Let's Not Rewrite the Classics Yet

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

It looks like 2008 will be the year of restoration bashing.

After all, way too many good restorations have taken place. Worse, several architects have carved out a rewarding niche that other plan scribblers wish they had gotten in on now that the new course business is slowing down.

Still, others are irked by the possibility that their office-drawn catch basins, stadium mounding and inconveniently routed designs are not clicking with golfers who still relish the old-style lay-of-the-land sensibility.

If you can't design like 'em, bash 'em.

The trend has been quietly building with odd little commentaries popping up like thunderheads on the horizon. The skeptics giggle at the notion that a Donald Ross course is worth restoring meticulously while howling at all this attention given to the dead guys who assuredly would do things the way the moderns do.

Consider what "Golf World's" Ron Whitten recently wrote: "Restoration is the narrow-minded substitute for imagination. It doesn't honor Ross, it insults him. It presumes the man never grew, never evolved as an architect in his 50-year career."

Perhaps Whitten feels guilty for having glorified the old guys through his magnificent research and impressive book, "The Architects of Golf." Yet, Whitten should be proud for bringing pleasure to hundreds of thousands of golfers who have enjoyed rounds over restored classics that were salvaged in no small part due to his and co-author Geoffrey Cornish's book.

Perhaps Whitten has read one too many press releases from architects proclaiming that they meticulously researched and put themselves in Seth Raynor's shoes when Whitten knows better. However, when was the last time you heard of an older, neglected course regretting the decision to restore? If anything, it's just the opposite.

Layouts where members elected to modernize would make a much longer list of regrettable mistakes, with Augusta National topping most people's ranking of "courses that wish they could go back."

Yes, there will always be internal debates over restoring certain bunkers or whether adjustments should be made to deal with changes in the game.

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But most of the sensitive restorers are not the stodgy diehards that progressives make them out to be. These uniquely talented architects are not threatening to quit when clubs fail to retain an old toilet seat cover once graced by William Flynn's tush. They are typically making the best of a tricky situation involving a rapidly changing game where strategic design has not been taken to another level. The classic courses do more than represent a point in time. They provide great joy and just enough challenge to many golfers.

Sure, several of the old architects predicted their courses would be surpassed by more intricately designed strategic and aesthetic master works, leaving those 1920 designs feeling primitive. Yet today, no jury in the world would convict the "old masters" of design malfeasance, particularly considering how few worthy-of-study courses have been crafted since the Golden Age.

Restoration bashers might be right in suggesting the old guys would have grown as artists and taken their work to another level. But would you rather trust a restorer to fine-tune a course by strict restoration guidelines, or to put himself in A.W. Tillinghast's shoes in hopes of channeling Tilly's design genius?

Restorers deserve credit for setting their egos aside to put up the good fight for their predecessors. Especially since sympathetic restoration work is not exactly lucrative — nor very much fun when answering to an angry mob of unsympathetic club members.

Geoff Shackelford blogs daily on the state of the game at www.geoffshackelford.com.