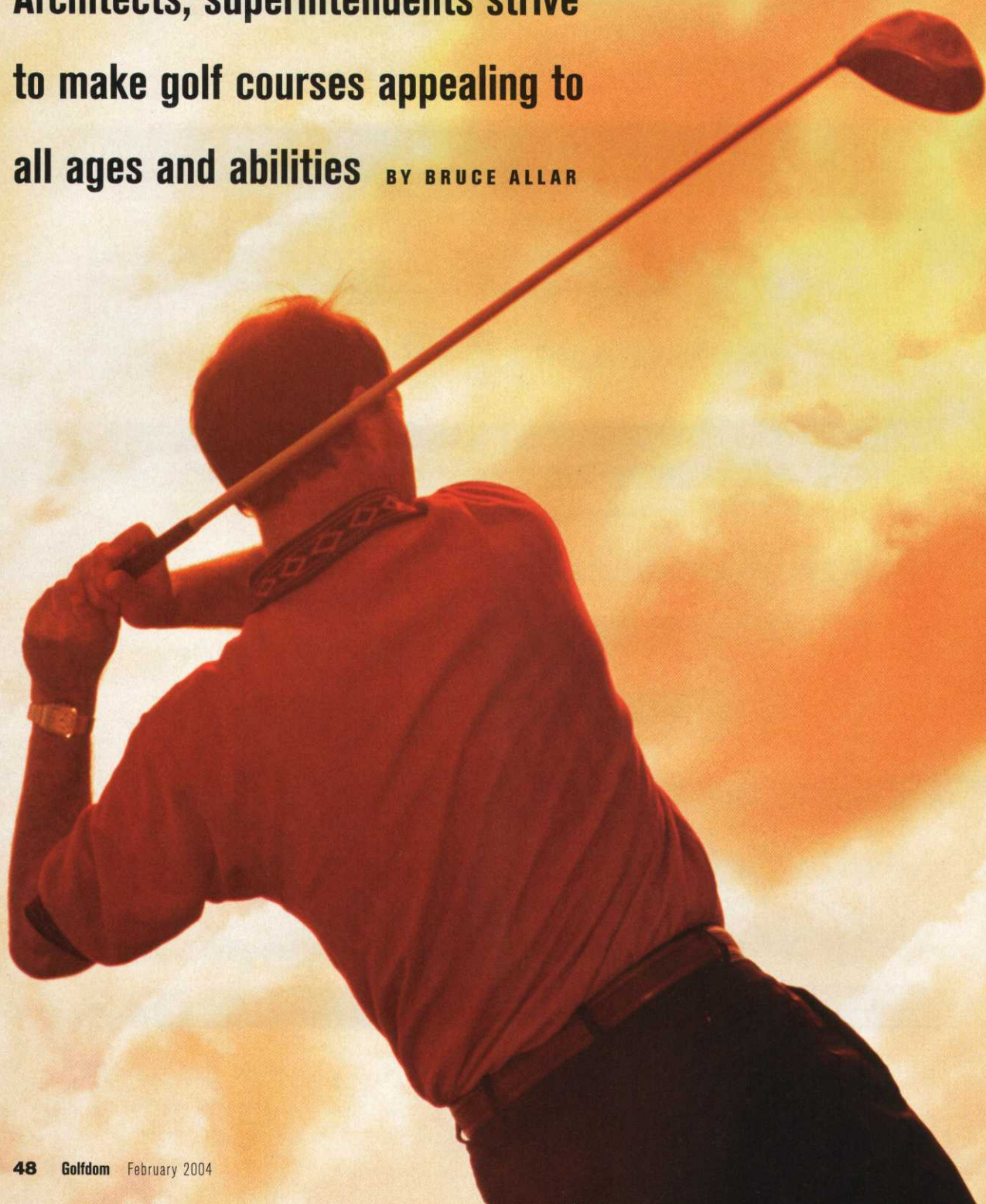


On the Level

**Architects, superintendents strive
to make golf courses appealing to
all ages and abilities** BY BRUCE ALLAR



Comparing a golf course's members to an extended family might seem like a tired analogy, but the image fits on several levels — not the least of which involves how at home golfers of all ages feel with a course's layout. You'd like to have the "teched-up" long-hitters out there enjoying the game right next to their parents and grandparents, but trying to make the game appealing to all ages and abilities, as every superintendent and golf course architect knows, can be frustrating.

"It's the standard line: We want to design that course that challenges the better golfer, yet is playable by everyone," says Spencer Holt, an architect based in Louisville, Ky. "But it's very hard to do both realistically all of the time. If you do things to make it totally playable by everybody, you'll have a very boring golf course."

If your golf club's idea of a healthy membership is one that includes all handicaps and ages, however, there are several things you can do as a superintendent to make the holes approachable and demanding at the same time. Holt, who worked for Arthur Hills until going off on his own in 1997, has designed the Cardinal Club, a championship layout in Shelbyville, Ky. (and home to the University of Louisville golf teams), as well as engineered a number of redesigns. He suggests the obvious first solution is at the tee box. Wherever possible, move tees back and add another, lengthier position to challenge big hitters while leaving the hole the same for others.

Naturally, there are limits to this strategy. Most courses were originally designed on limited space with few options for adding distance. And today's younger players, even with average skills, can boom it 300 yards with hot clubs and balls, nullifying many attempts to hem them in.

As another strategy, Holt recommends re-evaluating all bunker positions. Moving

these hazards farther down the fairway generally puts them in play for tournament rounds or low-handicappers without affecting the shorter-hitting mid- and high-handicappers. Architect Bobby Weed points out how much "angle turning points" in fairways have evolved. When Donald Ross was designing courses 70 to 100 years ago, the turn points started at 600 feet; today, these landing areas begin at 850 feet to accommodate bigger, stronger people with space-age equipment, Weed says. And it's difficult to foretell how much distances will continue to lengthen.

"The range of golfers is increasing more than ever before," says Weed, whose TPC at River Highlands course was the site of this year's Greater Hartford Open. "The ceiling is getting higher and higher, and the span between golfers continues to widen."

Weed says he's gone to more random bunkering, a throwback to an earlier era that places the hazards in unexpected spots and throws a few curves at better players without significantly altering difficulty levels for lesser golfers. Bunkers at more than 280 yards can also be set against a tighter fairway, thereby narrowing the landing area for the big hitters while average hitters get wider areas of short grass.

Holt does not favor front-side bunkers at greens because they are rarely a factor for the better players ("They usually hit their distances," he says). Instead, he designs hazards to the sides of greens where they're more in play. In the process, he's able to leave run-up areas for shorter, lower hitters, giving them opportunities at pars or birdies on longer approaches.

And Holt believes too many of today's bunkers do not penalize golfers enough. He wants to bring in more bunkers that even better players dread, as opposed to the easily escaped, pure-sand greenside beaches that often become targets for good golfers hitting approaches from difficult lies. "During a lot of tournaments you aim for the bunker," Holt says.

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Why not have some hazards so feared and so unique that they earn their own nicknames, as they do in Scotland?

"We have a mindset that — with a well-struck ball — you should be able to advance the ball. It's frustrating to change that mindset," Holt says. "It's a hazard. You should be lucky just to get out."

He's been including steeper-faced bunkers, 4- to 6-feet deep, in some of his recent redesigns.

On the other side of the coin, Holt considers how carries will affect the inconsistent golfers. He tries to keep what he considers "heroic shots" to a minimum because weaker players get discouraged if they must make too many all-or-nothing attempts. Offering a lot


of bailout options also increases playability. And he recommends keeping greens at about a 9 speed, which he says is fast enough to satisfy better players without scaring average golfers to death.

Finally, he pays attention to the vista off the tees. They should be challenging, but not severe enough to psyche out the typical player. The mental side of the game should not be intimidating, according to Holt.

Holt helped design some renovations at Wildwood Country Club in Louisville, a William Diddel design which opened in 1952. David Hawes, superintendent there, says the course now plays 6,500 from the tips, a gain of 200 yards over the previous distance. It also offers an extra — fourth — set of tees. One

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DYNAMIC GRAPHICS



A criticism is that too many of today's bunkers do not penalize golfers enough.

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Green speed should be fast enough to challenge better players — but not so fast that it intimidates high-handicap players.



DYNAMIC GRAPHICS

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of the biggest changes, not yet completed, involves moving the par-5, 17th green back 75 yards. It will still be reachable in two for long hitters, but with a longer carry and to a green surrounded by tougher penal areas.

Wildwood's crew has made other changes to challenge the best players: It interseeded the rough, adding bluegrass and fescue, for tougher, deeper lies. It also narrowed its fairways and moved the Holt-designed bunkers closer to greens to capture balls that are flying farther. With the addition of Toro Flex mowers, Hawes says he gets a more consistent cut on greens, allowing them to be more challenging at 9 feet to 9.5 feet on the Stimpmeter (bumped up to 11 for tournaments).

On the opposite side of the ledger, Wildwood is considering a switch in fairway grass to a stand-up bermuda that offers less-tight lies. This move would accommodate the club's older players with sweeping swings, making the ball easier to strike.

"It's a challenge, but you do the best you can," Hawes says

about accommodating all levels of play. "We have a broad range of ages out there."

Weed notes that architects and superintendents have faced this issue before — when shafts changed from wood to steel and during various golf ball advances, for example. But that doesn't make it any less crucial. "It's our biggest design issue: trying to design strategic golf courses that will challenge the top players and not unduly penalize the lesser players," Weed says.

(For the record, Weed thinks ball technology is the place to start in controlling distance advances that today make courses outdated before their time. "The golf ball is the most disposable item in the game," he says. "It's been changed a number of times. What's wrong with altering the specs on the ball to slow it down a bit? We don't need to keep going forward the way we have been.")

Scot Sherman, a senior associate at Weed Golf Course Design, notes that top players today are no longer tested in their long-iron games. The Weed group counteracts this, in part, by designing extra-long par 3s — and lots of them. These architects often favor building fewer par 5s and more par 3s (the River Highlands course, which Weed redesigned with 11 new holes in 1991, is a par 70 with four par 3s and only two par 5s). It's too difficult to make a par 5 at any distance a three-shot hole for today's players, according to Sher-

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ARCHITECT

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man, so why not build par 3s that are 240 yards or 250 yards from the tips to force long-iron play?

"We don't build a golf course anymore without at least five tee locations," Sherman says. This allows Weed Golf Course Design to create 250-yard par 3s for top players that can go down to 190 yards to 200 yards or less for the average male at another tee location. "We still want to challenge the average player to use every club in his bag, but that guy might only be able to hit a two iron 200 yards," he adds.

Weed-designed courses feature bunkers in areas where only good players will find them. They also have more unlevel lies in fairway landing areas where only the boomers come to rest. They also are characterized by short par 4s that can seem like a great par opportunity for less-skilled golfers but challenge the top ball strikers to make a decision — go for the green off the tee and a possible eagle (and risk huge greenside penalties) or lay up.

"The average player can poke it to the middle of the fairway and onto the green, two putt

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for par and never see the choices the top players are facing," Sherman says.

Indeed, a bad choice at the driveable, 296-yard 15th at River Highlands by Kenny Perry last year may have cost him the Greater Hartford Open. Sharing the top of the leaderboard when he came to the hole, Perry hit a driver into a nearly unplayable lie by a bunker on the right side of the green and took a costly par on a hole that others in contention were birdieing. Perry lost his momentum after that and finished four strokes behind winner Peter Jacobsen.

Weed attributes Perry's letdown on the hole to being somewhat apprehensive about his decision to hit driver, which is just the kind of mental game he wants his courses to play with the best golfers. "We love building those short par 4s of 300 yards to 330 yards," he says.

Weed adds that many courses today are being overwatered. That takes away the roll that higher-handicap golfers need to be successful without hindering the best players. He suggests changing rough lines and creating bottlenecks in landing areas where only the big hitters can go. Trees can also be placed in areas that primarily affect them.

What Weed does not advocate is more and higher rough. To his mind, it slows down play and is boring to hit from hole after hole. High rough as the main hazard on a course, despite U.S. Open setup standards, does not make for pleasant golf. Instead, Weed wants the top players to think their ways around a layout.

"The best holes have options," he says. "We don't want courses to cater to pure physical ability." ■

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A grass that offers fewer tight lies in the fairway is more accommodating for players with sweeping swings and allows them to strike balls easier.



DIGITAL STOCK