

# Rub of the Green



*Gregory E. Martin  
Martin Design Partnership*

*The No. 8 "Postage Stamp" at Royal Troon.*

**O**n a recent once-in-a-lifetime trip to Ireland and Scotland, I had the good fortune to play a variety of world-renowned golf courses like Prestwick, Carnoustie, Royal Troon, St. Andrews, Turnberry-Ailsa and Ballybunion, to name a few. At Prestwick and Carnoustie, I found that bunkers were perilous penalties, not just hazards. At St. Andrews, the history was indelible, and course knowledge was essential. Elegant Turnberry required long carries over gorse-filled canyons as a punctuation to its refined reputation. Troon's modest seaside terrain was not characteristic of its difficulty, and Ballybunion was a golf purist's paradise.

Without describing the boring details of the rugged, sandhill terrain, the magnificent views, the stunning beauty, or the significant history, what impressed me the most was the simplicity of the courses and the culture. Simple

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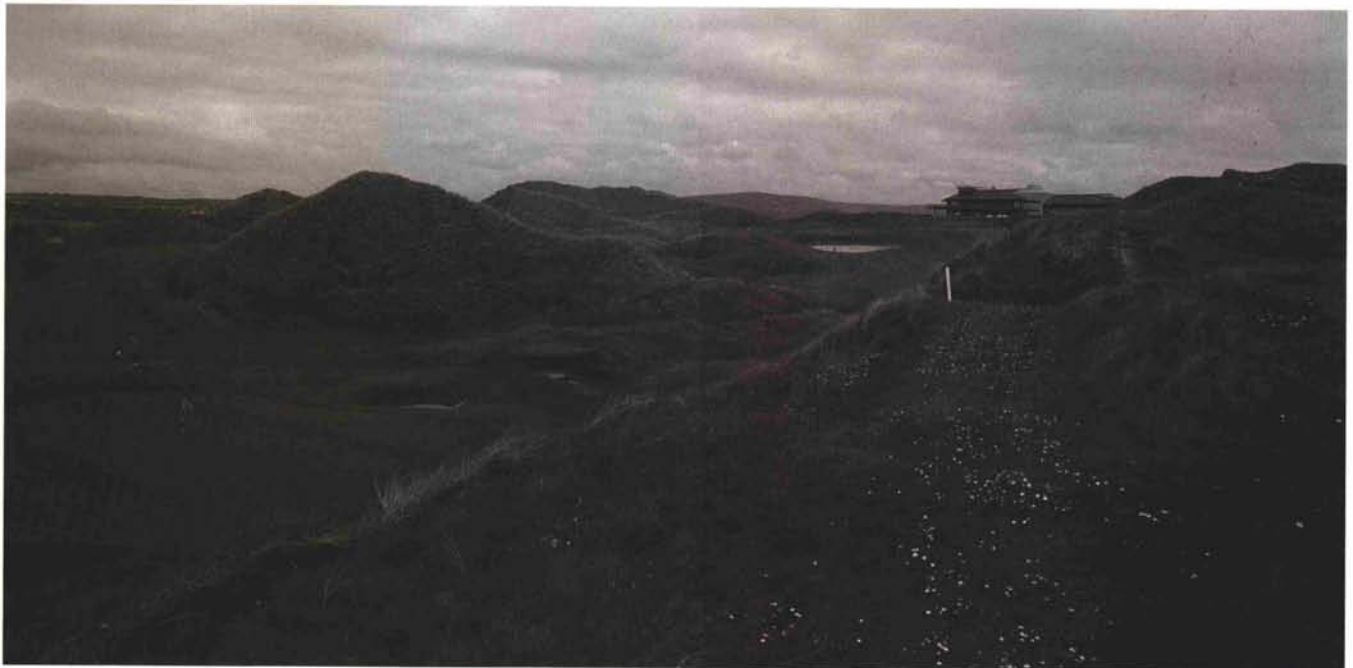


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The final holes at Ballybunion.

**Rub of the Green**

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lives and simply wonderful golf courses. This is a culture filled with a rational acceptance of life's good fortune and bad luck, and their golf courses illustrated that philosophy.

**Let me explain . . .**

When I did manage to find the fairway (it must have been a mishit), it may have found clover, or a divot, or a bare, tight lie. The rolling fairways were broad and distinctively lined with the characteristic deep rough. The exceptions on the golf course were plush fairways and slick greens. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, I was more often in the rough. It was knee deep in some places and spotted with heather and goarse. When I was lucky enough to find my ball, sometimes I had a good lie and clear shot to the green. Good lies and bad lies, such is life.

"Rub of the Green" is an often-used term in the golf industry and implies a certain degree of good and bad luck encountered on the golf course. Golfers in Europe have different expecta-

tions of golf and are true endorsers of "the rub." The competitive spirit is alive and well in the British Isles, but the compulsion for perfect fairways and fast

greens is slight. Even at Royal Troon, site of this year's British Open Championship, the course was conditioned so that fairways,

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## Rub of the Green

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greens and rough were sustainable and maintainable . . . tough strategically, quick, fair and true.

It is unfortunate that we American “revolutionaries” have become so fascinated with fast greens and a high rating on the stimpmeter. Wouldn’t we rather declare true, honest greens year after year instead of constantly fighting Mother Nature to maintain a 10 on the stimp? Is it any coincidence that the Europeans have dominated Ryder Cup play in the last 14 years. It appears that we Americans are spoiled a bit. We need to change our golf culture to a greater acceptance of honest environments and true golf courses rather than treating it as a beauty pageant.

Each of the courses that I played on this trip, which have seen decades of maintenance, seemed to be constantly monitored with a perspective toward long-term sustainability, a certain degree of landscape sensitivity and sensibility. These courses are not subject to the specific whims of over-

enthusiastic green committees, nor are they subjected to time-honored traditions of high chemical doses. These are world-renowned golf courses with maintenance budgets half of most golf courses here in the States, and yet, the courses are wonderful examples of a “pure golf experience.”

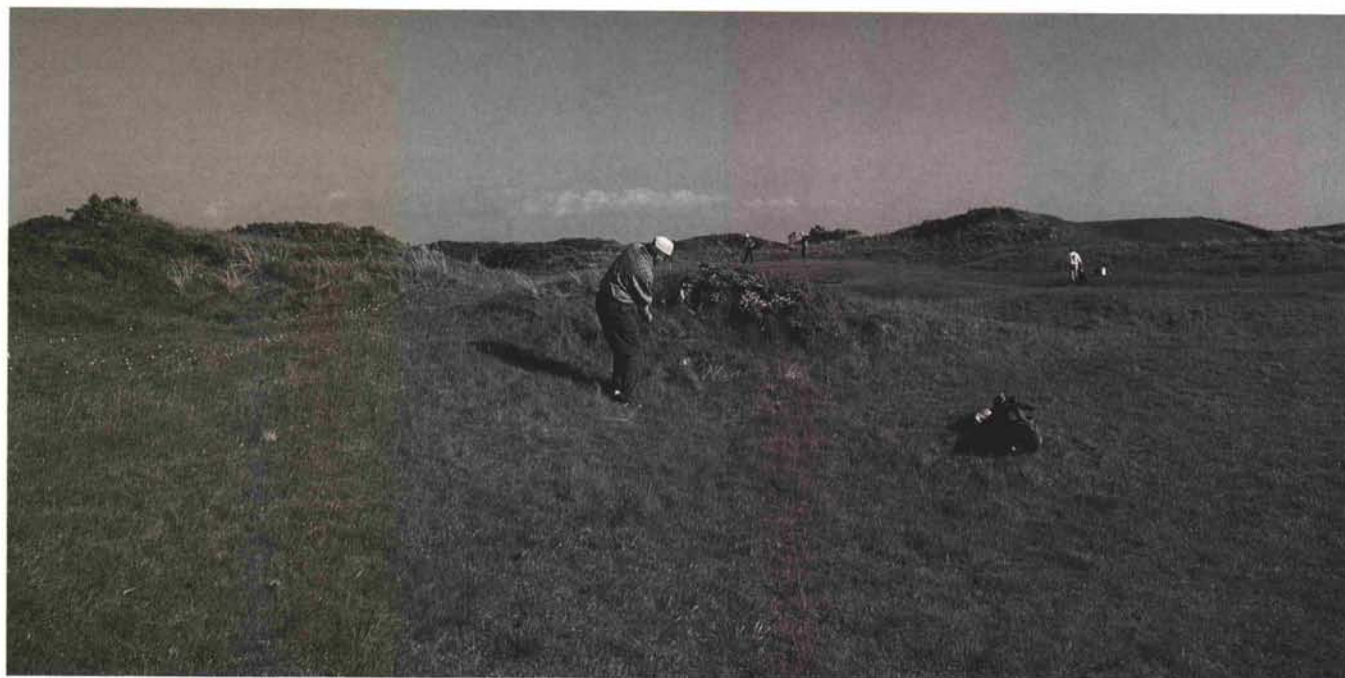
For instance, as I played Ballybunion Golf Club, with its mountainous sandhills, cavernous bunkers, wavelike fairways and strong breezes, I was overcome with a moment of clarity, an understanding of the game’s soul and purity. It all felt as though it belonged, naturally. There was nothing tricky there, nothing forced. Even though rain was dripping down my back, this was the single greatest golf experience I have ever had. “Winter rules” . . . ha! Play the ball as it lies: up, down and sideways . . . and have fun doing it.

Strategically, though, American golf courses stack up against many of those that I played. While we don’t have seaside views, a history of open championships and sand on which to build the cours-

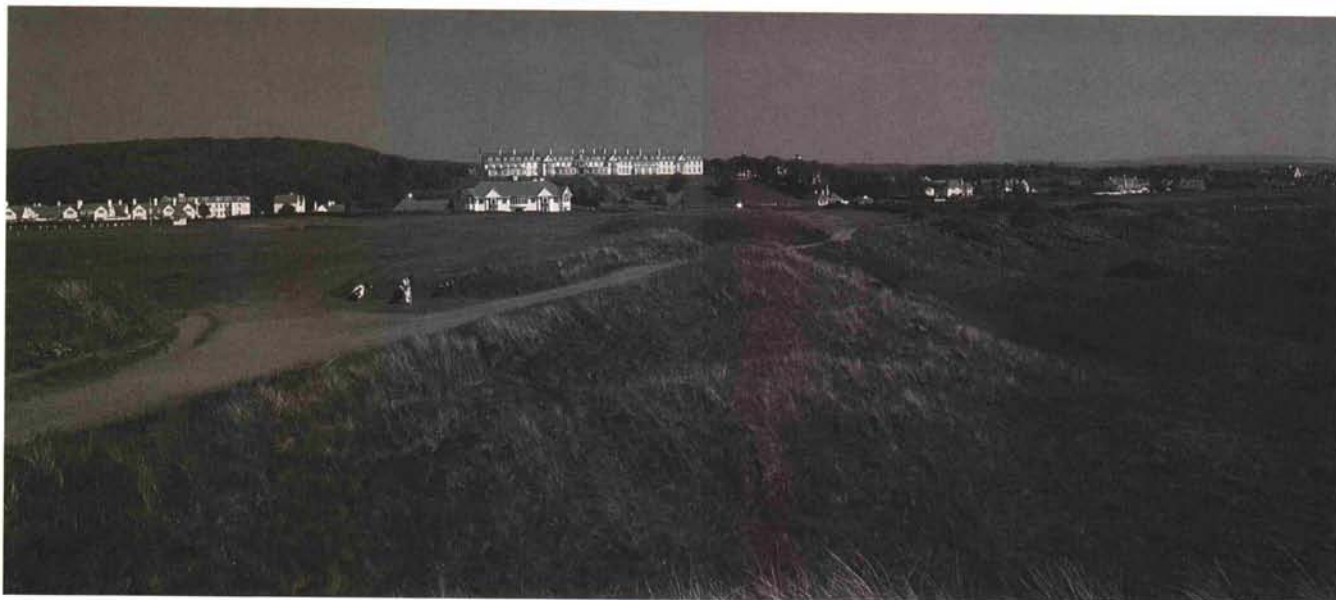
es, we can develop courses that have the honored characteristics of sustainability and maintainability—a naturalist’s approach. Overseas golfers are more accepting of unique characteristics that are a result of site specific conditions and microclimates, including heavy rough, steep unmaintained slopes, native shrub masses and tallgrass meadows.

Most of us are in the associated golf professions because of an appreciation of natural characteristics. Golf is an environmental encounter, a recreational experience as much as it is a sport and should be treated as such. Are the golfers in the United Kingdom any “less demanding” for a great golf adventure? Of course not. Golf in the Kingdom is typically played in three hours or less. In fact, 36 holes of golf is not an “all-day affair,” and more often a common event. It is curious that even though these courses have less maintained area and more deep rough, golf is played more swiftly. “Wall-to-wall” maintenance must not be the answer.

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Playing from the rough at Royal Troon.



*The 18th at Turnberry-Ailsa.*

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To emphasize that point, caddies are commonplace; there wasn't a "trolley" to be seen. To the Scots, carts are scorned. In fact, "course" in the term "golf course" implies a pedestrian event. While carts produce revenue, they tend to slow overall golf traffic, compact turf and inhibit golf's pleasurable pace.

Recently, I received a newsletter that promoted its services with lines like "GOLF COURSES TEE UP GAMES & GIMMICKS" and "HIGH-TECH ON THE FAIRWAYS." This is 100% contrary to what golf is intended to be. Why promote "high-tech" when the most pleasurable experiences on the golf course are low-tech. I'll concede that carts are good for the economics of the game, but they are still an infringement upon the unique pleasure of the experience. In Scotland and Ireland, the industrial, electronic and information ages were left far behind, or at least in the parking lot. This is golf, laddie, not a computer lab.

Most caddies I had were reliable, using their local knowledge of conditions and strategy to aid

the golfer. Great caddies encourage you throughout the round and can "club" you (determine your golf capabilities) within two or three holes. A little known fact is that carts can't help you find a ball in deep meadow grasses, can't point you toward a distant target or advise you on a putt. Caddies, I believe, speed play along and may eventually help save golf from itself. Think of the pleasure gained if we didn't have carts, of the jobs created and additional rounds generated. We should applaud clubs that support caddy programs and support the courses that actively promote them.

The beauty of these courses is in the drama produced by their rugged, raw beauty and simplicity. As I prepare plans and specifications for new golf courses, or review master plans for existing clubs, it is my intention to increase the strategic "playable" level of the courses with bunkers, tees, landscape improvements, etc. But I am also actively seeking locations to increase natural habitats and unmaintained areas, resulting in reduced maintenance. Superintendents should begin the process of reviewing maintenance requirements in these "low priority" areas.

Course management and design with a long view and a greater environmental perspective is necessary for golf to sustain itself through the next century. Architects and golf course superintendents can be leaders in this venture. Introduction of naturalized areas with an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program is a solid and positive first step. Audubon Sanctuary Program improvements meet a host of problematic golf course issues, including, and maybe most importantly, a better public perspective of the golf industry and golf course maintenance practices.

Every golf course possesses a "difficult-to-maintain-area," like a "high dry" area or a "wet low," that must be treated with greater attention and more labor-intensive detail. It is in these locations that maintenance budgets are stretched. North American golfers, club managers, green committees and club boards who have become overly involved with manicured fairways, fast greens and thick, rich rough, must be enlightened by golf course architects and golf course superintendents to a new understanding of golf design and management.

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**the Bull Sheet**

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the sponsor of the GCSAA Environmental Steward Award which Peter won in 1997. For the last couple of years, Peter and Ivanhoe have been the bridesmaids, but this year, they went all the way. Congratulations to both Peter and the Ivanhoe Club.

Henry "Hank" Wilkinson has been promoted to full professor in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences. Hank has been the turfgrass pathologist at Illinois since its inception in 1982. Hank, congratulations, and it is well deserved.

Also at the University of Illinois, Dr. Andy Hamblin has joined the staff, and his responsibilities and efforts will be in the science of

breeding and genetics of new turfgrass species. Welcome to Illinois, Dr. Hamblin; we look forward to meeting you.

From Kerry Satterwhite: At the NCTE, there was some discussion about using barley straw as an algaecide. While there was some interest, no one seemed to have a source. Oscar Miles and I have been working on this together, and I have located a source in Missouri, but the minimum order would be 200 bales. I was wondering if there are others who would be interested enough for me to bring in 200 bales and then distribute them to those interested. Please give me a call at 815-625-7923 or fax to 815-625-7318.

Samuel L. Jock: Searching for an assistant superintendent's position. Over eight years of experience including supervision. Fluent in Spanish with prior work in Mexico. GCSAA member. Bachelors and Associates degrees. Looking for a learning opportunity. Please contact 303-694-1210 for resume and references.

**MAGCS Annual  
Gin Rummy Tournament  
Friday, March 6, 2 p.m.  
Nordic Hill C.C.**

The tournament will take place after the regular MAGCS business meeting. The entry fee will be \$50. Please pay with your personal check. For over a decade, proceeds from this social event have helped Midwest members in need with their medical expenses. Defending champion is Paul Voykin.

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I have the greatest respect and admiration for Augusta National. I marvel each April witnessing the immaculate conditions of the Masters. But these conditions should not be the standard by which golf maintenance is judged. Even Augusta National gears its maintenance practices to one spectacular week each year. Valdarama, host of this year's Ryder Cup matches, has been designed and maintained as a bird sanctuary for migrating flocks. What a marvelous marketing tool.

Good examples of championship courses that illustrate sound design with an environmental awareness are Shinnecock Hills in New York, Spyglass, Spanish Bay and Cypress Point in California, Prairie Dunes in Kansas and Pine Valley in New Jersey and are consistently rated as the best golf courses in the world year after year. Each of these courses has significant out-of-play

grassing schemes and native planting throughout the golf course, adding to its mystique and "sense-of-place."

Most of us are in this industry because we have an appreciation for our environment and its remarkable ability to inspire. If you do not, you are in the wrong business. Aldo Leopold, a noted ecologist, wrote in his book, *A Sand County Almanac*: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the stability, integrity and beauty of a biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." We as professionals should fight for environmental awareness, sensitivity and cooperation; we should each make decisions that reflect this statement by Aldo Leopold.

Golf is an environmental encounter. The beauty of a golf course site is sometimes in its simplicity. Examine Pine Valley, Shinnecock Hills, Cypress Point or even Augusta. The greatness of

those golf courses is not a factor of maintenance, but rather a clear visibility and understanding of its distinctive topographical, vegetative and environmental characteristics. A current project of mine, Rich Harvest Links not only works around and through site-sensitive areas such as woodlands and wetlands, but it also introduces prairie, wet meadow and wetland plant mixtures into other areas of the design. The result is a unique "sense of place."

If "wall-to-wall" maintenance can be reduced and aesthetics increased, even at older, more prestigious clubs, without compromising the integrity of the course, everyone wins. Expanding naturalized areas will increase the inherent beauty of the site while reducing maintenance and introducing a new strategic feature into the design of the course. This should be the goal of every golfer, superintendent, architect and club committee member. ■