

What Makes A Golf Course Great

by **GEORGE H. BRODNAX III**, President, Atlanta Athletic Club, Duluth, Ga.

It is a real pleasure for me to be here today as I have looked forward to this meeting for some time. It seems strange that I, a layman golfer, should be here on your program with such qualified experts, addressing such a knowledgeable group of golf course superintendents and professionals. My viewpoint on the subject of what makes a golf course great, therefore, is from the viewpoint of a club member, a club director and officer, and an average golf player. Sometimes ideas and thoughts coming from ignorance or innocence can generate meaningful results.

What makes a golf course great? First we should look at the game. Golf is a very unusual game compared to just about any other game we can think of. Football, basketball, baseball, track, swimming, tennis, all use facilities for competition that are basically the same. All football fields are exactly the same size. The same thing is largely true with basketball, tennis, and all the others, while golf is played on courses that are individualistic and different. No two golf courses are alike, and this in itself offers opportunities that contribute greatly toward making golf the extremely popular game that it is.

How many tennis courts have you seen with beautiful lakes coming into play? How many baseball diamonds have you seen with rivers flowing by the outfield? How many handball courts have you seen with large old oak trees gracing their boundaries? I ask these questions to emphasize the tremendous opportunities we have to make golf a lasting and pleasurable experience. Even hunting and fishing, popular leisure activities, while offering beautiful natural outdoor environments, do not offer the creativity or personal development that golf courses invite.

That brings us to our topic. What is it that makes some courses better than others? What are the characteristics of excellence that make one course stand above others? There certainly has to be a combination of things involved to justify greatness; no single factor, in my opinion, can make it so.

THE MEMBERS

First, and the most important single factor, is the enthusiasm and pride of the club membership. These are the people who determine by their interest and their money exactly how their golf course is to be built initially and how it is to be maintained throughout the years. They influence the geographic location of the club, the selection of the architect, the builder, the landscaper, the golf course superinten-

dent and the golf professional. If they are proud of their course, they will continue to finance the necessary improvements and proper maintenance required to keep it a great course to play. Their enthusiasm is extremely important in assisting management to stay on its toes to provide the very best.

Naturally, I'm prejudiced, but I believe our two Atlanta Athletic Club courses qualify as great golf courses and the enthusiasm expressed by our membership during the 1976 U.S. Open Championship in working some 1,200 members to make this one of the finest tournaments ever held, proves what can be accomplished if the membership has the right attitude and desire.

Bobby McGee, our superintendent, and his staff expressed the same enthusiasm and pride and the results speak for themselves. Several years ago I would have labeled our two courses as only "good" and not in the category of "great." I will explain why a little later, but the point here is that our membership was willing to spend several hundred thousand dollars to put them in the "great" classification. My point is that without the proper membership attitude, you will never have a great golf course, and I, therefore, label this as the most important single ingredient.

ARCHITECTURE

Architectural features of a golf course are part of a uniqueness. In laying out a course, consideration should definitely be given to **who** will be playing. Care should be observed so that the course is not built only for the better golfers—the professionals or scratch player—nor should it be built only for the duffer or beginners. A great golf course is one that can be enjoyed by all players—both men and women.

The placement of the tees is a controlling factor here that is very often overlooked in planning a course that all will find enjoyable. Obviously, the course must truly challenge the good player, yet be so designed that the others with shorter and less accurate games will feel that they have an opportunity to compete. Tee length and placement are the primary considerations in designing a course for all of the players, and the great course must be one for *all* players.

Selection of the site for a course must be made with care to be certain architectural features can be incorporated to meet the wishes of its members. With the availability of large earth moving equipment today, courses can be altered to achieve certain de-



Enthusiasm and pride of membership are the ingredients that made the 1975 U.S. Open Championship at Atlanta Athletic Club such a success.

signs to make each hole unique. Lakes can be created to make the hole more difficult, to add beauty, or to aid in the drainage. The dirt removed can be used to elevate the green or tee. A good example of this would be the seventh hole on our Highlands Course. An average par 3 hole was made into a very tough and challenging hole and at the same time gave us some relief on a serious drainage problem.

TERRAIN

Of course, different areas of the country have different types of terrain, yet you will find great golf courses whether the land is flat or hilly, where the architect has moved earth around with ingenuity and vision. He has literally created the type of terrain he feels will make a hole meet the challenge of its players, and at the same time give the hole character and beauty. Proper and skillful use of the earth moving equipment available today will play a large part in helping to make a golf course that might be just an ordinary one into one that is great.

Fairway treatment is another good example. Far too many courses have flat, unattractive fairways that give the impression that too many of the holes are alike. Moving dirt around can create swells and slopes that add beauty, and at the same time, challenge the player on his fairway shot. Fairway bunkers placed in the landing area of the tee shot can penalize the errant shot maker and add greatly to the difficulty of the hole.

Variety is certainly the spice of life when it comes to golf courses. Treatment of greens and bunkers during the design and construction stages truly contribute to the degree of greatness of a course. The use of small greens on shorter par 4s and par 3s add to the difficulty and test the golfer's accuracy, while

the longer par 4s and par 5s with larger greens can be sloped and slanted to achieve a different element of skill.

Our 10th hole on Highlands was changed completely three years ago. We had to move the tee, and this cut the length of the hole by 50 yards, making a shorter par 4. To proportion it, the green was reduced by two-thirds, creating a smaller and more difficult target. Yes, fascinating and innovative things have happened in the field of golf course construction in the last decade, and because of this factor, we are seeing more great golf courses. We are seeing more holes that require thinking and finesse.

SCENERY

I mentioned earlier that it took a combination of things to make one course stand out against others. This is a personal opinion of one who loves the game, but I believe strongly that spectacular scenery contributes to a great degree in making great golf courses. This doesn't mean that the course has to be on the ocean, such as Cypress Point and Pebble Beach—even though I'm sure you would all agree that they have spectacular scenery, and it certainly contributes to the greatness of both courses.

All over this country we are blessed with outstanding beauty, and courses can and should be located where they can be appreciated by the players. Oceans, rivers, lakes, mountains, trees are all contributors to this scenery. The large, old and beautiful hardwood trees at Oakmont and Winged Foot are examples of how trees can be used to advantage. While we recognize that this scenery does not come into play on the course itself, it certainly adds a lot to the pleasure of the game.

PLANTINGS

In addition to the spectacular scenery provided by nature, the club can enhance the beauty of its course by selective planting of shrubs, flowers and trees. Many of the great golf courses have taken advantage of evergreens and seasonable flowers to decorate locations out of the playing area in order to add to the scenery and pleasure of the golfers.

In the Southeast, dogwoods, azaleas, honeysuckle, and crepe myrtle all make outstanding plantings, along with many varieties of flowering plants. The Augusta National Club in Augusta, Ga., is an example of how planting programs can contribute to the development of a course. This outstanding course in the spring is indeed a sight to behold with all of its decorative plants in full bloom.

I have dealt here, thus far, with the decorative aspect of planting shrubs and trees in places around the course well out of the playing area but within sight for the golfers to enjoy; and also to be used as screens to shield any undesirable views and noises from the players. In addition, trees can be selectively planted to alter or improve a particular hole. Fairways can be narrowed by the proper use of trees, or a tree can be planted to force players away from a short cut or to make a hole play with more skill by requiring a more accurate drive. A cluster of trees planted behind a green can create a silhouette to enhance the beauty as well as give the player a more challenging hole.

CARE & MAINTENANCE

A golf course can be located on the most beautiful piece of land, with fantastic natural scenery all around it, designed and built by the very best architect with the most challenging holes and be classified as a great golf course in every respect, but without proper maintenance and care, it will surely not remain great.

The way a course is maintained is extremely important for the maturity of the course, and until a course matures it cannot really be in the category of the "great" ones. The golf course superintendent must be knowledgeable about local grasses, shrubs, trees and the fertilizers and food for his particular area. Each section of the country requires an

altogether different concept on types and care of grasses.

The programs conducted by the United States Golf Association Green Section are invaluable to the member clubs. I know the value Jim Moncrief has been to our area with the continuous testing and experimenting conducted and information passed along to the clubs for incorporating into their programs of proper planting and fertilization.

There are certain times during the year that the superintendent must thatch, replant, fertilize, and do other necessary things to insure continued success in the development of the course, and for short periods of time, the playing conditions will not be ideal. If the superintendent will communicate information in advance to the membership as to when these things will take place, he will be able to maintain the enthusiasm and support of the members.

A logical method of accomplishing this is through the golf committee with timely articles in the club's monthly newspaper and also through the golf professional. Proper communications by the course superintendent to the members will insure their cooperation and he will be able to perform the maintenance necessary for the course to play at its finest. The way a course is maintained is a definite prerequisite for greatness.

WHAT IS "GREATNESS?"

My interpretation of what makes a golf course great might differ from yours or the importance of certain elements might vary, however, I feel very deeply that all of the ingredients I have mentioned today are vital and necessary for a golf course to be considered for greatness. I realize that I have only scratched the surface and each aspect I have touched on but briefly, could be the subject of an all day session. Fortunately, there are no standard sets of plans for construction of golf courses, but rather the opportunity exists for each one to create something new, something different, something outstanding, to attract even more people to this fascinating game. The interest has never been higher than it is today, and I am confident that with your dedication and enthusiasm we will see more and more great golf courses.

No two golf holes are alike anywhere in the world. Linville Golf Club, N.C.

