

Old-time architect Max Behr believed that golf should remain true to its origin as a “sport.” He insisted that golf not transform into a “game.” Alister MacKenzie made fun of his good friend for “quibbling” over words. However, Behr’s point may help explain why modern golf seems just a little out of whack.

Golf initially thrived on linksland because the golfer’s opponent consisted of wind, ground features and sandy pits. Like hunting or fishing, it was man vs. nature. The golfer dealt with whatever disaster came his way.

“Golf was then in that fortunate state when it never entered the mind of the golfer that he could vie with nature,” Behr wrote.

Games, on the other hand, pit at least two opponents against each other who square off over a prepared ground.

The playing surface should do its best to be neutral so the most talented opponent wins.

Extensive rules are created to police the game while keeping the battles played at a reasonable pace. The first two foul balls became strikes in baseball. Tennis provides two serving chances per point to land in the service court.

Modern golf is a game, replete with expectations for game-like equity at all times. We have a rule book longer than Tom Clancy’s latest novel. And yet those rules will never consistently eliminate “rub of the green” and other assorted natural calamities leftover from golf’s days as a sport.

To keep the game as “fair” as possible, golf courses are asked to minimize the opportunity for imperfect play by tacking on manmade elements. Regardless of the architecture, rough and rigged fairway contours control the play, theoretically rewarding the straight while punishing the wayward. Trees are planted to close loopholes.

Bunkers are built to restrict the driver. But in this shift to close openings, seal fates and protect the “integrity” of the game, something funny has happened. Not only do these add-ons fail to dish out punishment equitably, but bunkers — golf’s ultimate hazard — must be raked immaculately.

“What is the cry we hear today — this or that is unfair!” Behr wrote of what he was seeing in 1922. “A golfer comes in from a round, and some bunker or green has spoiled his score, and

Why the Sport Is Out of Whack

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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he proceeds to damn the course and the whole world. And all this because he approaches golf selfishly, with such an exaggeration of ego that he is convinced he is not only equal to coping with nature, but that he should never be humbled by her.”

As course conditions have been refined and the golfer’s equipment perfected, golf courses are asked to keep the game tough but “fair” for the combatants. But it was the governing bodies’ job to keep golf a sport by ensuring that equipment did not become as important as human skill. They failed, and now it has become a “game” instead — one that is increasingly out of whack.

With super-long drives and new course records, expect more calls to trick up our game boards to compensate for the governing bodies inability to police themselves.

Plant more trees. Pinch those landing areas. Install new tees. Just do something. Oh, and do you think we can rake the bunkers twice a day?

“I do not mean to imply that it is possible to return to those halcyon days of golf, or that it is even desirable,” Behr wrote. “But what I do wish to emphasize is that unless we keep before us a true perspective of golf, a viewing of it always from its natural side, it will eventually degenerate to a known quantity, a true game, and will become robbed of those elements of mystery and uncertainty which make every round a voyage of discovery.”

The fate of golf would seem to lie in the hands of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club and the USGA. Can we expect that they will protect and preserve the sanctity of the spirit of golf?

No. Sorry, Max.

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