

As golf courses look to improve or restore their design, the art of contouring fairways doesn't garner as much attention as it should. Fairway contours on many courses — old and new — tend to be too narrow, too systematic and of secondary consideration. With a little tweaking here and there, however, reworked contours can be the fastest way to improve the architecture and playability of most golf courses.

The creation of the straight, narrow fairway contour approach can be traced back to the early 1950s (USGA's Joe Dey). That's when protecting par and the host club's ego became more important than determining the best player. When courses around the nation heard about the revolutionary idea of pencil-thin fairways, many followed USGA's lead.

As golf's governing bodies continue to sit back and watch equipment outdate most of the pre-1930 courses where they prefer playing Majors, fairway contours are continually tightened. Golf course committees take this irrational setup approach to heart and follow suit. It's a bizarre infatuation to push the infamous "tough but fair" envelope, which we all know is an utterly meaningless concept in the everyday enjoyment of golf across America.

So as spring approaches and the subsequent growing season allows superintendents to prepare courses for play, there is no better time to do some in-house restoration on your fairways. A little tweaking here or there can not only make a course more enjoyable to play, but also increase speed of play and accentuate design features.

With those thoughts in mind, here are some basics on fairway contouring from an architectural point of view:

• **Wide as possible** — Unless you are under order from some governing body to impose a 25-yard maximum, fairways should be as wide as your budget and design allows. Green committees usually want to narrow things down to penalize those dreaded long hitters. However, narrow fairways only make the game tougher on the average player who struggles out of rough, but easier for the good player because it tends to keep that person's ball out of hazards like trees and bunkers. Worst of all, narrow fairways eliminate strategic design possibilities.

Fairway Contours Provide Quick Fix

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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• **Stay away from set widths** — Every hole is different, particularly sloping ones. Judge accordingly and allow more room for fairways with slope or contour because they end up playing narrower than flat fairways. Golf professionals tend to be most guilty of the every-fairway-must-be-the-same-width-approach.

• **Hug hazards** — Does anything look worse than seven yards of rough between the fairway edge and an important bunker? Expanding fairways to the edge of bunkers not only looks more aesthetically natural, but brings the trouble into play as the architect intended.

• **Contours don't need to get wet** — The shaved lake bank concept (which Augusta National probably kicks itself for not copyrighting) has taken the short-grass-next-to-hazards-concept literally INTO the hazards! Golf courses have mimicked the shaved lake bank look, but must we risk the lives of innocent maintenance staff to be like Augusta? An inch or two of rough around water hazards is more reasonable.

• **Avoid straight lines** — This doesn't mean you need to make your fairway lines look like they came off a landscape architect's drawing board. Trust your artistic instincts by incorporating some gentle curves, preferably creating contours that accentuate ground features and hazards. Avoid covering interesting humps and bumps in the fairway with rough because few hazards are more appealing than a tightly-mown mound.

So if the board nixed another year of upgrading your course or you are putting together a master plan, do not forget the most important playability aspect of any golf course — fairway contours. They are the cheapest and easiest way for a quick fix, and key to the long-term appreciation of any layout.

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