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here comes a time when each of us concludes that top 100 lists are taken too seriously. I sensed something amiss came when I visited the pro shop of a great old course and found

it had embroidered the course's current *Golf Digest* ranking on every cap for sale.

I realized rankings transcended rationality, however, when a frustrated architect told me the "restoration" project he wanted to undertake had become an excuse for club members to toughen their course. The emphasis had shifted from bringing back the classic architecture to shoring up the course's resistance to scoring. The members felt that a tougher course was their only way to higher position on *Golf Digest's* "America's 100 Greatest" list.

The rankings obsession has deepened to the point that the jobs of architects, superintendents and management personnel can depend on how a course is perceived by ranking panelists. That's a sad statement, considering that, at best, the lists have given us something to talk about. At worst, the rankings stem from severely flawed criteria and are voted on by too many panelists who don't know how to discern ordinary golf holes from great ones.

But you have no choice, right? The ultimatum has been issued from the club president in so many words: "We must get ranked, and your job depends on it."

Want to know what criteria you have to meet to keep your job? Funny, some panelists determining your fate wonder that as well.

Overemphasizing trivialities

Golf Digest came out firing this year, proclaiming its list the original and oldest (true). The magazine also patted itself on the back for being the most open and consistent regarding voting procedure and criteria (also true). And yes, architecture editor Ron Whitten, who oversees the panel but for some reason can't vote, writes eloquently about the essentials behind the great courses in each biannual "100 Greatest" issue. Yet the panel consistently ignores what Whitten preaches, and emphasizes conditioning, aesthetics and resistance to scoring.

Consider this: The best-defined category on

So You Wanna Get Ranked?

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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the *Golf Digest* ballot, playability, only counts in balloting for its biannual listing of the best public courses, even though panelists award a playability score for each course they see. Now, ponder this definition of "playability": "How well does the course challenge the low handicap golfers, while still providing enjoyable options for high handicappers through the use of shorter lengths, alternative routes, placement of hazards and accessible pins?"

Am I missing something? Aren't these the most common traits among the timeless course designs?

The *Golf Digest* panel is unusual, however, in that it sees a higher annual growth rate than most Fortune 500 companies. In 1999, the panel reached 660, up from 577 in 1997 and 450 in 1995. Described as well-traveled, publicity-shy low-handicappers, they apparently have created a frat-house buddy system to gain access to America's best courses. The low point came in this year's issue when a *Golf Digest* associate editor revealed the group awarded a panel position as a 50th birthday present.

The *Golf Digest* ballot consists of seven categories that each require a 1-to-10 score: shot values, playability, resistance to scoring, design variety, memorability, esthetics (yes, that is how they spell aesthetics in Trumbull, Conn.) and conditioning. The often misinterpreted shot values count double in the final tally, while playability is eliminated and conditioning is tinkered with to soften the blow of an off-maintenance day.

Once scores for all of the above are tallied, two points are added for courses that allow walking, while no points are awarded if carts are mandatory. However, panelists are not required to walk, and rarely do — another major flaw with all panelists regardless of the magazine they represent. You can't see what the architect intended and built from the cart paths, although

if recent trends continue, "cart path camouflage" will be a new category in 2001.

There is, however, the ever-so-important saving grace for the *Golf Digest* Top 100 — the tradition category. This is a score tacked on by a mysterious in-house committee once the panelists have weighed in on America's toughest and prettiest. Consider these editorial modifications:

Prior to the tradition score, Wade Hampton comes in at No. 8, but moves to No. 22 in the final published ranking. Shadow Creek arrives at No. 6 in the panelist's eyes, and moves to No. 20 on the final list. Colorado's Sanctuary GC lands at an amazing No. 17 before the in-house committee drops it down to No. 48.

However, thanks to the tradition score (and I mean it in these cases), Baltimore CC goes from the panelist's No. 84 to a more respectable No. 50. Classy Kittansett Club starts at No. 71 and gets moved to a more reasonable No. 39. Baltusrol (Lower) goes from a surprising No. 62 to a more logical post-tradition No. 34. And, thanks to the editors, Riviera CC surges from No. 52 to No. 24.

So why does the *Golf Digest* panel produce results that force the editors to drastically, but wisely, correct their findings? Personally, I'd say they have too many low handicappers voting. Like Tour players, most good golfers selfishly focus on what they shot or how "fair" the course seemed to them, instead of analyzing the design and how interesting it could be for all players.

Frankly, who cares about what some publicity-shy, rich guy thinks is a good test? Please tell us which are the best golf course designs, since anyone can make a course difficult. Tell us which courses are the most fun for the most people, as well as the most thought-provoking, timeless layouts.

Please stop giving points for layouts perceived as extraordinarily "pretty" or points for how they were maintained on the one day you played. A course should not be penalized because the superintendent rested the collars on the lone day a *Golf Digest* panelist happened to test how resistant to scoring your course was.

Intentionally opposite to *Golf Digest*, *Golf Magazine's* list of the Top 100 U.S. layouts employs the overly vague I-know-it-when-I-see-it criteria for judging. This is a dangerous way to evaluate the greatest designs, especially when two-thirds of the network morning show hosts are panelists, and livelihoods depend on their assessments.

There's no criteria when voting for *Golfs* list, just an "A to F" grading system for its panelists to use in determining what they like and don't like. Just tell us what you think because you are special and — say it with me now — you know it when you see it.

While the *Golf Digest* panel overemphasizes elements of a course it shouldn't, *Golf*

well-traveled types who supposedly can break 80? Wouldn't a little criteria help cut down on the conflict-of-interest questions raised with *Golfs* list?

The truth is, rankings are inexplicable and largely at the whim of the panelist's flavor of the month. Sure, the top 100 lists have been beneficial to the golf business in raising the stature of courses, bringing recognition to excellent designs and course operations and improving the stature of architects, superintendents and management.

But the lists carry too much clout considering such inexact systems are in place. Too many panelists are in it for playing free golf instead of analyzing the best design work.

The rankings have little affect on what matters: People enjoying the courses they play, regardless of ranking. And since no panelist has paid a green fee since the beginning of time, can you imagine how much money is lost in green fees due to panelists and their friends perusing the country and playing golf the last 20 years?

Worst of all, rankings now have too much influence on livelihoods. No, the magazines did not set out to make them this weighty, but now that the lists are so popular, the panels and criteria must be more closely monitored and refined.

Architects and superintendents are being pressured to create something "great" in order to be ranked by a few too many people who don't know what great is. Developers are spending millions more to try and top the course down the street in hopes of landing on the best new lists.

Meanwhile, the rankings and their panelists are no longer merely a little strange. They are dangerous.

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MIKE KLENNE/GOLFOTO

Rankings should tell us which courses are the most fun for the most people, as well as the most thought-provoking, timeless layouts.

Magazine is creating debatable results by not asking its panelists to analyze any design features, nor are they being held accountable on their ballots to explain extreme scores. *Golfs* list is notorious for its infatuation with certain new courses, only to inexplicably turn on them a few years later (i.e. Troon North, Kiawah Island Ocean Course, Wild Dune and Haig Point).

Furthermore, with such an open-ended system and a panel that is heavily stocked with designers, big-name developers, Tour players and even a public relations rep for several architects, doesn't this raise just as many conflict-of-interest questions as the *Golf Digest* panel's obsession with wealthy,