

An Architect's View of Minnesota's Great Golf Course Heritage

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The Roaring '20s

The roaring '20s was an exceptional era for American golf course development. Dubbed the "golden age" of golf course architecture, the country saw an unprecedented number of courses developed. During this time many of America's greatest courses were built by architects whose ideas and philosophies have stood the test of time. We're still playing championship golf on some of these courses - Augusta National, Bethpage Black and Pinehurst Number 2 to name a few.

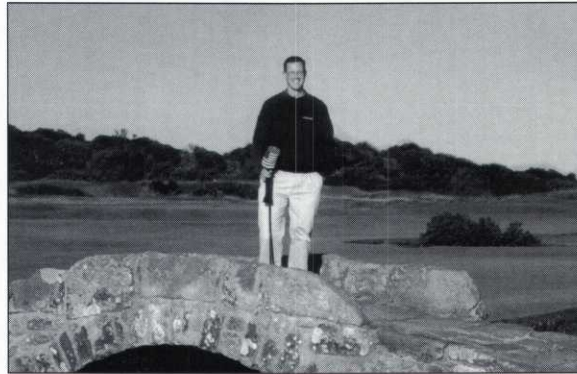
Minnesota is lucky to have a number of courses designed by the same architects responsible for America's masterpieces.

We have courses designed by Donald Ross - Minikahda, Northland, White Bear Yacht Club, Interlachen, Woodhill. Rochester Country Club and Golden Valley CC were designed by A.W. Tillinghast. Seth Raynor, who was mentored by the great C.B. MacDonald, designed Midland Hills, Somerset, and Minnesota Valley (with Ralph Barton). And we are very fortunate to have a Stanley Thompson designed course at North Oaks Golf Club.

Each architect had his own style he brought to Minnesota. Donald Ross, the most prolific designer, has a reputation for consistency. Ross had a gift for routing golf holes over the terrain. He could look at a contour plan, find the ideal areas for tees and greens, and then connect the dots into 18 holes of coherent golf. Ross was as good as any architect at using angles of approach to create subtle strategic choices. Many of his best holes look plain if not easy, but leave you wondering how you just made double bogey.

Tillinghast's style is the most difficult to define. His curious mind and his creativity never settled on a single look. At Bethpage Black in New York he designed a course that rivaled nearby Pine Valley with forced carries and massive bunkers. In California where George Thomas and Alister MacKenzie dominated the scene,

he designed bunkers with intricate capes and bays. In Minnesota, Tillinghast seemed to use a style more reminiscent of MacDonald and Raynor - flat bottom bunkers with steep turf faces. Despite the



Jeff McDowell at the Old Course

different bunker styles, Tillinghast holes always make you think. He understood the principles of strategic design, and was a master at creating dramatic shots on average terrain.

Seth Raynor's style is the easiest to identify, since he never changed. He designed geometric features with sharp edges and steep slopes. His courses looked built. This shouldn't come as a surprise since Raynor was an engineer by trade, and wasn't a golfer. He learned to design golf courses while working for C.B. MacDonald on the National Golf Links in New York. On this project, MacDonald taught Raynor many "classic" design features found on Scotland's best courses. When Raynor designed courses, he worked these designs into the land as best he could. When he couldn't find the topography he needed, he built the features. An often duplicated design was the Redan - a par three with a green that slopes away from the golfer. This hole comes from the 15th hole at North Berwick Golf Club in Scotland. Somerset's fourth hole is the best example of a Redan I've seen in Minnesota.

Including Stanley Thompson with the above architects is a bit of a stretch, since he designed North Oaks in 1951. But he had such a great influence on the art of golf course architecture, I think he's worth

including. He had a style that combined the best of strategic design and glitz. He forced golfers to take risks if they wanted to score well. He was one of the first architects to incorporate the principles of art into golf course architecture. This translated into big, intricate bunkers with large capes and bays.

The Future of our Classics

These courses should be treated with the same respect given to buildings designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. They are examples of what the most creative minds in golf have produced in our backyard. The membership of these clubs should be mindful that they are the keepers of Minnesota's great golfing treasures.

But they have a difficult task. Technology is taking the teeth out of these older courses. They play considerably shorter and easier than the original design. Remodeling to keep up with technology while retaining the classic elements is a difficult balance.

Green committees looking into remodeling should work hard to understand the styles of their architects. There are books available on nearly every prolific architect that give insights into their tendencies.

The best way to understand specifics about each course is to find and study old photos. A little known resource for old aerial photos is the Borchert Map Library at the University of Minnesota. They have photos that date back to the early 1900s.

If a course is lucky, members may be able to find the original drawings. These drawings should be studied carefully to understand the design intention and the intended effect.

Green Committees may also find helpful information from the Donald Ross Society, the Tillinghast Society, or the Seth Raynor Society.

Finally, work with an architect that understands the importance of these courses, and who is willing to do the research necessary to preserve the original architect's style.