

As if the United States Golf Association's (USGA) mad hatters and Mona Lisas haven't provided us enough course setup headaches over the years, they're adding another feather in their plume of par-preserving weapons.

Or maybe not.

Either way, this time they're making it known to the green committees who will listen: Do not try this at home.

When Winged Foot Golf Club hosts its fifth U.S. Open this month, the USGA will unveil a tiered rough concept masterminded by new course setup man Mike Davis, with assistance from USGA agronomist Tim Moraghan, cooperation from Winged Foot superintendent Eric Greytok and plenty of anxious USGA executive committee members who will monitor the setup closely from Quaker Ridge Golf Club, Fenway Golf Club and _____.

The new setup wrinkle goes something like this: fairways 21 yards to 26 yards narrow, just as they were for the 2004 U.S. Amateur. Yes, that's way too slender to allow Winged Foot's design to reward drives placed on certain fairway sides. And in fast conditions, the fairways may be too narrow to keep most balls on the short grass.

After the fairways, Davis plans to have two distinct cuts of primary rough. A 6-foot-wide area off the transition cut will be cut at one and a half inches; that's followed by 24 feet of 3- to 4-inch tall stuff, followed by 6-inch hay. And then there will be the mashed-down gallery area.

Davis believes this will provide a 48-yard-wide corridor for tee shots.

However, there's one hitch. On three short holes (translation: the birdieable ones), there will be no intermediate cut. Just the spring rye harvest.

So much for the USGA squelching that silly cliché that they are obsessed with par.

Something tells me Davis and Moraghan are not behind this decision, since both are good players who know that giving the world's best a chance to recover from rough usually gets those players into more trouble. Take away the heroic recovery option, and you usually do them a favor.

Davis concedes the concept is something that

USGA: Don't Try This at Home

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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looks good "on paper," but is largely untested and one big experiment. More importantly and most refreshingly, he makes it clear this is not for everyday golf.

"The whole concept is really trying to give the guys who just miss the fairway a better opportunity than in the past," Davis says. "The fact is, if you throw aside competition at the highest level, most people I know don't like to play with a lot of rough. That said, the Open is the hardest week of the year for the best in the world, but that doesn't mean it should be emulated across the country.

"If clubs try to grow rough and narrow fairways, they're not doing anyone a favor," Davis continues. "It's a bit of a trademark for the U.S. Open, but you almost want to do a public address announcement saying, 'This is not to be emulated.'"

While the tiered rough concept is a far cry from the perspective of strategy-loving architects like A.W. Tillinghast and Alister MacKenzie, it does serve to eliminate one absurdity of growing so much grass: the severe penalty for the slight miss. And if all goes well, you'll see players make strategic mistakes by getting greedy out of the tall stuff.

Still, no matter how much the USGA says you should not try tiered roughs at home, one can already imagine the Monday-morning arm-chair superintendents asking when you plan to turn the holes into big dart boards, with prescribed penalties proportionate to misses.

So feel free to post this column on the locker room bulletin board (but don't let them black out my teeth). Remind Steve McChairman that the mastermind behind tiered rough would not recommend it for your layout.

Unless you're hosting the U.S. Open.

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