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CHANGES TO THE “OLD COURSE”

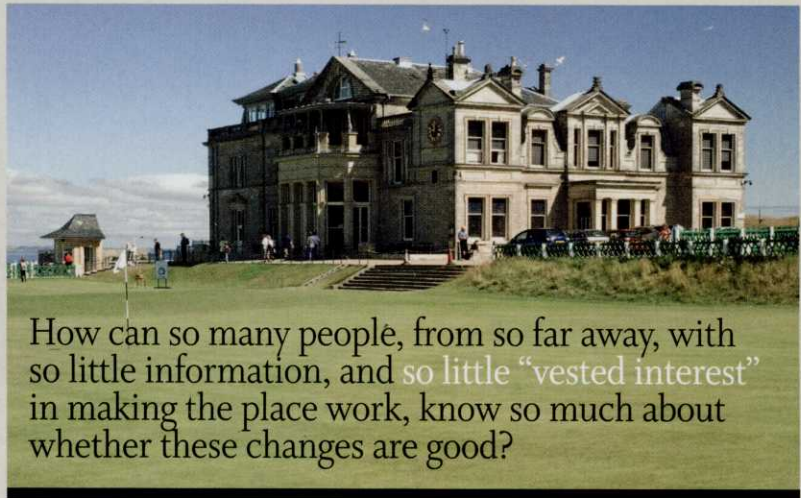
The recent uproar on changes to the Old Course at St. Andrews makes me want to weigh in from this “Bully Pulpit” with a stern, unequivocal: “I can see both sides.”

R&A chief executive Peter Dawson says there is “too much hysteria” surrounding the Old Course changes, and I tend to agree. Much of the outcry came quickly, and from sketchy information. Most were understandably against change on preservation principles alone. That is quite understandable, given that the Old Course is so special and unique.

Both change and fear of change have been constant at St. Andrews. In most cases, changes have obviously gained acceptance over time. Is it different now, just because we are more aware of them from the Internet? How can so many people, from so far away, with so little information, and so little “vested interest” in making the place work, know so much about whether these changes are good?

This sentiment factors in my love of St. Andrews dating to my first visit in 1980, so much so that I named my son “Andrew.” No doubt, St. Andrews is a “museum piece” and window into what golf was like in the beginning. However, as romantic as the idea of playing the same course Old Tom Morris did is, the reality is all golf courses – even historic ones – are constantly evolving and changing. Years ago, the St. Andrews superintendent told me they had filled in many bunkers over the years, often in the middle of the night. Even in an era generally less attuned to architectural preservation, he knew: There would be much complaining about changes if known in advance; and most would not notice the changes and/or would soon forget them if they did.

This year, the first point has occurred. We will have to see if the sec-



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ond also occurs, but based on history, I think it will. I suspect the process and complaints regarding changing the Old Course were nearly similar, whether in 1612, 1812, or 2012.

Most books about St. Andrews document the many changes at the Old Course. There was uproar when “Old Tom” converted fairways from heather to turf. The course reversed its routing, which is perhaps the most radical change ever. When I first played there in 1980, locals were lamenting that the new irrigation system had ruined the course forever.

It’s always valid to question whether these changes will prove acceptable. Should any change mostly promote modern “tournament fairness” over tradition? Most importantly, will these changes “open the floodgates” for wholesale future design changes?

However, unlike some, I presume the brain trust there asked those questions before proceeding. While it’s easy to romanticize Old Tom Morris as infallible, while presuming current leaders can do little right, they do have responsible people in place. As is often said in politics, a difference in opinion is not a difference in principle. Even if we disagree with some

changes, we must presume those in charge have the best intent.

In my view, filling a large depression in the 7th fairway fixes perpetual maintenance problems, and is easily justified. (With all the divots, it probably looks worse now than when sheep huddled there against winter winds.) Removing rarely used fairway bunkers reduces maintenance, speeds play, and has occurred before many times.

Most of the design changes are also understandable; unless your perspective is against any change at all. Granted, a few made from the Tour Pro’s point of view risk turning the Old Course into “TPC St. Andrews.” For instance, I don’t favor lowering the fairway ridges formerly blocking the view of the 4th green to promote the modern concept of “full vision to the green” from the left. That takes away the traditional advantage of “playing far right as you dare.”

Change is inevitable, and even with many changes over the centuries, the Old Course still serves both a worldwide public and the occasional tournament. Most importantly, it would still be recognizable to Old Tom Morris, and that is a wonderful testament to the Old Course’s greatness. **GCI**