

Golf course design: longer, wider, steeper

More players. Better golfers. Longer, wider courses.

Golf course design is drawn well beyond the wind-driven links look of ancient Scotland.

By DR. MICHAEL J. HURDZAN

Golf courses may have evolved more in the past 30-plus years than they did during the previous three centuries. The changes have been in response to new technology, agronomics, player patterns, golf equipment, golf carts, environmental awareness, life styles and politics. In fact, it is way beyond the scope of this article to fully discuss the consequences of each issue, but a review of the most significant ones is enlightening.

In a nutshell, golf courses have gotten longer, wider, steeper, greener, more crowded, and increasingly environmentally important.

Golf courses have gotten longer because the design and construction of golf equipment supposedly allows golfers to hit the ball farther. Many observers, including myself do not really believe that, but since perception is more important than reality, a modern golf course must stretch to more than 7,000 yards or it is considered short. This is especially true when tour pros are involved in course design. In fact, the three things golfers want to know about a new course are:

- ▶ the designer;
- ▶ how long it plays;
- ▶ the slope rating.

Thirty-five years ago, during the first golf growth boom, none of those were very

important; no one cared. They were just happy to be playing any golf course.

Just as marketing hype has led to longer golf courses, some clear reasoning has made them shorter for various groups of golfers through the adoption of multiple tees. In early 1960, the norm was one or two sets of tees with two sets of markers, one for men and one for women. Today, there are at least five sets of tees set at various distances and angles on a hole to accommodate, respectively: pros; single digit players; average golfers; senior and lady golfers; and the novice and super senior. Although 7,000 yards from the back, the course will play as short as 5,000 yards from the novice tees to correspondingly longer tees at 5,700; 6,200 and 6,700 yards.

Lawyers and lawsuits have caused the trend to wider golf courses. In the early 1960s, we were not afraid to put 18 holes and a practice range on 120 acres. To protect golfers, owners and adjacent land users from nuisance golf balls, designers have been forced to make golf courses wider, to try to spread out play and provide better safety buffers. Today, about 160 acres is considered minimum acreage for a full-size



Hurdzan: cultural practices more meticulous.

course.

Modern earth moving and turfgrass mowing equipment have allowed designers to make golf course features steeper. The vertical face look of dramatic modern architecture was beyond imagination 35 years ago. My colleague and

friend, Pete Dye, broke the mold first at TPC Jacksonville and buried the pieces at PGA West. Today, there are no limits to how high, deep or steep we can make golf course features. How to maintain them may be resolved in the next 35 years.

The turf is greener

Turf science and technology have made incredible strides that allow today's golf course superintendents to keep golf courses greener than ever could be imagined when I was young. Cultural practices on fairways are more meticulous than greens of the early 60s. New turfgrass varieties are more drought tolerant, disease and insect resistant, and are cared for with encapsulated fertilizers, improved pesticides and application equipment, and modern irrigation systems.

—*Golf course architect Hurdzan is an authority on golf course environmental issues. He and partner Dana Fry run Hurdzan/Fry Golf Course Design, Columbus, Ohio.*