

# GOLF THEN—GOLF NOW

## *A Champion's View of Course Conditioning Over The Years*

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**I**t is a pleasure for me to be here today to be able to express my views on golf courses and golf course conditioning.

Several months ago, Al Radko asked if I would talk briefly at this meeting. Since then I have been jotting down ideas as they have come to me, hoping to get them into some form that would make sense and be interesting to you. As well as talking about conditioning, Al asked me to do so by contrasting British courses with our own.

At the outset, I want you to know that I am not an expert by any means on the subject. By way of having a mis-spent youth, I have played hundreds of different courses in this country and a few abroad, and in the process I have obviously formed some opinions as to what I like or dislike about a particular course. Also I might add that I personally am what one might call a traditionalist; my wife has at times called some of my views reactionary.

As an illustration of my philosophy, I thought I might use the example of graphite shafts. A great deal of time and money have been spent on their promotion. I really don't think they are better than steel. They may be, but why is it that Nicklaus, Snead, Boros, Trevino, etc. do very well without them. You might say, "Well Johnny Miller has used them." I would argue that Miller could probably go down to the local Hermann's sporting goods store, pick a set out of the barrel and still shoot 65!

When conditioning is being discussed, I think you must touch upon architecture because the two go hand-in-hand. That is to say, if a course is designed properly on the right kind of terrain, it is easier to maintain.

Why is it that the USGA, which is certainly a traditional organization, always seems to choose courses like Oakmont, Oak Hill, Winged Foot, Merion, or Medina for its Championships? And why is it that when it chose Hazeltine, there was a lot of criticism? I happened to play in the Open at Hazeltine, and I thought it was a very nice course. I think the fact that it was new and had a few tricky holes on it drew more criticism than was called for.

The primary reason for the USGA choosing

these older courses is that the game has been played for a long time with essentially the same Rules and same equipment. There have been very few changes in the 25 years that I have been playing, and this has kept the game a very consistent one. I think this adds to the fun of the game. I first played Winged Foot about 20 years ago. The first hole took a drive and a 2-iron. Today it still takes a drive and a 2-iron. This is the mark of a great course, it is CONSISTENT.

Many clubs have set about changing their courses to make them tougher and trickier. This is fine with me. But to make them too tough is unwise. To me the true test of a good hole is when a good shot is played, the player is rewarded by being on the green near the hole. When a good shot won't get the job done, then the hole is too hard.

Recently courses have been built by people who aren't traditionalists and who seem to know little about golf. They decide they will have 300 bunkers on the course, because no one else has that many on *their* course. They do not have maintenance or conditioning in mind. They put them everywhere—on side hills—at low levels. They don't realize that every time it rains the crew has to fix the wash out, and when it doesn't rain the crew has to rake them. Chances are that 75 per cent of the bunkers on a course like this have nothing to do with the game. If a bunker isn't built to catch an errant shot, **why build it at all?**

I have seen new courses that have had trees right in front of the green. I mean large trees thirty feet in front of the green!! There the player stands with a 4-iron shot and the only way to get close to the hole is to be lucky enough not to hit a limb on the way through the tree. This is not golf because the fun of the game is eliminated.

Many of the courses are too long and have greens that are too big. When a professional has to hit a driver to reach a par 3, where does that leave 85 per cent of the golfing-world? They can't even get close to the green in one shot.

On the subject of large greens, there are several reasons why I dislike them: One is that



*Old Course, St. Andrews, Scotland*



*Cypress Point, USA*

to hit a huge green with a 9-iron takes very little skill. A short hole should have a small green that makes a short approach shot tricky and difficult, and that brings skill into play. Another reason is that a huge green eliminates many chipping and bunker shots, because even a very poor shot is on or around the putting surface. Also, it is often difficult to have good drainage on large greens.

I have only played on a few courses in Great Britain. All of them have been seaside courses, because this is where the R&A chooses to play its Championships. Therefore, I cannot speak for the inland courses over there.

This is where you can find tradition! The courses I have seen are probably exactly as they were 50 years ago with very few exceptions, and they continue to be great tests of golf. Very seldom do you find a bunker that was not designed to catch a particular bad shot, or a green that was not designed for a particular reason, such as luring the player toward a bunker or some heavy rough.

The members of these clubs take great pride in the tradition of their courses. Although the ground is almost sacred to them, they are not as concerned as we are that every blade of grass be bending the same way. They are more interested in the course being a good test of golf.

The most famous club that I have played at is Muirfield, in Scotland. I came upon an article by James Dent that I would like to read to you that will give you a little flavor of the club. It might not be Muirfield, but it certainly could be. It's entitled "Inadequate Duffer" and goes like this:

*All of his life, a dignified English barrister-widower with considerable in-*

*come had dreamed of playing Sandringham and one day made up his mind to chance it, although he was well aware that it was very exclusive. When he asked at the desk if he might play the course, the secretary inquired, 'Member?'*

*"No sir."*

*"Guest of a member?"*

*"No sir."*

*"Sorry," the secretary said.*

*As he turned to leave, the lawyer spotted a slightly familiar figure seated in the lounge reading the London Times. It was Lord Wellesby Parham. He approached and bowing low, said, "I beg your pardon, your Lordship, but my name is Higginbotham of the London firm of Higginbotham, Willoughby and Barclay. I should like to ask a huge favor, really — if I might play this delightful course as your guest?"*

*His Lordship gave Higginbotham a long look, put down his paper and asked, "Church?"*

*"Episcopalian, sir. And my late wife, Church of England."*

*"Education?" the old gentleman asked.*

*"Eton, sir, and Oxford — magna cum laude."*

*"Athletics?"*

*"Rugby, sir, spot of tennis and rowed No. 4 on the crew that beat Cambridge."*

*"Military?"*

*"DCCE sir: Coldstream Guards, Victoria Cross, Knight of the Garter."*

*"Campaigns?" "Dunkirk, El Alamein, Normandy, sir."*



*A difference in philosophy!*

*"Languages?"*

*"Private tutor in French, fluent German and a bit of Greek."*

*His Lordship considered briefly, then nodded to the club secretary and said:*

*"Nine holes."*

The course is well-groomed but not overdone. The fairways are not watered, but since it is located near the sea, there is enough rain to keep them in good shape. The greens *are* watered and are very fast and true. You never get a flying lie at Muirfield. As most of you know, a flying lie is one where the grass gets between the club and the ball and causes it to fly with no spin. As a contrast, at many of our courses the fairways have become too lush. Even the most accomplished player cannot easily control a flying lie.

Muirfield is a greenkeepers delight. The mowing is simple because there are not a lot of trees and bunkers to mow around. A lot of the area is just left to grow. Obviously these are areas that a player should avoid. There are many bunkers, but all have good drainage and are easily maintained by hand. The greens are fair-sized but not huge.

One thing that is missing in Great Britain is mechanized carts. There are no asphalt cart paths or worn down roughs or tire marks in the fairways. Cars are a fact of life in our country, but they certainly don't help the condition of a golf course.

In closing I would like to point out a few

problems that I see at our courses and some possible remedies.

1. As I just mentioned, cars are a problem. Unfortunately, many clubs have become dependent on them for revenues. If each club could constantly educate its members as to the use of cars, it could help conditioning.

2. As I also said, bunkers are too numerous on many courses. Many of them don't even come into play. This makes maintenance very difficult. The new automatic trapraker is very prevalent now. This unfortunately leaves ridges in the bunkers. I would like to see the unnecessary bunkers plowed under and have the more strategic ones hand raked.

3. With regard to greens, I think the use of the triplex mowers has hurt the greens. I have noticed a lot of skinning around the edges, and I believe the triplex definitely affects the natural grain of a green. I would like to see greens cut with a conventional mower—at least for tournaments.

4. Fairways could be cut narrower. This would save some cutting time and make some of the less difficult courses a little testier.

Unfortunately, everybody can't be members at Winged Foot or Muirfield. I do think that there are hundreds of great courses in the United States as compared with probably a handful in Great Britain. Rather than trying to condition them so that John Miller won't break 60—why not condition them fairly, and if some one is good enough to shoot a great score—so be it. That's golf.