

The Soul of the Game

Greetings from the place that got us into this business. I wrote this column in St. Andrews, Scotland, while attending The Open last month. St. Andrews is not only the home of golf, it's the soul of the game. I know, you're probably thinking this is another laudatory column about the merits of the Old Course, served up with a big dollop of honey.

But if you were with me when I wrote this, you'd understand. The places ooze golf — the kind of golf of which we need more. As noted golf scribe George Peper said of St. Andrews, "This is what golf is, not what it isn't."

More than ever, the sport needs reminders of what St. Andrews is about, and how far we've drifted from its spirit.

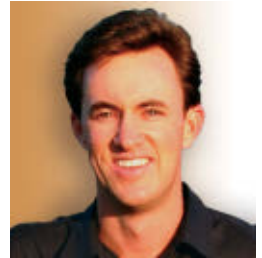
A few more observations from St. Andrews and the United Kingdom:

■ The Old Course is as much a town park as it is a golf course. When there's no golf happening, people are free to walk their dogs or simply stroll the sacred soil. In fact, members commonly take their dogs for on-course walks in the early morning or late afternoon at other clubs throughout the area, and nobody thinks otherwise.

American courses, on the other hand, have become overprotective of their turfgrass to the point that any visitor seems destined to be shot on site. This attitude of anyone but a paying golfer as an intruder certainly can't help the game's image. Surely, we all understand liability issues and putting property at risk, but it's a shame we treat such visitors as criminals. Perhaps it's a reason why so many Americans are turned off by golf.

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BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



■ Speaking of our four-legged friends, they're welcome at most courses here. Folks are even encouraged to give their happy hounds a wee nip now and then, thanks to modified drinking fountains. It's just another example of the type of informality that rarely causes problems, and, more vitally, is essential to the beautiful convergence of community and sport here in Scotland.

■ It's not embarrassing to be a golfer or associated with the game here. Yes, no apologies are necessary and, quite often, folks are excited to hear about your desire to be in Scotland to see the home of golf. See above for the reasons why.

■ The contour doesn't have enough meaning in America. I'm not thinking about those nice, little linky bumps and "hillocks" you see on television, nor am I thinking of the littering of containment mounding that American architects love.

No, these are large, often strange whale burial grounds you see at St. Andrews and other links in the middle of play. They are natural — remaining from the days when the sea shaped the ground, yet they play a vital role in how a hole plays. And, yes, they create blind shots, quite often for a poorly placed drive.

But almost always, the player is given another option that opens up a view of the putting surface. When there's a way, there's no room for complaining.

■ Slow play and lack of interest from younger golfers has become an issue here. Yes, even as wonderful and affordable as the game is in Scotland, the country is still struggling to attract and retain enough new golfers here, just as it is in the states.

There's little question the time and cost it takes to play are the primary issues. Both are a product of selling the game out to the manufacturers' need to constantly sell us new clubs, most definitely not from a lack of facilities or inappropriate conditioning.

Unfortunately, the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews also believes the game would suffer if the ball were to be rolled back allowing for shorter courses to be relevant and logjams from more reachable par 5s and par 4s to be resolved.

So at least we have one thing in common with Scottish golf. No one wants to stick up for the best interests of the sport.

You can reach Shack, Golfdom's contributing editor, at geoffshac@me.com. See his web page at www.geoffshackelford.com.