

Designs on Golf

■ ARCHITECTURE

This year, we watched golf officially shift from a sport of multiple dimensions — course management, shot-making, length, finesse and creativity — to a one-dimensional emphasis on power. Tennis shifted to a power-centric sport several years ago. Those who still watch the lackluster pro tennis circuits know that powerful serves dominate. Points seem to end when someone just happens to hit a winner. There's no strategy and no finesse.

Except for golf's PGA Championship, this year's Majors were painful to watch. The game today is all about power and less about all-around skill. Experience, thought and creativity are out. Boring power is in.

Greg Norman recently addressed the shift: "The fact that most up-and-coming players don't have multidimensional games is not necessarily their own faults," he said. "We as course designers, developers and keepers of the game need to take responsibility for bringing the need for multidimensional play back to the sport."

But then Norman contradicted his wisdom by touting Muirfield's ultranarrow fairway setup for the 2002 Open Championship as a return toward multidimensional golf. "Like at most other championship venues, the rough surrounding each fairway made players think of the consequences of spraying the ball off the tee," he said.

There is nothing more one-dimensional or dull than designs arranged to reward the straightest possible avenue to the hole. What's next? Laying a rope down the center and adding bonus points for closest to the center line?

Architecture is no longer able to challenge players with strategic questions or provide multidimensional golf that allows a short hitter on his game to compete with a powerful player. Why? The problem starts with a fear of low scores. The marketing gurus keep telling us how the players are in better physical condition. We hear that they're more skilled than ever. While they can be all things magnificent, they're not allowed to shoot lower scores for some mysterious reason.

So to preserve dignity in the face of complacent equipment regulation, Major championship course setup takes on extreme and one-dimensional measures to keep scoring in check. Unfortunately, this setup mentality filters down

Stretching the Rubber Band 'Til ...

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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to everyday golf faster than we'd like to admit.

Old-time architect Max Behr worried about the shift from strategic, wide courses to the restrictive, tightrope setup mentality. He said: "Owing to the stress today placed upon competition in golf, golf architecture has come to be rationalized. The old road which seemed to wander with no intent or purpose has now become a well-posted concrete highway. Every inducement is offered to step upon the accelerator as long as one can keep the car of skill from slipping into the rough."

We watched players step on the accelerator this summer, where longer setups narrowed the fairways. So players simply swung harder, opting for the shortest iron into greens regardless of the height of grass below their ball. It wasn't exciting to watch. Many in the golf business are probably getting tired of hearing how their courses need new back tees or narrower fairway contours.

A reduced-flight ball would give everyone a great excuse to widen out fairways and return architecture to its role of separating good play from just OK golf. Reasonable width, combined with driving distances proportionate to the design, would bring strategic hazards back into play. Players might even use both sides of a fairway. There would be a reward for accuracy and well-timed aggressiveness.

But change won't happen anytime soon. There's too much money at stake. Some of golf's governing stiffs would have to acknowledge that they resorted to goofy course setups and expensive redesigns to mask rulemaking complacency.

So superintendents need to get out their paint guns, call their local contractors and make room in their budgets. Looks like we're going to keep stretching this rubber band until it breaks.

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