



Jeffrey D. Brauer is a licensed golf course architect and president of GolfScapes, a golf course design firm in Arlington, Texas. Brauer, a past president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, can be reached at jeff@jeffreymbrauer.com.

PHIL: "MODERN ARCHITECTURE IS KILLING GOLF"

Some big questions arise from the recent PGA Championship, for those not paying attention. If Rees Jones is the Open Doctor, is Mickelson – who also dabbles in architecture – on tap as “Dr. Phil?” Is Phil Mickelson a regular reader of my column? For those of you who didn’t follow the PGA Championship this year, Phil had these comments about modern architecture:

“I also think if you look at the four par 3s here, it’s a perfect example of how modern architecture is killing the game, because these holes are unplayable for the member. You have water in front and you have a bunker behind, and you give the player no avenue to run a shot up. And the 7th hole, where there is not any water, there’s a big bunker in front and right of the green; instead of helping the player get it on to the green, it goes down into the lower area, as does the left side.”

Now, for us out here, it doesn’t make a bit of difference, because we are going to fly the ball to the green either way. And that’s why I say it’s great for the championship. But it’s a good reason why the number of rounds are down on this golf course amongst the membership. And it’s a good reason why – in my opinion, this is a great example again of how modern architecture is killing the participation of the sport because the average guy just can’t play it.

Standard disclaimers: No one confirmed Phil’s comments about reduced play among members, nor can we attribute to design alone, since many clubs have declining membership in this economy. And, he ignores the forward tees, which make the course more playable for others and may have teed off on the Rees Jones re-design because he disliked Rees’s remodel of Torrey Pines, where Phil played as a youth.

Despite those quibbles, for once, a tour pro seems to be “right on” in his comments about architecture. Play is down, and certainly, architecture can be a reason.

As I wrote in my May column, modern design had been driven by “one-upmanship,” which was defined as harder, more photogenic – ie, more bunkers – longer, award-winning and highly-rated. And all were probably difficult for average players.

However, after the initial publicity of awards and rankings, there is anecdotal evidence that eventually, golfers play where they have the most fun, lose the fewest balls and shoot near their average score. Rankings, awards and course ratings be damned!

In two states, I have the two top-ranked public courses. In both cases, the higher ranked – and more difficult – course initially had higher play. Over time, though, the second-ranked courses – both easier – surpassed them in rounds played.

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There might be other reasons, such as proximity to urban areas and availability of other activities, but the intimidation, cost and frustration of high scores and lost balls may contribute.

After all, golf is supposed to be fun! Most play for the camaraderie. Others play with business associates and don’t take them to the golf course for a miserable time.

Courses that offer its players reasonable challenge rather than epic struggles are emerging as the most popular in all but the “destination resort” category.

Yet, in renovation after renovation, the discussion inevitably turns to “tournament play” as if a PGA Tour stop will ever come to Tiddy Links Golf Club. While it’s perfectly fine for Atlanta Athletic Club to host, and Rees Jones to design for a PGA Championship, it’s *not* all right for the other 4,000 courses built in the last decade to do so.

Next month, I will reiterate some of the basic design steps we can take to remove unnecessary difficulty from our “every-day play” courses.

Hopefully, Phil will be happy! Tune in. **GCI**