



Even the exalted Augusta National has been altered through the years, albeit to the condemnation of many Golden Age purists.

# Genius Misunderstood

Golden Age architects were good, but does reverence for their work undermine necessary golf course evolution?

**G**olf course architects are getting a lot of attention these days. The golfing public cares about course designers. People know the names of architects, their styles and their courses. As part of this new attention, some architects have become media superstars, appearing on television and on the lecture

circuit. All of the national golf magazines now rate courses and give lots of ink to designers. Everyone seems to have his favorite architect — old, new, living or dead.

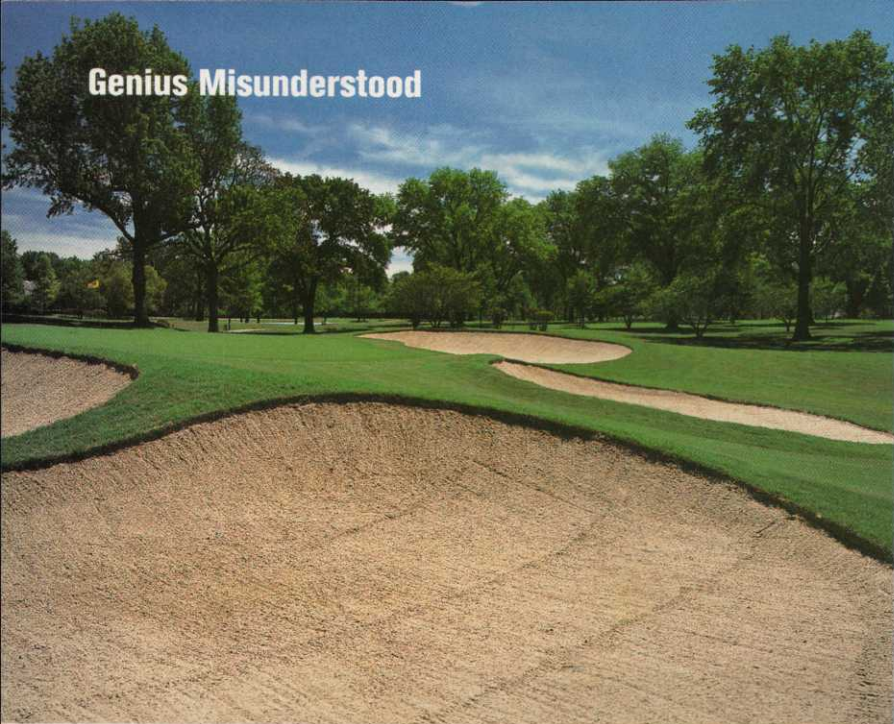
It wasn't always like this. Not too long ago architects got very little attention. Golf courses were just places where you played golf. They weren't "by" anyone, and they weren't in any particular style.

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By Mike Young

**ANALYSIS**

## Genius Misunderstood



Perry Maxwell's Southern Hills Country Club was retooled by Keith Foster in 1999, including tees, greens and bunkers.

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Consider, for example, Bernard Darwin's famous "Golf Courses of the British Isles," a book that brought attention to famous courses in England, Scotland and Ireland for the first time. Golf architecture is central to

the book. There is, however, not a single architectural attribution anywhere. In a similar vein, Pete Dye wrote recently that while in the Army during World War II, he played Pinehurst No. 2 many times, never knowing who the architect was. He says he wouldn't have known "Donald Ross from Betsy Ross" at the time. Likewise, "Shell's Wonderful World of Golf" in the 1960s was filmed at some of the greatest courses in the world. Rarely, if ever, was the architect of the course identified.

It is a sign of how much things have changed that in a recent edition of "Shell's Wonderful World of Golf," the course's architect was not only prominently mentioned, he introduced each hole on air. Entire real-estate developments are marketed on the strength of an architect's reputation. Architects now figure prominently in media coverage of major tournaments. Never before have architects received this kind of attention.

All of this architect adulation gets ratcheted up another notch when it comes to Golden Age designers. If there was a time when Dye didn't know Donald Ross-designed golf courses, those times are over. Ross, Alister MacKenzie, A.W. Tillinghast, George Thomas, C.B. MacDonald, Seth Raynor, William Flynn and the other members of the Golden Age pantheon are now household names, and they are treated like deities. That's not an altogether bad thing. They were an extraordinarily talented group, and the recognition of their talent was long overdue. Their recent fame has helped to save many of their courses from mutilation or worse.

But sometimes I wonder if all of this adulation hasn't gone too far. As good as the Golden Age architects were, the reverence for them can sometimes be over the top. Their courses are sometimes treated like sacred texts. Every swale, tree and ridge (or lack of the same) is taken as a mark of the master and invested with deep architectural significance.

All of this might be disregarded as harmless hero worship if it weren't for the fact that courses from the Golden Age evolve and change like any other courses. Questions of restoration or alterations inevitably come up,

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and dealing with these issues on Golden Age courses can get crazy, especially if you are dealing with people who believe that the designer of their course was a genius (which is sometimes true) and that every feature on their course is a sign of the designer's genius (which is almost never true).

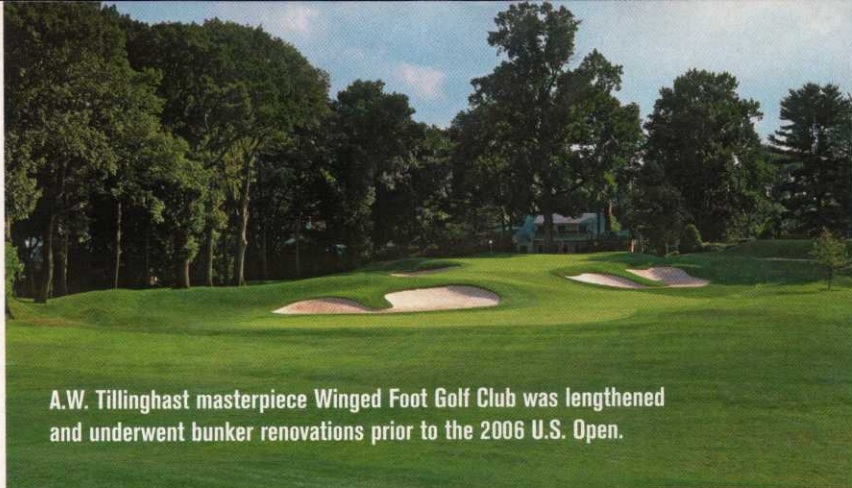
The sanctification of courses by these famous architects can get in the way of thoughtful restorations. I've had people tell me that an architect carefully placed a tree behind a green for depth perception. The tree would have been no more than a 2-foot sapling when the course was built in the 1920s. Swales

**It's impossible to know all the details about what an architect wanted 75 years after a course opened.**

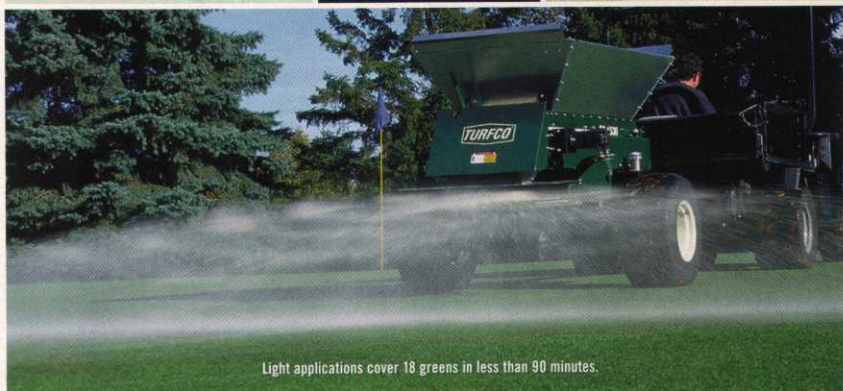
in fairways, dug for drainage, are seen as marks of unsurpassed artistry. Odd bunker locations are taken to have deep aesthetic significance. I've come to think that these architects placed bunkers in certain locations simply to provide a source of fill dirt for nearby green pads.

It's not possible to know all of the details of what an architect wanted for a course 75 years after it opened. Even if you are fortunate enough to have detailed drawings, it's still not possible. What still exists on the course can be misleading as well. The fact that an architectural feature survived 75 years does not necessarily mean it was intended or desirable. It's very hard to know what details Ross would have wanted on the 300 or so courses he de-

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A.W. Tillinghast masterpiece Winged Foot Golf Club was lengthened and underwent bunker renovations prior to the 2006 U.S. Open.



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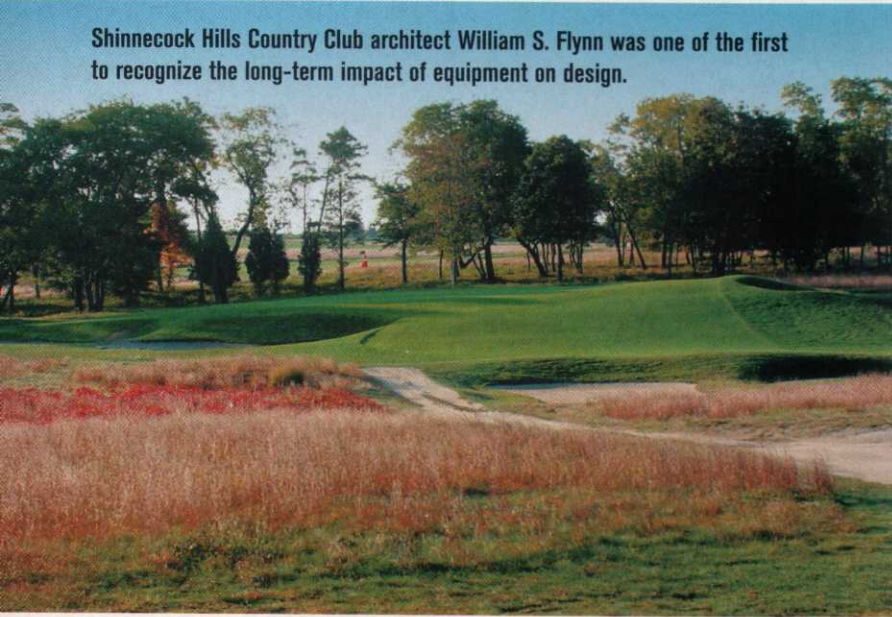
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signed but never saw. It's entirely possible that he didn't know.

All designers from all eras left a great deal

**Shinnecock Hills Country Club architect William S. Flynn was one of the first to recognize the long-term impact of equipment on design.**



to the interpretation of construction crews, owners and club members. Even when architects oversaw construction, features were constantly being changed in the field. Ross tinkered with Pinehurst No. 2 his entire life. McDonald was still changing National Golf Links 25 years after it opened. MacKenzie was rethinking features at Pasatiempo until the end. Augusta National was the only clay-based course designed by MacKenzie. Clay-based courses present unique drainage problems, and I suspect that MacKenzie would have made many changes to the course after opening day if he had lived. And these famous architects fully expected this process would continue long after they were gone.

When asked to restore or repair an older course, the first, middle and last question is, "What is it you are restoring?" The course details as originally intended? As originally built? As it looked at some interim date? And what if the current membership has its own ideas about what the course used to be? These

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are all legitimate issues that should be debated and resolved in any restoration project. But I think the masters of the Golden Age would have scoffed at the idea of literal restorations of their original designs.

Cults, whether about Mao Tse Tung, The Grateful Dead or Donald Ross, always get in the way of clear thinking. An overdose of reverence for practitioners during the Golden Age can get in the way of thoughtful restorations.

The best of the Golden Age were unmatched geniuses at using existing landforms to build strategy and interesting shot options. I stand in awe of what they were able to do. My point, to butcher an old axiom, is that their genius does not reside in every detail. It can be counter-productive to treat Golden Age courses with too much deference. A balance has to be struck between respect for their genius and the needs of the modern player, new turf types and the current regulatory environment, to name a few.



Finding that balance is the hardest part of a good restoration. But when done well, it is also the most satisfying part. ■

*Mike Young is a golf course architect and partner with Young/Rymer Design in Athens, Ga.*

**Alister MacKenzie's bunkering at Cypress Point makes it difficult to discern where nature ends and where artistry begins.**

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