Design Review: 1985-2005

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Introduction

Jack MacKenzie, CGCS, asked me to develop an article on changes in golf course design from a more recent historical perspective. I chose the twenty-year period from 1985 to 2005 for three reasons. First, this period represents one of the greatest periods of golf growth and, more recently, one of the most severe declines. Second, this period represents one of the most significant periods in terms of sophistication and advancement in golf turf grasses, maintenance equipment technology and golf club/ball technology. And thirdly, as a design company, we are celebrating our 20th year of professional practice in golf course architecture.

This is the first segment in a three part series. Part I responds to basic design changes we have seen, Part II will look at maintenance equipment and practices that have changed in the twenty-year period and their impact on design, and Part III, will focus on golf participation, management philosophies and legal issues.

MAJOR DESIGN INFLUENCES

Oh where, oh where, has the dogleg gone…

Since 1985 we have moved this theoretical point in golf design three times. We started at 250 yards (750 feet), then 266.67 yards (800 feet) and now we use 300 yards (900 feet). Much of the time the dogleg point is only a dimensional location used in conjunction with the center of the green and one of the tees for construction purposes, but it can also serve as a general reference for the position of hazards such as bunkers or water, or for positioning other design features such as tree groupings. In reality, hazard position is based on many factors including prevailing winds, terrain, visibility, function and effect.

Related to the distancing of the dogleg point to reflect longer drives is the much more important aspect of design corridor width. We are all aware that golf equipment technology has enabled us to hit the ball farther. As designers, we have learned these advancements have also enabled the golfer to hit the ball higher, farther right and farther left. In the past, two adjacent holes may have fit nicely into a 450-foot to 500-foot corridor width. The distance has now widened to 600 feet or greater. In a single fairway configuration (double loaded in real estate jargon), today's textbook, published corridor widths have grown to 370 feet or greater, up from widths of 250 feet to 300 feet. Sometimes this is tough sell to advocate safety and future liability concerns to course owners and developers interested in lot sales or more holes per acre.

Also related to the distancing dogleg point is the reference to course length. We complete numerous master plans for existing courses every year. In every recent project, one of the common goals has been to seek and add safe length to keep up with the perceived loss of challenge or marketability. Championship length considerations have grown from 6,700 or 6,800 yards to 7,000 or 7,200 yards. This impacts even regular tee playing lengths that are now averaging 6,500 to 6,700 yards up from 6,200 to 6,400 yards.

ISOLATIONISM

Shunning the Parkland

In the past 10 years there has been a strong push by some golf developers and certain clients to advocate the concept of isolating by design one hole from another, the thought being to control the vision of what the golfer sees on the tee to just that hole and not any other. This is accomplished not only by distancing the position of one hole from another but typically also by mounding and tree planting. We have employed the concept on many new courses, most recently at the Meadows at Mystic Lake, Prior Lake, Minn, White Eagle, North Hudson, Wis., and at the Legends, also in Prior Lake, Minn. Willingers, in Northfield, was an early example. Willingers opened in 1992.

This is in stark contrast to the historical inland course, termed parkland course, which is, in turn, contrasted to their seaside counterparts we know as the links-land course. Twin Cities metro courses we have designed of the parkland type include Cedar Creek, Albertville, Crystal Lake, Lakeville, Inverwood, Inver Grove Heights, Minn., Highland Park National, St. Paul, Glen Lake, Minnetonka and the Ponds at Battle Creek in Maplewood.

I personally believe the concept of presenting each hole individually pushes the designer to design each hole individually rather than reflecting on the design of the golf course as 18 holes. I believe the influence of what was just played or yet to be played is lost when the design of the course as a whole yields to the design of 18 individual, independent holes.

THE LOST COURSE

Interestingly many of our recent master plan projects address the issue of removing trees, not to improve turf quality near greens or tees, but to return lost shot values to the course. Prior to 1985, on a national level, there was little interest taken by designers to advocate tree removal.

Starting in the early to mid 1990s many of the older established clubs began the process of course restoration. By

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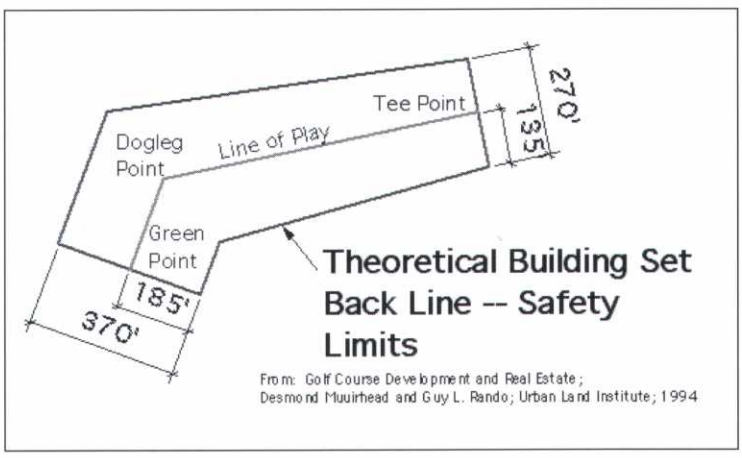

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examining old photographs they realized how much their course had "closed in" and tightened due to the planting and maturing of trees. They realized, as well, that many of well intentioned greens and grounds committee chairpersons planted trees in their position of liking. The resulting impact was a beautiful, landscaped golf course, but one that had lost much of the character and shot-making attributes of the original design.

National Golf Club was essentially restored to its tree cover condition prior to World War II. At Oakmont Country Club, approximately 2,000 trees were removed and I'm not sure they are done yet.

In many instances, we have observed sand bunkers and trees occupying essentially the same space and serving the same purpose. We often see trees that were planted between the fairway line and fairway bunkers as well. In our design practice, we advocate trees or bunkers, just not both.

But because of courses understanding that trees greatly influence play or courses beyond agronomic reasons, we have found a more sympathetic audience since 2000 for removing trees to improve the playablity of the course design. In the recent renovation of Highland Park for the City of St. Paul, approximately 430 trees were removed. The number seems high, however, many of the trees needed to be removed because of disease, old age and poor branching habits. As you walk the course today, even the very familiar player rarely remarks that any trees are missing.

Many trees were removed in the restoration of National Golf Club, Long Island, New York.

At the Village Links, in Glen Ellyn, Ill., willow trees became so large that they completely hid water hazards from view. Once gone, the complete beauty returned to the holes my father David Gill, had originally designed. In this regard, I would advocate that any master plan should include a review of the course with respect to lost shots, lost shot values or lost views.