

Designs on Golf

■ ARCHITECTURE

This month's U.S. Open at Torrey Pines should mark the beginning of a precedent-setting era in our national championship's history. We might just be in store for a sound, interesting examination of skill with a hip, new twist.

Though the U.S. Open often transmogrifies into an absurd display of defensiveness where the world's best players plod along and rarely see an opening to play aggressively, some have argued that it doesn't have to be that way.

Sure, difficulty is the defining characteristic of the U.S. Open, but the cost to maintain those traditions in the face of major equipment changes has been too great for not only the championship, but for every golf course superintendent required to reproduce such silliness for the club championship.

Now that Mike Davis has taken over as the U.S. Open's setup man, the United States Golf Association once again has a good player in charge. Davis is a single-digit handicapper, and like the last good player who set up Open courses — current Champions Tour player David Eger — he has no desire to humiliate the best players in the world.

That does not mean Davis is going to allow the U.S. Open to deviate from its place as the most mentally taxing event in golf. He vows to maintain a "test" with a fun new twist that will be talked about at Torrey Pines. Davis wants to cleverly pose questions to players via course setup tactics.

What Davis and the USGA championship committee have in mind is both revolutionary and yet totally unoriginal. The question is: Will players and fans get it or see it as USGA trickery?

The blue coats want to mix up tee locations and strategy, especially for weekend play. They want to vary par-3 yardages, move tees around and, in general, make players think on their feet. They are going to do less handholding in the way of announcing which days holes will play a certain way.

This U.S. Open Will Be Interesting

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



THE USGA SETUP

WILL FORCE

PLAYERS TO THINK

WHILE ON THE TEES

Players will actually step on a tee and have to plan their attack under pressure instead of deciding the night before.

Anyone who has played a links knows that the toughest golf in the world is facing the same hole over four days in vastly different conditions. But most American golf courses are too soft, too windless or too inflexible to pose much in the way of day-to-day variety. So at a place like Torrey Pines, the only way to have players hitting a 3 iron one day to a simple hole location and an 8 iron the next day to a tucked pin is to vary the setup.

Any good player will tell you this kind of day-to-day variety is far more testing than merely trying to hit the ball to a narrow fairway or a firm green. Give the player a road map to the hole and he can play worry-free. That's boring to watch and boring to play.

But throw him a curveball that he wasn't expecting, and suddenly we learn who is the supreme player — the one who can think on his feet.

This approach hopefully will trickle down to everyday golf. Nudge your best players to notice how the USGA made the flatbellies earn their pay by asking the boys to think a little bit more. Point out that it wasn't just the super-high rough or excessive length that provided a test.

If they say it's trickery — as players reared on thought-free golf are prone to do — remind them that the players had three practice rounds to scout out all of the possibilities.

Is that so difficult?

Geoff Shackelford can be reached at geoffshac@aol.com