

The square tee replaced the free-form tee that replaced the runway tee that replaced the tiny low profile. Now the square tee is on its way out.

Sorry. I know. Just when you thought you were up on the latest fad in teeing grounds — squaring off those edges or rebuilding them entirely — it seems cutting-edge architects and course setup specialists are onto something fresh.

I'm not sad to report that the rectangular "box" tee, popularized of late as "traditional" in appearance, is headed to the trash heap. In hindsight, it never really made sense.

Box tees were annoying to mow. But even worse, on lovely and nature-inspired designs they stood out like Michael Jackson at a cotillion dance. In the last few years, the box look was installed on classic courses hosting championships. Massive in size and utterly devoid of character, they were often propped up artificially and big enough to raise a net and host a Nadal-Federer match.

Even the master minimalists Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore loved their square tees. But they started realizing that something wasn't quite right about linear objects gracing designs where every hint of a straight line was softened to look natural.

What will be replacing the square tee?

Why, the ultra-retro, low-profile, supernatural tee — along with a few small, simply shaped complementary tees for the extreme yardages.

Understand that we're not going back to the Old Course circa 1859, where you tee off next to the hole on whatever slab of turf you can find. What we have seen, however, are some masterful tee complexes constructed in recent years that still provide the level lie golfers expect. But rather than look like a propped up coffin, they present a simple, graceful walk to the tee followed by a series of gently cascading pads that meld into an existing land form.

Without question the most artistic set of tees worthy of study can be found at Ballyneal, a private club course near the Colorado-Nebraska border designed by Tom Doak and his

Teeing Off on the Box Tee

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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Renaissance Golf Design team. Most of the tees are subtly connected to the previous hole by simple strips of turf, helping to make for a good walk accentuated. The tee complexes are gently carved into the faces of dunes, with layers and pockets that meld beautifully, offering the superintendent myriad setup possibilities. And everything is shaped gracefully enough that a triplex mower can handle the task if necessary.

While fans of course design artistry will celebrate these meandering regions of maintained turf as a more natural approach to design, they will ultimately arrive at more courses thanks to the course setup versatility they deliver.

In the wake of the United States Golf Association's stunning success at Torrey Pines, where the simple shifting of tees created excitement and strategic controversy (Phil Mickelson leaving his driver at home), the folks handling course setup are going to start varying tees and looks as much as possible because it not only spreads out wear and tear, but also delivers more challenging and interesting golf.

As part of this strategy renaissance, we will also see the return of smaller, oddly shaped tees for those wacky back plates used by the flatbellies or those wild forward spots like we saw at Torrey Pines' 14th hole this year. I sat next to that low-to-the-ground 267-yard tee for most of the U.S. Open's final round. The intimacy of it added to the excitement as fans and playing partners were able to listen in on strategic decision making.

Ultimately, it's the strategic possibilities that will drive courses to blow up their tennis court squares and reconstruct them into meandering, flowing teeing grounds that respect the fundamental laws of nature.

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