



POLITICS AND GOLF DESIGN

In this election year, much as been made of how to blend socialism into capitalism for the betterment of all, who to tax, who to assist, and where to spend money. The free market vs. socialism debate has many parallels in golf course architecture theory. Many want to tax the (talent/length) rich golfers by limiting their equipment, because they simply have “too much” (length/wealth). If taking away their length redistributes length to other golfers, including me, I support it 110 percent.

That attitude puts me with the other 99 percent, who myopically evaluate architecture based on their own game. Just as a recession is when your neighbor loses his job, but a depression is when I lose my job, the difference between “Fair” and “Unfair” hinges on whether it’s you or your competitor who is penalized by hazards. When a golfer argues that fairway bunkers should be 260 yards off the tee, I know their tee shots travel 250 yards. When they favor grass bunkers, I know they are terrible out of sand. In fact, most complaints about a hole/feature tell me it costs them strokes.

It’s similar to citizens who favor policy that favors them at the expense of others. Just as businesses say, “What’s good for (our) business is good for America”, golfers often praise an architectural features as “good for all golfers” when in reality, it’s good for their golf game.

While you would think average players would argue most in favor of architecture that helps their game, good players (the 1 percent) actually demand more architectural assistance from their courses.

In 1892, top amateur Charles Blair McDonald designed Chicago Golf Club with Out of Bounds on the left side of nearly every hole, which nicely

accommodated his slice. It continued when Tour Pros entered architecture. Jack Nicklaus reportedly designed his early courses to favor his own high fade. He has also said that architecture should never hurt the player, and should help them shape and contain shots. Other Tour Pros with perfect putting strokes suggest flat greens are best, whereas some pros with below average putting skills argue that

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greens should have ample contour – because if they aren’t making putts, the architect has an obligation to make others miss just as often.

Nearly all top players demand that hazards offer no more recovery challenge than a shot from the middle of the fairway, believing (somehow) that this is more “fair” golf. It has led to massive bunker expense (both maintenance and construction) to assure “fairness” and may be the cause of many clubs’ budget deficits.

The Pros input has been a big change from the philosophies of the Robert Trent Jones and Dick Wilsons (the premier 1950’s architects) who spoke of architecture in military terms like “attack and defending par” and whose courses seemingly presumed the enemy was at the gate. Some softening in the name of justice was due, and long before the financial crisis of 2007, architects provided “bail outs” for the tough and penal shots often offered up by those architects.

As golf became diverse and more public, owners wanted courses that met everyone’s needs, meaning cours-

es that made golf easier, more attractive and faster to play. You might call it “socialist” to challenge every golfer to his or her ability, or “democratic” in opening golf up to all comers.

It became standard architectural policy to “tax” the (talent) rich more than average players, while providing some assistance to average golfers. We narrow fairways and place hazards to challenge the best players, with fewer

hazards and wider fairways in the landing zones of average players. Less skilled golfers also get architectural assistance from multiple tees, to reduce length, provide easier angles and to reduce forced carries and difficult angles around doglegs and hazard, in an effort to “give everyone a fair shot.” In general, hazards are increasingly benign, in deference to senior, female and junior golfers.

While most agree with this notion, one pro argues fairways should be 50 percent wider at 300 yards than 200 yards, because a 5-degree miss strays further as tee shots get longer, and he believes this punishes all players equally. He must favor a “flat tax” over a graduated tax, regardless of the ability to pay – or play.

In many ways, golf architecture has followed society. It’s still a may-the-best-competitor-win” game, but with increasing doses of assistance from architects to make the game enjoyable for all. While we may argue the last 5 percent of what makes the perfect blend, in general, we are on the right path. **GCI**