Bonallack urges architects to return to Rossian principles

The recipient of the Donald Ross Award urged a return to that revered golf course architect's standards, if not an end to the current mania for more course length, lavish water hazards and indiscriminate bunker building.

Michael F. Bonallack, OBE, who accepted the award from the American Society of Golf Course Architects at a special Donald Ross banquet in Broughton, England, has impressive game credentials.

He's been secretary of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews since 1983, five times British Amateur champion, and a member of the Walker Cup team in every match from 1959 to 1973.

He received the Bobby Jones Award for distinguished sportsmanship in golf in 1972.

The Ross Award is given annually to an individual who has acknowledged the importance of golf architecture to the game, and encouraged others to recognize great design.

"Many new courses," Bonalleck said, "have so-called short holes, par 3's of between 220-240 yards, whereas most of the great short holes one remembers are very short and almost certainly well under 200 yards. Witness the 12th and 16th at Augusta National.

"The Donald Ross courses have stood the test of time. Of course players will score lower and lower in the same way that runners will run faster, swimmers will swim quicker and jumpers jump higher. The test of a great course is that the best player wins, not what score he does."

Ross, relying strongly upon the wisdom of early St. Andrews professional and keeper of the green Tom Morris, adhered to Morris' strategy in laying out courses — leave things as you find them and interfere with Nature as little as possible.

Bonalleck said Ross followed these precepts when he emigrated to America and designed the 600-plus courses which helped to bring about the interest in golf in the United States. His courses blended with the surroundings.

In Morris' days, Bonallack emphasized, the only earth-moving machinery was by man with a shovel and wheelbarrow, together with a horse and cart. "But the architects offset the lack of equipment with an almost free hand in selecting the land most naturally suited for golf. They did not have the worry of having to create a man-made golf course out of a swamp or dense forest.

"I like to think that Ross and Morris saw the challenge of golf as an extension of the challenge of life. Life itself never runs smoothly or according to plan. We have our ups and downs, our good and bad breaks. So it is with golf. Golf is not only about hitting perfect shots. It also is a test of temperament and the ability to overcome such misfortune. As in life, one has to decide when to be cautious and when to gamble. Always there are unexpected hazards to catch the unwary.

"I sometimes feel this is an element lost in the constant striving for perfection and standardization. Greens must be the same speed, fairways the same width and cut to the same length, the rough uniformly graded. Bunker sand must be of certain size particles and depth, and free relief obtainable from almost any lie not quite perfect.

"I recently played some fine new courses in Florida. I can understand that when a course is built on flat wet marshland, if the architect is to create mounds or features, it means digging soil from another area, thereby creating a lake.

"While I enjoy water on golf course when on holiday, I would not like to play all my golf on such courses. Scenically, they are beautiful, but generallly I suggest water as a hazard can be too penal to the not so able.

"When one sees water in front of a green, it does not tax the mind too much to know there is really only one way to get to the green. Playing on land, particularly on links land, there may be two or three alternative shots. It is up to the player to work out the most appropriate one.

"Courses that stick in my mind have many things in common.

"Firstly, they are scenically and naturally beautiful.

'Secondly, they do not necessarily call for long carries from the tees or have penal hazards to catch the not-so-expert player.

"Thirdly, they make you think. The holes have their own character and pose separate problems. Half the fun in playing a classic course for the first time is working out what the architect was trying to make you do on a hole and what snares he had laid for those who did not think.

"Fairway bunkers are not regimented like lines of soldiers on each side of the fairway, but are sparingly and strategically placed as close as possible to the perfect line of play to the hole so that by just missing one you are left with the ideal second shot.

"Ross always built dog-legs on

Continued to page 35

American architects learn British ideas on environment

Continued from page 30

ASGCA members, touring England's famed courses as part of their 45th annual meeting, heard of these and other projects in late April.

Golf Course Wildlife Trust Chairman Michael Harvey, Ecoschemes Ltd.'s Gary Grant, Durrell Institute Director Ian Swingland and Environmental Golf Services Ltd.'s David Stubbs shared their work educating British society and lawmakers about the wildlife-friendliness of golf courses.

The Golf Course Wildlife Trust, whose members include Wildlife Links and the National Turfgrass Council, is geared to independently researching safe chemical and water use and to educating planners and disclosing misinformation from environmentalists and others.

Harvey said most widely-known British courses carry the government distinction as Sites of Special Scientific Interest where the land cannot be altered.

He said the government acknowledges most coastal courses — like St. Andrews and Troon — as preserving wildlife. Inland courses — like Royal Birksdale, Royal St. George's, Sunningdale and Gleneagles — also carry the SSSI designation.

Only 40 percent of Britain's golf course acreage is maintained. The remaining 60 percent equals all the area of all other nature reserves in the country.

Saying paperwork is the biggest obstacle to golf course builders, Swingland suggested that developers and architects weigh the costs and benefits of using sensitive land in their projects.

He also recommended involving top local officials in the projects, giving the officials a vested interest. He said developers must initiate communication with local people and conservationists, since they could be potential partners in removing political logjams.

It is important to balance golf and housing, conservation and economics to get the best total impact in a project, Swingland said.

Ecoschemes' Grant said derelict land like quarries could be reclaimed and, where locally appropriate, new wildlife habitats recreated to that existing before farmers used tractors.

Stubbs declared that in many ways the United Kingdom and Europe are far behind the United States in research. He cited the Cape Cod Study done by the Environmental Protection Agency at several golf courses in Massachusetts.

Pointing to the drought of the past five years in southern England, Stubbs termed research in irrigation practices as well as water table levels lowered by ancillary development as important.

Stubbs, like Grant, cautioned against heavy-handed earth-moving, changing the countryside too much.

Golf also is seen as a threat, Stubbs said, to historic parklands — parks associated with old estates and historic sites that might be sold to unscrupulous developers to suburbanize the countryside.

By careful monitoring and using local plant species and an organically managed approach to the golf course environs, Stubbs thought it possible for golf course development to flourish in the future.

Meanwhile, in Europe the key to developing and implementing an environmentally sensitive golf course project is awareness of each market segment's revenue and type of demand, according to consultant Howard Swan.

Swan said growth in Europe will come only from those who never have played golf, and this alone would create a demand for courses for all skills.

Robert Berthet, of the 18-member French Association of Golf Course Architects, said Europe needs golf academies and less difficult courses.

Although there is a 15-percent growth of players, 30 percent give up after the first year because the course is not attuned to their skills, Berthet said. The courses are difficult and the golfers lack and need instruction.

Spain's courses mostly are geared to tourists. France, Italy, Germany and Sweden target their courses to locals as well as tourists, he said.

He said in the architecturally rich tourist areas of Italy, France and Costa del Sol, large companies begin developments with hotels and several golf courses, then face difficult administrative conditions.

In France, it may take four or five years to obtain for permits from 30 to 40 services.

Bonallack —

Continued from page 34

his courses. No good course is complete without them. They test the player's nerve and strength, depending on whether you play safe or go for the carry.

"All of us wno play golf are very fortunate when compared to those who play other sports. Football fields, tennis courts, cricket pitching, swimming pools, bowling greens, dartboards and pool and snooker tables are all very much the same. All are flat and built to standard sizes. Generally speaking, their surroundings leave no lasting image in the mind.

"Not so with golf. Every course is different and has its own attraction, resulting from either the planned creation of the golf course architect or from the work of the Great Creator. Happily, on some occasions, it is a perfect combination of both."