



## A Player's Perspective

# TREES ON THE GOLF COURSE

By Dr. David Cookson

Opinions concerning golf course trees are highly subjective. Traditionalists, who have immersed themselves in the origins of the game and have often returned several times to the Scottish links courses where golf got its start, would prefer a course without any trees at all, and vociferously expound this point of view. On the other hand, insular midwestern types, such as most of us, used to the quietude and subtle grandeur of forested areas, feel a golf course is naked and stark without an adequate number of trees to beautify the holes and outline the challenge awaiting an off line shot. Still, although most who read this essay will be in agreement as to the desirability of trees on the golf course, there are some points to be made concerning their placement and maintenance.

The greatest error in tree placement is planting the wrong kind of tree in the wrong place on the course. In Wisconsin, unless the course is carved out of a pine forest, evergreens should never be placed where they may easily come into play. They are fine for framing a green, or adding distinction to the area near tees, but they should be placed far enough away so as to be highly unlikely spots for a golf ball to finally come to rest. Trees which come into play should be deciduous, where the lower branches may easily be trimmed so that the player can both get under the tree to advance the ball and also play forward under the branches if he is unfortunate enough to be directly behind it. It is patently unfair for a nearly perfectly hit drive to bound only a few feet off a fairway into an unplayable position in or under an evergreen tree adjacent to the landing area, yet many courses (including my own) have just such conditions. The tendency of the non golfer or the arboreal infatuate, is to consider inviolate the natural shape of the evergreen, often a spruce, totally ignoring the question as to whether this shape will permit a golf shot to be played from its vicinity. This

is wrong; a tree should not be so situated as to exclude relief from it other than by taking a penalty — unless it stands far away from normal play. Consequently, these trees should be trimmed of their bottom limbs, as deciduous trees are, perhaps not as high but enough so that the ball can be advanced if underneath and the otherwise impenetrable evergreen can be played through under the lower limbs.

The other big problem with trees is the reluctance to remove one. Many of us have such innate respect for a healthy tree that we consider it sacrilege to cut it down whatever the reason favoring its removal. On the golf course this most likely occurs when trees initially planted far apart, grow tall and spread into each other; or trees placed as saplings too close to greens, mature and cause damage to the green by shading or rooting, and also interfere with play by their subsequent proximity to the green surface. Again, I have seen plans to markedly improve the design of a golf hole, increasing playability and safety, thwarted because implementation would have caused the removal of a healthy large oak. This too is wrong; new trees can be planted to replace the old, and they grow surprisingly fast when one retrospectively evaluates the decision to remove the healthy tree, a few years later. On the other hand, the case can well be made for keeping a difficult to replace strategic tree standing in position until its last sign of life, to try to maintain the shot making character of a specific hole.

My plea then is to consider carefully whether the planting of a tree is appropriate in that specific location for that specific species, and if subsequently it is obvious that a mistake has been made, rectify the error by either adequate trimming or removal of the tree. The primary concern should be whether trees enhance the playability of the golf holes, not how beautiful they may be as individual specimens.

*David Cookson*