

First, the kudos. John Zimmers Jr., his crew and the legion of grounds volunteers did an amazing job presenting Oakmont Country Club in pristine condition for last month's U.S. Open.

Mike Davis, the USGA's senior director of rules and competitions, presented one of the most varied setups in the game's history. Tees and hole locations were moved around to beautiful extremes. If they could keep it on the short grass, players were asked to adapt daily to vastly different yardages and shot demands, creating a fascinating examination of their versatility.

Oakmont itself sparkled, with back nine vistas allowing players and fans to witness action on multiple holes at once. Oakmont proved that separating holes with trees is unnecessary.

But corresponding with Oakmont's tree removal should have been an appreciation for the importance of width under extreme championship conditions. Oakmont's stiflingly narrow fairways registered a measly 21 yards to 25 yards on sloping ground, proving too confining to produce skill-rewarding golf.

With all due respect, Angel Cabrera is a fine player and probably an equally wonderful humanitarian. But the Oakmont setup cried out for a surprise winner and got it.

It was not a good sign when Davis openly stated prior to play that firm, fast fairways could cause problems. Ernie Els noted in an interview that the course was fair because the fairways were "holding." NBC on-course reporter Mark Roling summed up the absurdity of Oakmont's landing area widths best when talking about the first hole during The Golf Channel's excellent post-round coverage. "Not only is it a hard hole for the players, it's a hard hole for the announcers. I stood there, called Paul Casey's tee shot, said it's straight down the middle and it ends up in the left rough."

Too many perfectly struck drives trickled into excessively thick rough that induced two withdrawals and great concern about Phil Mickelson's future. Over and over again, players were not able to display their skills because the USGA's attempt to put a "premium on accuracy" was simply not feasible under this setup.

Life in the Fairway No Fun at Oakmont

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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Davis did a fine job communicating the USGA's approach each day. And despite USGA Executive Director David Fay's insistence during Friday's borderline conditions that the course was "right where we want it," Davis boldly ordered the course softened for Saturday's play.

I know, the USGA can't win! Let the course turn into another Shinnecock Hills, and the USGA is criticized. Water it to keep it seemingly "fair," and the USGA is criticized.

Here's the crux. The need to soften the ground was brought on by a faulty fairway width setup heading in to the tournament. Inheriting fairway contours from the prior USGA regime, Davis had an unwieldy setup to work with and made the best of a lousy situation.

Now remember this is the organization that snickers at the PGA Tour for playing "lift, clean and cheat" (as Tom Meeks famously said at the 1996 U.S. Open). This is the same governing body of American golf that tells us to play the ball as it lies. Yet, the U.S. Open has become a contrived mess of man-made lies crafted to keep the course just playable enough that the dreaded "fair" word is muttered grumpily by players, but still extreme enough to ratchet up scores.

Sadly, the U.S. Open still comes down to producing a high score despite all of the USGA's claims to the contrary.

After all, if the USGA widened fairways out to appropriate widths for the architecture at hand, it wouldn't have to so radically tamper with day-to-day conditions to keep control of the course. But reasonable width that affords players the freedom to demonstrate their talent means the USGA would have to hand players control of the outcome instead of making it all about itself.

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