

My skeptical eyes and I recently toured a new “minimalist” design that was constructed artfully from tee to fringe. It seemed no detail was left behind. Cart paths were well-hidden, and each bunker was painstakingly conceived to look great and provide meaning to the holes.

And then there were the greens.

Now, I love an undulating putting surface as much as the next sadomasochist. But after about the fifth-consecutive roly-poly mess of contours, I began to wonder if there was ever going to be a change of pace.

Maybe a smaller green with one simple ridge? Or one with a bump, or perhaps a swale? Nope.

It turned out there were 18 of these overcooked greens on an otherwise beautifully conceived design. No variety, no letups, no long, slender flattish greens to offset the previous green's wild, wacky contours.

Just one ode to the St. Andrews Ladies' Putting Green after another.

The minimalist architect will respond that his greens are born out of the land, and a formulaic approach to his 18-hole vision would contradict the entire point of calling oneself a friend of nature. Unfortunately, this course was entirely manufactured, so that excuse was out.

And while that idea of land-based design might be true in some cases, the original minimalists — those MacKenzie, Tillinghast, Ross, Thomas and Flynn dudes — could respect nature while still building meaningful greens that offered a variety of looks, shot requirements and styles within an 18-hole design. And they could do that in a way the average observer might not notice that attention was paid to providing a distinct variety of green styles.

In other words, they figured out how each green fit their 18-hole vision, but you'd never know the architect had a checklist of green styles in mind.

The greatest greens in golf typically revolve around one or two key features that register in golfers' heads, allowing them to recall those elements as they stand in the fairway and

A Potpourri of Putting Greens

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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contemplate their options during repeat rounds. That's not a wholesale endorsement for the sadly overdone two-tier green, though I'm starting to warm to the idea of those pedantic double-level greens after seeing this contour smorgasbord set of greens.

Sometimes a big undulating mess of contours can be fun, assuming the putting surface is large enough to leave pinnable quadrants. But if you go back to the great greens in golf, they are generally midsize (about 5,000 square-feet) with one key feature around which all hole locations revolve.

Maybe it's a bump in the center that you know you can't miss right when the hole is cut left. Or when the pin is set to the right, you have to shape a tee shot to be on a certain side of the hole to best attack that location.

The ideal collection of 18 greens features several of these memorable surfaces to make the course a strategic joy. But the ideal assortment also throws in a few smaller, flattish greens, along with some bigger, more actively contoured fellas.

And no truly interesting design can hold its head in elite company without a green or two sloping away from the fairway, as long as it provides a well-conceived approach for the run-up shot. Variety is a good thing in green design. And sometimes you have to tell nature that the needs of golf supercede what the ground has left behind.

It must be remembered that golf is first and foremost an interesting contest between man and course. And to be interesting, a variety of greens will always charm the player into wanting to experience the design over and over again.

Contributing Editor and Author Geoff Shackelford can be reached at geoffshac@aol.com. Visit his Web site at geoffshackelford.com.