

Golf Course Architecture and Construction

The First Step—By William S. Flynn

Much has been written about golf course architecture, about the theory of construction, as to why certain holes should be laid out in this way or that way, as to the cost of maintenance and concerning the gradual improvement of the links. But it seems to me that too many of these authors fail to go back far enough. They ignore the basic fact that in order to have a satisfactory golf course you must first secure a suitable piece of land over which to lay it out.

And that first step is most important, for an unwise choice of terrain may prove so costly in the end as to almost, if not quite, bankrupt the whole project. So my advice to a club in process of organization, or to an old club that is forced by circumstances to seek other quarters, is to appoint a close-mouthed committee and have that committee scout around quietly so as to secure options on several available tracts of land without the secret leaking out that a golf club is in the market for the property.

In the past it has been customary to purchase one or more old farms, with a stone house or two and an old barn, a creek or two, orchards and a few small hills and dales and then call in a Golf Architect and tell him to make the best of what the club owns.

The men on the purchasing committee, lacking special knowledge of engineering problems, frequently buy land because its scenic beauties appeal to them and without thought of the practical difficulties involved. So, when it comes to planning the course and the architect goes over the property he is forced to tell the committee that a really good layout is not possible unless expense is no object.

As the cost of construction is usually a very vital item in the budget the committee is much upset. And if it is decided to go ahead and build as good a course as the terrain and the club's treasury will permit the members never take as much pride in what they get as they would if there had been more latitude of choice.

If an option has been secured on three or four tracts of land the architect can go over each carefully and then tell the committee which he considers the best, and why, his reasons including its possibilities as the site for a really first-class course, for keeping down the cost of construction and for economical maintenance after it has been completed.

The golf architect who knows his business can tell the committee in plain, understandable English just why one tract should be chosen over the others. He can show by figures why the cost will be lower and the results more acceptable. He can explain why drainage and future upkeep must always be kept in mind, picture the grades that would have to be climbed on every round if this tract were chosen, or the chances of having fairways and greens flooded every year if another were selected.

There is no way of telling how much money has been literally tossed away by the lack of foresight in choosing land over which to build golf courses, but it must have been an enormous sum. Not only have mistakes been made in the past, but they are still being made by committees selecting the wrong properties for golf courses, and it does not seem fair to the host of golfers who annually pay the bills.

Any conscientious architect by exercising tact and persuasion can save prospective clubs a great deal of unnecessary expense in making a proper selection of property for a new course, and this is all the more true when the architect is possessed of some knowledge of engineering.

In considering the man to select the property and lay out a golf course of the 1927 model a club should view the problem broadly. The committee in charge of the matter should inquire whether the man under consideration really cares for golf and its future, whether he cherishes the ideals of the game as handed down from the fathers and whether he has vision or whether he considers the building of courses as merely an easy way of making a good living.

They should visit some of his other efforts and find out if the members of clubs for whom he had built courses were satisfied. They should not engage him merely because he can prepare attractive plans. They should determine whether he has sufficient engineering ability to see to it that his plans are carried out as he intended and that all problems of future maintenance were provided for in advance.

The relative merits of the various architects available at the time the club wishes to secure its property and start work should be discussed with leading amateurs who have made a study of the theory of golf architecture and their opinions of the men under consideration secured. These amateur students would have little or no bias, for they greatly desire the betterment and advancement of the game.

Once the decision has been made and the architect named, there should be a conference during which the committee should put all its cards on the table. It should be frank about what it wants, should tell the architect exactly how far the club can go financially and whether a really stiff course or one not quite so hard is desired.

The architect should look over the various tracts under option and eventually report to the committee which he considers the best for the particular purposes of the club in question and why he deems it so. When the choice has finally been made, the committee should outline any ideas or suggestions the various members may have in mind.

Some architects are faintly contemptuous of suggestions made by "amateurs," but the wise architect is aware that he does not know it all and that really good ideas are often developed in these conferences. He never turns down a sensible suggestion simply because it has been made by someone else. On the contrary he accepts it thankfully and promptly embodies it in his plans.

The committee has every right to disagree with its architect at that time, but not later when work has actually begun. During the preliminary proceedings it is up to the committee to advance every objection that comes to their minds, and it is up to the architect to prove to them that he is right when he is firmly convinced that such is the case.

He must explain to the committee clearly and convincingly just why one suggestion would not work, why another would be too costly, or why still another would draw the ironic laughter of the critics. Often objection is made that the course, as planned by the architect, would be "too hard," but these very objectors are usually the ones who boast about their "sporty course" after it has been completed.

The architect must be tactful, he must have his facts at his tongue's end and must be firm. But in the end, if he knows his job, he will get rid of unsound suggestions and obtain sanction for a course on which he is willing to stake his reputation. For no matter how many first-class links a man has built, just let him be overpersuaded by a committee to construct a freak course and the word at once goes around that he has lost his vision, is slipping fast down grade, and his reputation bursts like the proverbial bubble.

But after the architect's plans have been accepted and he has been told to go ahead the committee should, most distinctly, lay off. The architect should not be pestered with more suggestions as to changes, and so on, or bothered in any way by the individual members of the committee. He should be let alone to carry on the work after his own fashion.

It is impossible for most laymen to visualize what the completed course will look like during the early stages of construction. The whole terrain resembles a segment of land between the front-line trenches while the World War was on, and pessimistically minded members often want to fire the architect on the spot after just one brief glimpse of ploughed up fields, hundreds of tree stumps, deep ditches where water pipes are to go and unsightly mounds and broad scars that eventually will be smooth greens and shining white sand traps.

If the club has sufficient confidence in the architect to hire his services it should be taken for granted that he is capable of laying out a course possessing both variety and interest, that it will be scientifically constructed and that once finished it can be maintained at reasonable expense.

No club should expect and no architect should consent to submit plans and specifications and then not supervise the construction. The architect's reputation depends on what he produces. If he allows others to carry out his ideas the chances are strongly in favor of confusion that will result in a botched job.

The most successful method, when possible, for building a golf course is for the club to let a contract for a lump sum covering the complete construction of the course. This insures against additional financing, when the course is partly finished, as has been true in some cases in the past. It also relieves the committee of a great deal of worry should they attempt to build the course themselves, hiring someone to supervise the construction and sub-contracting labor, teams, material, etc., and places all responsibility under one head.

In nine cases out of ten when a club attempts to construct the course the man designated to superintend the job is not familiar with the architect's method, nor is he, perhaps, capable of interpreting the framework plans the architect provides.

It naturally follows that if a plan is incorrectly interpreted in the construction work much money is wasted, because the architect should insist on the work being done as he conceived it.

It is often a very hard matter to convince a committee that their work has been done improperly because they are not familiar with seeing a course develop from the start and they always seem too easily satisfied with what has been done and are loathe to change it.

The best results, I think, can be obtained when an architect has engineers associated with him who have been trained in his way of

doing things and who are familiar with the problems connected with golf course construction, namely, soil structure, drainage, turf culture, and course maintenance.

With an organization of this kind nothing is left to guesswork or done in hit or miss fashion. Practically all of the construction problems have been worked out before a spade full of earth is moved.

The advantages of having only one concern to deal with are obvious. Trained men will be in charge of all the various ramifications of the proposition and once finished the engineering firm should stand back of its product. If anything is wrong, which is unlikely with an organization that knows its business, the firm will promptly put it right.

But, if a club has been dealing with many sub-contractors, it is hard to fix the responsibility and even more difficult to locate the man to blame and force him to make good.

If a club, however, insists on attending to the actual construction of the course, the architect should insist on supervising the work. It is not fair to himself or to the club if his plans are not carried out as he visioned them. No conscientious architect should accept more commissions during any season than he can give his personal attention to.

The plans first submitted by an architect should cover what might be well termed the framework of the course, but should be flexible in the matter of pits and bunkers. Those around the greens and certain traps just off the fairways may be fairly well determined in advance, but the location of the others can be determined better after the course has been completed and played on for a time.

In this connection it would be well for a club to retain its architect in an advisory capacity for a year or so after the actual work of construction has been finished.

He will then be able to better determine the definite location of a complete bunkering system for the course and will be able to advise in the treatment of the course in preparing it for play. In this way the club can secure the best results and eventually find itself possessed of a course that will be satisfactory in every detail.

NOTE—This is the first of a series of articles by William S. Flynn on Golf Course Architecture and Construction and the relations that should exist between the golf architect and the golf club. The second article will appear next month.

Our greens were sown five years ago with German Creeping Bent seed. As soon as the grass matured it became apparent that there were a dozen varieties of bent, some of a fine texture, some coarse, and of various hues. Each year, as the putting surface improved, there still remained many coarse runners, in spite of frequent top-dressing, proper nourishment and close cutting.

A representative of the Green Section visited us this spring and suggested sweeping the greens with an ordinary street broom. In doing this we endeavored to lift the grass or make the blades or runners stand erect. We have followed this practice faithfully immediately before mowing and in 10 weeks' experience have found most of the coarse grass eliminated, and naturally, the putting surface vastly improved.

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