

Tips

→ Planning and Building a Golf Course

There are four ingredients needed to construct a great track

BY GRANT WENCEL

Golfers' impressions of courses are as varied as the people you talk to. Apart from how well you played at a particular course or how successful the course is financially, we all seem to rate our favorites with a variety of criteria. *Golf Digest's* annual challenge to determine the best new courses uses rating categories like shot value, playability, design balance, memorability and aesthetics. Other publications also have their best course lists, which they're constantly revising as new courses open.

Along with these discussions and ratings, let's consider what separates the "great" golf courses from the many "good" ones. Say you're a future developer wondering where to start and how to get from a dream to a great course. You must mix four essential ingredients for a great golf facility. Any three usually result in a good course, but all four must be attained to create something special.

A good site

Today, it's not as important to find the perfect site in terms of natural characteristics. With modern earth-moving equipment, we can build golf courses on almost any type of terrain. The only barriers are large wetlands or flooding areas, mountainsides, continuous rock, inadequate soil or regions lacking water for irrigation. Important factors in site selection are availability, location, demographics and access, as well as the area's natural terrain, vegetation and aesthetics.

Some incredible sites have been



An area's natural terrain and vegetation is vital to proper selection.

blanketed with golf holes with breathtaking results, like Spyglass Hill GC on the rocky Pacific coast or The Broadmoor GC in the mountains and pines of Colorado. It's rare to have an exceptional site to work with, and it's not a prerequisite to a great golf course. You do need a good site, however, rather than an average or poor one.

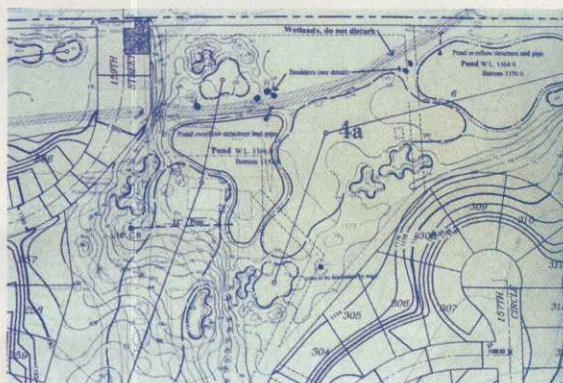
A good site must be of adequate size and shape with none of the barriers mentioned above. If the development includes housing (as many do today), the size obviously needs to account for this.

Beyond this a good site has:

- ⊙ Interesting terrain that creates opportunities for holes and views to be placed throughout the landscape.
- ⊙ Spots of existing vegetation and trees that anchor some holes and experiences.
- ⊙ Possible existing waterways (creeks and ponds) to add natural elements to manmade features.
- ⊙ An overall pleasant sense of place when you're on the property.

A good design

When you've found a good site, the task of defining the course begins. Here's where an architect's experience pays dividends through a step-by-step



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GRANT WENCEL

A good design involves exploring different layout plans and hole routings.

design process. I don't believe good design happens by accident, and it rarely occurs for someone new to the challenge.

However, some of the courses in your area (especially the older ones) were probably laid out and designed simply and mechanically by an owner, golfer, engineer or planner with little professional experience in design.

Good design requires an intimate knowledge of the site, thorough fore-

thought and numerous design studies. The process starts with a broad look at the best overall master plan and routing of the course and then narrows, focusing on the particular details and creation of each hole and its parts.

Evolution of a good design typically involves:

- ⊗ Exploring the different layout plans and hole routings.
- ⊗ Finding the best layout and routing.
- ⊗ Working out detailed grading plans for forming the site to the necessary grades, slopes and desired shaping.
- ⊗ Designing the details of tees, fairways, roughs, bunkers, water features, green complexes and the like.
- ⊗ Deciding on types and location of various grasses, as well as new tree plantings.
- ⊗ Designing an appropriate irrigation system.
- ⊗ Locating cart paths, designing cart bridges, retaining walls and highly landscaped areas.
- ⊗ Planning for the functional and sensitive siting of the clubhouse area.
- ⊗ Creating a pleasant indoor clubhouse atmosphere.

Good construction

Architects always hope that excellent design is followed by good construction. This is not always the case, however.

The seemingly never-ending construction process is where the long, hard work takes place and where little by little, the site is transformed into a natural arena for the game. Some may think it's just cutting down a few trees, flattening land and planting grass. A course may be built with these minimal expectations, but obvious and unimaginative results will follow. However, an experienced builder with a reasonable budget shares high expectations with the owner and the architect and has the know-how to accomplish the task.

Good construction requires understanding the design and the goals behind it. It's important for a builder and his staff to have broad experience with other sites on which to draw.

Good plans show the work and the finished product, but many times the details of the site (a majestic oak tree near a green of an unrealized view from a tee) suggest an alteration during construction. Conscientious builders and architects know when to consider changes.

Good construction also plans for and responds to the elements of nature. Rain and site erosion is common when soil is exposed for months as it is moved, worked, and re-worked. Using quality construction methods are a must — building greens according to current United States Golf Association specifications; using proven underground drainage pipe and quality irrigation components; supplying sufficient topsoil in turf areas; and using high-grade fertilizer, seed and sod.

When good construction occurs, there's usually a posi-



Good construction requires understanding the design and the goals behind it.

tive working relationship between the builder, architect and owner. In such cases, the builder may make an extra effort to finish the job well. The final intricate shaping and detailing of tees, fairways, roughs, bunkers, mounding and green surfaces are critical because it sets the look, feel and play of the course for years.

Good maintenance

So the construction of your course is complete. The bulldozers have left, the grass is growing and the clubhouse is almost finished. You have the first three ingredients for a great course. The remaining final ingredient is how well you manage and maintain this living environment.

On one extreme, you could spend more than \$750,000

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annually on a maintenance budget with a large, qualified staff and ample modern equipment with attention to every detail. On the other hand, owners with modest expectations and budgets supply limited maintenance staff, equipment and expertise for costs under \$300,000.

The degree (and therefore cost) of maintenance practices should have been generally determined when you began the project. Aspects that have an impact on maintenance are:

- ⊙ Have you built a public or private course?
- ⊙ How many rounds do you expect?
- ⊙ Who are your typical golfers?
- ⊙ What do you expect to charge your customers? Obviously, many private and resort courses charge higher fees to maintain excellent conditions



Golfers will pay more to play well-maintained courses – and they'll enjoy their experiences more.

(which their customers demand), while smaller-market public courses operate on tight budgets which simplify their maintenance.

Some course designs demand high maintenance because of the types of grasses selected; the severity of slopes and mounding of turf areas, which must be cut by slower methods; the extent of fairways and rough area to be irrigated, cut, fertilized and aerated; the number of bunkers; and the special plantings of trees, shrubs, and flowers.

Good maintenance doesn't always

mean large budgets. It also depends on the type of course, and the wise decisions and practices of the superintendent. As an architect, I'm saddened to see a well-designed and built course go downhill because of poor care.

Golfers respond to well-maintained courses – they will pay more and play them more and enjoy their experiences more. ■

Grant Wencel is a golf course architect based in Lincoln, Neb. Two of Wencel's newest designs, Stone Creek and Eagle Hills, opened last summer in Omaha.

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