

Must We Always Demand Perfection?

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Years ago, when the links courses of Scotland and England were laid out in and around the natural dunes and landforms, man moved minimal earth to provide contiguous golf holes. Everything on the links was adapted to fit existing conditions. You might say that Mother Nature was actually the builder, and the course designer was merely the one who discovered the routing.

This use of nature often provided courses that were testing and frequently offered imperfect lies, blind shots and unmanicured turf. Part of the enjoyment of these courses, however, resided in having to respond to these challenging circumstances, often through creative shotmaking.

But somewhere along the line, the American perception of the game strayed from its European roots. That perception, which has been a major influence on course design around the world, applauds wonderfully maintained, impeccable golf courses. It also encourages complete fairness in design and is skeptical of "unusual" design measures such as the occasional blind shot.

Television, golf magazines and the PGA tour have all had a hand in furthering this perception, particularly in setting expectations that are often mistaken for standards. Announcers banter on about how players are penalized

for anything less than a perfect lie, and touring professionals complain about course conditions. Meanwhile, we nod in empathy.

But must a good tee shot always be rewarded with a perfect lie? Must every shot be hit to a clearly visible target? Must it

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always be possible to advance a ball from a sand bunker? Must every green hold approaches? Must the play area contain 100 percent turf coverage throughout the season, no matter what weather conditions exist?

I am the first to agree that these conditions can contribute to the game's overall enjoyment

level, but I also feel this "Americanization" may eliminate many shots that are required on the traditional Scottish and English courses—shots that add to the overall challenge and finesse of the game.

In discussions with other members of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, I find that most strive to meet these Americanized expectations. As a result, today's golf course architecture may best be described as a study on how to best modify terrain to create the desired golfing experience.

With sites containing more and more limitations—whether they be related to size, terrain or environment—designing to this American-style of golf often involves extensive earthwork to reform the ground, especially to prevent blind shots and provide level play areas. It also requires green construction methods, irrigation system design and grass selection that have reached a level of sophistication almost beyond comprehension. All in the name of perfect playing conditions.

While meeting golfers' expectations, these designs have and will continue to drive course construction costs higher. The dramatic upswing in maintenance costs is likely to continue as well. (It is not uncommon today for the average annual maintenance cost of a 25-year-old facility to exceed the original cost of construction for the same course!) All of which has led to an overall rise in green fees.

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It is my belief that the quality of a game of golf should be judged more on the integrity of the course's design than on its condition. The goal of the golf course architect is to create variety, demanding that players use every club in their bag. Less-than-perfect turf conditions provide an additional variable that should not necessarily be considered a negative.

When playing older courses where the condition of the turf is determined by the most recent weather cycle, golfers are required to adjust their game to the specific conditions every time they play. For example, in the early summer when turf is

lush and fairways are soft, fairway roll will be limited and the greens will hold a wider variety of shots; but in a late summer drought when the fairways and greens may be hard and lean, the traditional bump and run may be rewarded. This variety adds to the excitement of the game.

I believe we should consider changing our expectations and returning more to the original concept of the game. In this concept, the ball is played as it lies, and there is not *always* a reward for a perfect shot. In doing so, we will expand the opportunity for more affordable golf. We will also obtain a better appreciation of what the game has to offer. ■

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