INSIGHT:

One Architect's Perspective

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Since 1977 and for the majority of my working life, I've been in golf course architecture and design. After graduate school where I received my Masters in Landscape Architecture, I joined my father, David Gill in practice in St. Charles, Illinois, a western suburb of Chicago. In Minnesota, my Dad is best known for his design work at Bunker Hills in Coon Rapids and Dwan in Bloomington. In 1983, I decided I could work with my Dad, but not for him and I started my own design career working in Texas. As for our business here in River Falls, Wisconsin, we opened in 1987. To date we have completed more than 200 golf course projects in thirty-three states. I am a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, the only professional organization in the United States exclusively for golf course architects.

Today there is a push to restore golf courses back to their original design, sometimes called sympathetic restoration. How does one select an architect for the job?

I have always felt the selection of the golf course architect should be based on the architect's past accomplishments, expressed interest and commitment to the client's project and a strong client / architect compatibility that is sensed from the very first meeting. The client must feel strongly that they have selected the bestt architect and not necessarily the best firm. Golf design is a personal business. The architect's name is attached to each project.

In regards to restoration work, the selected architect must have a strong familiarity with the original architect's work ,either by past study of the architect's work, playing experience on original designs by that architect, or past renovation or restoration work of that architect. The restoration architect must also recognize modifications or revisions to the original design. I like to think of this as "golf course archeology". Philosophically speaking, the restoration architect should be sensitive to the evolution of the golf course through play. I think many of the "dead" architects would believe their courses should be allowed to evolve. I often think of the pot bunker at Pine Valley on the par 3, 10th hole. I have to believe that bunker has become what it is because of the play it has received over the 90 years the course has been in existence.

Why should an architect be used when restoring a golf course?

> ***"Many in the ASGCA, including myself, believe the ball has the greater potential to impact the game of the future."***

I think we all have a bias here. Who else should a club use? Perhaps the club could go directly to a contractor or a superintendent, but the person with all the skills of communicating with the club, preparing the plans and specifications and observing the work in the interests of the club, would be the golf architect.

Technology is impacting the game of golf and many courses do not pose a challenge to the bigger hitters. With limited land, what can be done to thwart their attempts at par without disrupting the integrity of the architect's intent?

The course needs to logically evaluate its options. In many cases the problem is perceived, but not actually realized. Our experience often shows that while the golfer may be hitting the ball father, they are not necessarily scoring any better. Architecturally, basic instincts suggest adding length where possible and tightening landing areas either through hazard placement, rough condition or placement, or by adding trees (which I think of as hazard). Second level instincts may include shrinking the greens, adding more contour to the greens, making sand or turf bunkers deeper, blocking selective shots either off the tee or in the fairway. We think it's important that the club not think in terms of toughening each hole, but rather think in regard to strengthening a series of holes leaving opportunity for players to adjust to course demands. It is not the challenge of the architect to make the course/hole difficult, the difficulty to the architect is making the course/hole challenging yet fun.

Was it the ball or the clubs or the USGA that allowed this situation to get out of hand?

Many in the ASGCA, including myself, believe the ball has the greater potential to impact the game of the future. To date, the majority of interest has been in the clubs used. In the short term, I sense more specialty clubs will emerge. No one is allowed to blame the USGA.

Have you considered the newer Round Up ready bents and their impact upon golf courses?

To date, we have not specified any of the Round-Up ready bents. I see direct advantages to their use in large turf areas such as fairways and for use on tees. From what I've read and seen, I don't think they are comparable to the newer bents available for putting greens such as A4 or SR1119. I would like to hear from the membership on any experiences they may have had with their use. On most of our renovation and remodeling work, we will specify the products and protocols being practiced by the course superintendent.

Have players taken to the forward tee programs being designed into older courses today?

On many courses, yes. I think it still comes back to developing the right yardage gap between tee sets and active comes back to developing the right yardage gap between tee sets and active

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course management, both at the pro shop and at the maintenance building promoting and encouraging their usage. With the gap too close, golfers will most likely opt for the longer tee. In design, we work to achieve a 300 to 500 yard gap between tee positions. But let's face it. The golf course architect or the club needs to design, build and manage an attractive, well-positioned tee. Forward tees and forward tee programs often have gotten the bad reputation and lack of play because of the thoughtlessness to which they have been built or positioned on the course.

Do you have a preference of sand used in bunkers today?

Not really. We need to remember the sand bunker is a hazard. Often I think too much is made of having perfectly consistent bunkers throughout the course. It's rather pitiful when a golfer purposely aims for the hazard knowing the kind of follow-up shot they will have. In general, our basic guideline is a sand which meets the USGA criteria for bunker sand. We have found most of these sands meet the playability criteria. After that we look to client preference, color and price. Occasionally we get into the exotic sands offered by Plaisted and others. We've also come across a product being used as a bunker sand from Iowa which is actually poultry feed, but that's what I like about golf design, there aren't many rules.

With the demand for ever-quicker greens, older greens are losing many cupping locations. What is a comfortable speed for everyday play?

We have been counseling clubs to be careful with this issue. As green speeds increase, green slope must be flattened. Generally faster speeds planned in on new designs have larger greens (7,000 SF) to accommodate roll and undulation. On small greens, typical of the older course, if one "flattens" the green to accommodate speed, you've lost much of the character of the green. We've advised older clubs to consider limiting or capping green speed to preserve the character of their older greens. If speeds top out between 8.5 or 9 to 10, providing the greens have character in contour and/or shape, and if the course is historically significant, let them be. If someone wants to putt to a 11, 12 or 13, invite them go to the newer course that has the new bent grasses, and large greens.

Name your foursome:

Over the years I have had the privilege of playing in many a great foursome. I've always enjoyed playing with Pete or Alice Dye or other fellow golf architects: George Williams, Lindsay Irvin, Forrest Richardson, Mark Mungeam and Bob Lohmann. I've also had a tremendous amount of fun playing with our past clients on opening day: Howie Samb, Willingers, Jake Enebak, Legends, Kevin Finley, Ponds at Battle Creek and Tim O'Connor, The Ponds in St. Francis. Naturally I've had some great rounds (not just golf) with superintendents Jim Kassera, Hastings CC; Roger Kisch, Southview; Matt Rostal, Interlachen, and Keith Scott, Oak Ridge. But perhaps my two dream foursomes would include another round with my late father, David Gill, Donald Ross, the ultimate inspiration to all golf course architects, and Arnold Palmer, who in my opinion is the greatest ambassador of golf, in play and design. The second foursome would be made up of fellow architects, Kevin Norby, Jeff McDowell and Joel Goldstrand. I wish them the best.