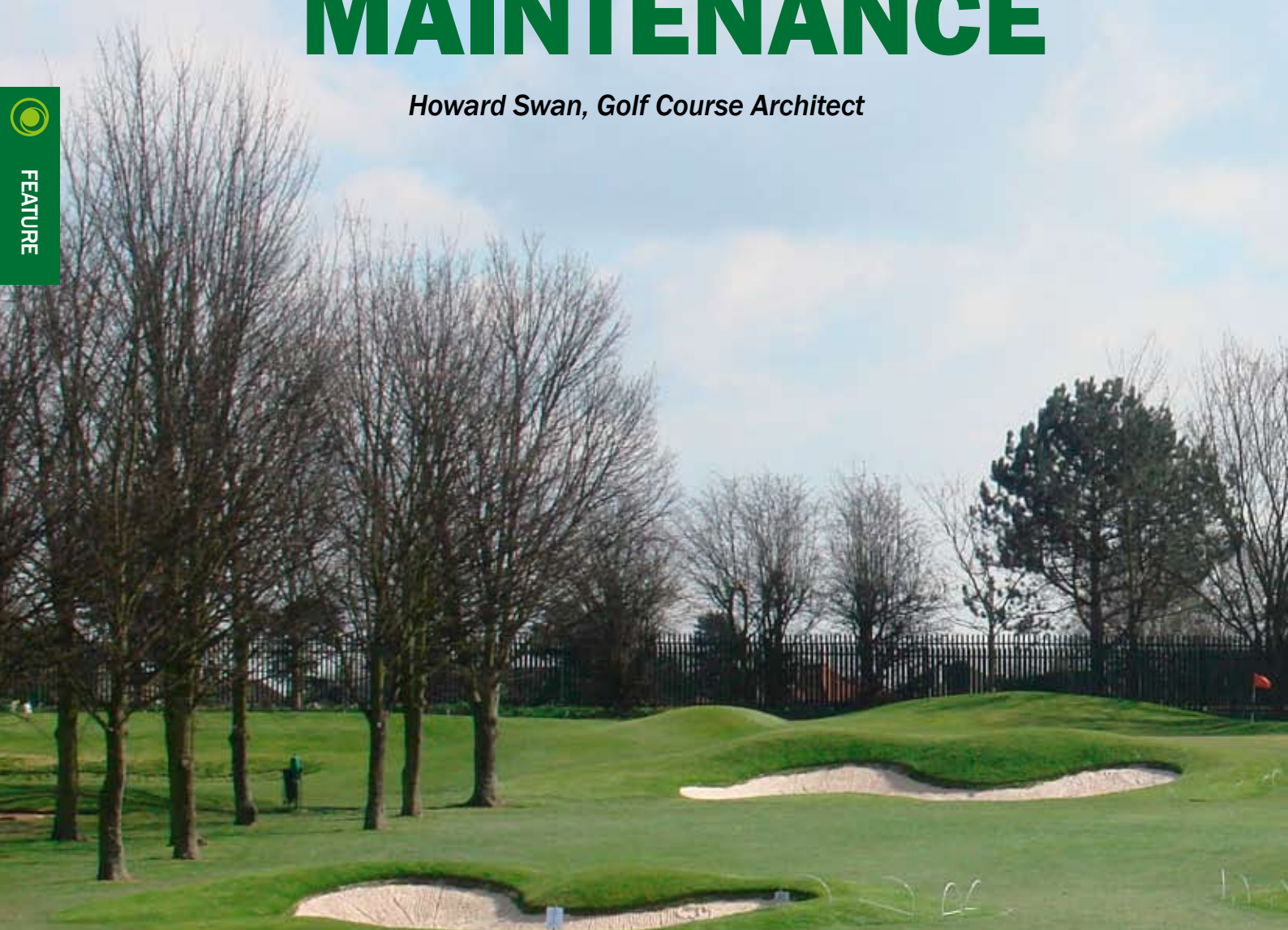


DESIGNING FOR MAINTENANCE

Howard Swan, Golf Course Architect



FEATURE



Times are tough... Everyone is looking at the bottom line...at spending... should I? Shouldn't I? Take care of the pennies and, hopefully the pounds. Many are not spending at all, cutting back to any bare minimum...or even less.

Scary stuff, dangerous business, and where is it all taking us to? Golf Clubs closing, bankrupted by lack of cash flow, reducing staff on and off the course.

So we all need to be focused; more cute; more thorough; more professional in what we do, whether it be a golf course architect or greenkeeper. We all need to show just how much better we are than in better times; how better we can perform when the chips are down.

From my design point of view, I have to convince clubs to continue to invest wisely in their

courses – I like to think that it is the course, which is paramount in attracting players, members – and not decide to do absolutely nothing. Some will, no doubt...but nature will catch them out and eventually they will need to spend more just to keep up.

Therefore, a continuous process of renovation is needed on each and every course. At any time we see enough of the Captain, the Secretary, the Committee man leaving their mark and some legacy it often is. At these tough times it is nonsensical to adopt such a way forward wasting valuable resources, particularly money. Consistent, steady evolution of the course must be undertaken.

I therefore argue that the renovation process needs to be in the hands of professionals – yes, golf course architects working hand in hand with Greenkeepers – ones of sound mind, experience

and expertise, caring for the course with which they may be entrusted as custodians.

Custodians for the long term, I would suggest, not for just a year or two, that makes good sense as no business, successful, was ever founded on short term profit rather than long term growth and...that word...sustainability. Enough of the one year committee efforts, the annual legacies to be left as we see so often.

So if we can convince clubs to keep investing in the structure, in the fabric of their courses, spending sensible sums of money, year on year. What should we as golf course architects be looking to do to improve the product which can attract the player, the member or visitor alike, the green fee player and sustain the business of the enterprise?

And it must be the course which is the primary focus to do just that.



In overall terms, it is essential to look, holistically, at the course, all of it, wall to wall, top to bottom...firstly...

- Its routing
- How is its length?
- Is it long enough?

Many are too long, extended in my view for the sake of it, for the sake of an ego, for the sake of marketing, or a “more is better” philosophy.

- How is its rhythm?
- How do the holes flow?
- How does it circumnavigate the plot?

Does it make good use of the topography...the vistas...the natural lie?

- How does it stir the emotions?

Many don't have a good rhythm, a good flow or par-3s,4s and 5s and the necessary balance and variety between them again, against par, against SSS.

And many courses just aren't memorable. They may have the odd good hole – the signature, as the PR boys like to call it, but not enough “Wow!” to stand out among the competition. It must!

- And how is its safety?
- Internally?
- Externally?
- Are there danger points?

Many courses are unsafe because or not just too small a parcel of land on which they are laid out, particularly the old ones, but many are unsafe because there is inadequate separation between holes and boundaries – houses, roads and the like, and between holes themselves,

between tees and greens, between greens and tees and some are a clear result of poor, myopic design and dangerous.

Golf balls do hurt a lot!

We can avoid accidents with sensible, thorough architecture! Most of the time!

Its components, most importantly.

- Are the greens big enough?
- Do they have enough pin positions – for maintenance, for variety, for challenge?
- Are the slopes, mounds mowable? – with reasonable ease, efficiency, safety?

Many, many fail in each respect.

- Are the putting surfaces testing?
- Have they good borrows?
- How is the sward?
- The rootzone?



- The drainage?
- The potential to sustain growth?
...and playing performance?

Could go on and on asking the questions and, in a renovation exercise, one needs to.

And no less importantly, the tees.

- Are they big enough to take the wear, particularly the par-3s?
- Are they located correctly to maximise the strategy of each hole?
- Are there enough flights to give all levels of golfer a reasonable playing chance?
- And are they built properly with reasonable slopes which can be easily mown?

Even more questions that the golf course architect and the greenkeeper can ask of the course... and they should.

And the bunkering, which can contribute so much to the quality of the course.

- Are they in the right places or, in this day and age of progressive club and ball technology, redundant?
- Do they drain?
- What is the sand like – the right colour, depth, performance?
- Are the bunker mounds mowable?
- Do they look good?
- Do they allow reasonable forward play?

They need to fulfil all these. They must not frustrate.

And there are many more facets of the course which need to be looked at improved to make better play, better conditions, better maintenance and presentation.

The field drainage, the irrigation, the traffic routing and its management - players and greenkeeping staff – The landscape and the environmental setting of the course.

All contribute to the maintainability of the course and to the efficiency...and economy of the greenkeeping effort.

Finally, I have to say that even if the structure of the course...its overall design, the performance of its components...is okay, or improved, the gloss needs to be put on it, to shine, to impress, to create that wow, that it needs to out perform its neighbour.

Routinely, it is the province of the greenkeeping team, but it is a matter of the course's design and hand in hand with the golf course architect there is always the opportunity to frame the greens, the tees, the bunkering, the fairways with varied, contoured dimensions of mown grass, less mown grass and managed vegetation.

Designing for maintenance, perhaps, maintaining for design, perhaps, but together architecture and greenkeeping can make that vital difference in producing courses of real quality.



Howard Swan is one of Europe's most senior and respected golf course architects. He is working in close to 30 countries on some new projects. Today not as many as yesterday, but on many renovations at home and abroad. He was President of the (now) European Institute of Golf Course Architects and has for almost 20 years conducted his design masterclass for BIGGA at Harrogate and around the country.

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