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IN DEFENSE OF THE MOUND

Golf course mounds always have been around. I see what appear to be “built” mounds even at the Old Course. Donald Ross included a chapter in “Golf Has Never Failed Me” called Solid Mound Work. But, modern golf course architects expanded earthmoving as artwork compared to their predecessors, until the past few years, when it’s fallen out of favor.

Owners and golfers are tired of 1990s style golf course mounds, and they’re vilified now because of overuse and misuse. Even I’m tired of them and have become a reformed mound-a-holic.

Believe it or not, golden age architects used mounds similarly to modern architects – to support bunkers and frame greens. They built at smaller scales with horses and scoops, creating subtle slopes that looked natural and artistic. Time has helped mounds season, as tree planting and changing grass lines keep them from looking artificial. After World War II, mechanized earthmoving evolved and so did mounds – they became bigger and more prolific. But, they looked more repetitive and less natural for many reasons:

- **Paper-designed mounds** related too strictly to greens or fairways, typically fitting repetitively on most inside mowing curves,

rather than following random patterns.

- **Philosophy.** With bulldozers, mounds were built to stand out as man-made, not blended in as natural.

- **Repetition.** No golf course architect or shaper is as varied as nature. Many mounds start looking alike. The tendency is to build mounds of similar height and slope no matter how much we try to emulate natural contours. Even when a green site has a gentle side slope, the backing mounds are often built to one height, rather than having the highest mounds on the higher natural side of the green.

- **Steepness.** When economics became more difficult, architects saved fill and construction costs by building steeper slopes. Robert Trent Jones and others built 5:1 to 7:1 slope, which looked natural in rolling terrain. Later, to get higher and more dramatic, mounds were often built at 3:1 slopes – the maximum slope most mowers can handle – or even steeper on Scottish links courses.

- **No feathered slopes.** Even steeper slopes can look good if the toe of slope ties naturally into natural grade at 6:1 or greater, even if the bulk of the mound is fairly steep. Many architects lost sight of this.

However, mounds can be built to look good, and they have many practical, visual, strategic and speed-of-play uses. They:

- Create a sense of enclosure on fairways and frames for greens to defined spaces. Trees do this, but on open land, mounds and ridges separate holes more cheaply and immediately than immature plantings.

- Hold approach shots without sufficient back spin near the green, a problem for average players. With faster greens and flatter slopes, those shots roll further, making small backing mounds more necessary.

- Encourage good players to play more aggressively at back pins.

- Contain shots on fairways or doglegs.

- Artificially create a valley fairway,

which is always a comfortable shot.

- Help with distance judgment.

- Create variation in fairway landing areas and lies, especially in landing zones beyond 300 yards, where building bunkers for the few long hitters isn’t justified.

- Test the short game around greens.

- Create shadow patterns for aesthetics.

- Screen objectionable views.

- Provide safety from adjacent fairways or practice areas.

- Give landscape plantings a good head start on achieving a desirable height and show off plantings by allowing back plantings to be higher than front ones.

- Hide cart paths.

- Create drainage.

While mounds solve some problems, they create others:

- They take longer and are more dangerous in some cases to mow.

- They require more irrigation and/or often dry out.

- While they contain off line tee shots, wild shots clearing the mounds have a blind approach and potential safety problems.

- When hot approach shots land wide of the mounds, they result in a difficult pitch.

Hopefully, mounds will find favor again, at least if used where they serve one or more valuable purposes and are built to fit the site, rather than being the be-all end-all of design. They deserve a better reputation than they currently have. **GCI**

