

Let's Waste A Little More

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THAT GOLF COURSE maintenance costs have increased dramatically over the past two decades requires little amplification. Published figures show these costs to have risen by 350 percent since 1960. That we've come to accept such ever-increasing costs is illustrated by recent petroleum industry estimates of a 6- to 7-cent increase in the price of a gallon of gasoline in 1982 are greeted with optimism because this represents "only" a 5 percent increase.

With each annual upward move in maintenance costs, most courses find their operations threatened to various degrees. The greatest challenge the golf industry will face in the future revolves around its ability to react to these

economic problems in a manner that will allow the game to remain within the financial grasp of the common man. Failure in this regard will permit the regression of the game back to the status of the early part of this century when it was a diversion for the elite.

Considering the economic conditions, a question regarding the suitability of the title "Let's Waste A Little More" seems well in order. The title refers to the designation of areas within a golf course that receive reduced levels of maintenance. In some instances, these areas have been referred to as waste areas.

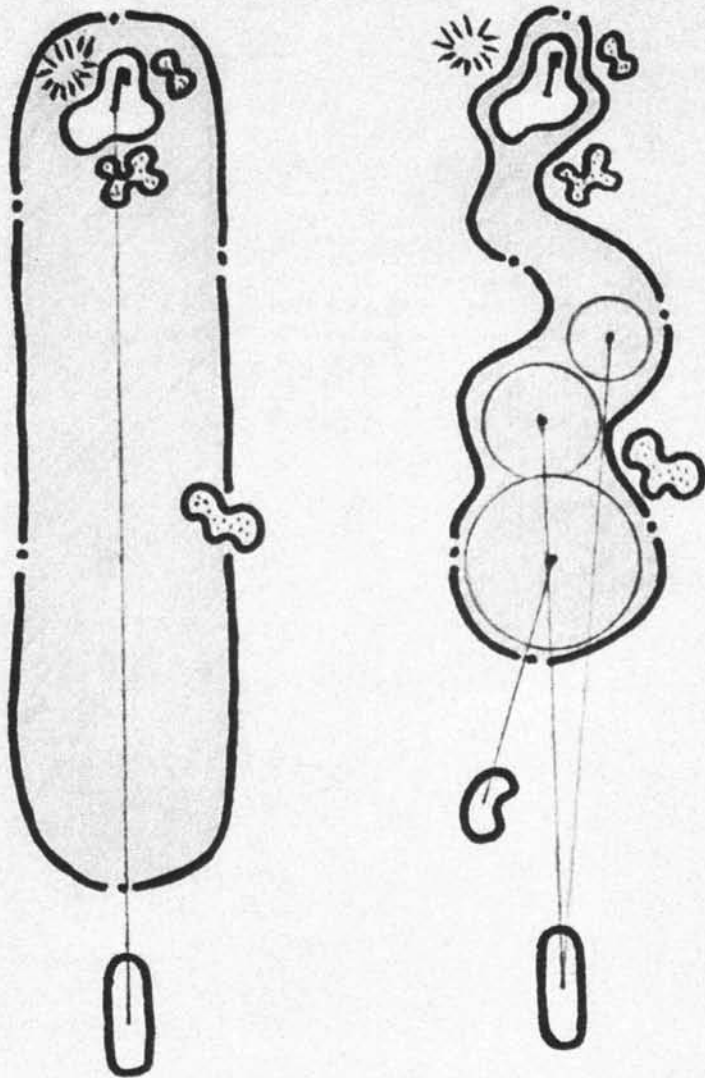
A good number of older, established courses contain such areas, and many of these courses are considered among

the nation's finest. The National Golf Links of America, Pine Valley, and Pinehurst Number 2 are three that come to mind. These courses contain significant areas that are markedly unkempt compared to the excessively manicured, every-grass-blade-in-place look of most contemporary golf courses. These three courses harken us back to an earlier day in the history of golf and are, in many ways, reminiscent of the more natural Scottish linksland courses.

The respective architects of these three classic courses, Charles Blair Macdonald, George Crump and Donald Ross, left natural areas in an attempt to mimic the land where the game was born. Their intent was also to emphasize the inherent qualities of the sites on

Waste areas at Tournament Players Club, Florida.





Turning a lot (of maintenance) into a little.

which these courses were constructed, not necessarily to reduce future maintenance costs. Anyone who has played them knows that these natural areas allow for interesting strategic and, in some cases, penal possibilities. Furthermore, the waste areas on these golf courses provide an historical reference to the cost-conscious contemporary superintendent.

At the other end of the spectrum, new golf courses are being designed and constructed with a good deal of emphasis on future maintenance costs. The new courses seek to control costs by reducing total acreage requiring high maintenance. This concept of increased "waste areas" is perhaps best illustrated by the Players Club, in Ponte Vedra, Florida. The Players Club is characterized by large expanses of sand along the sides of fairways. On some holes, this sand continues on to border putting greens. Fairway acreage is reduced, resulting in maintenance savings.

Some are quick to point out that a portion of this savings will be required to maintain the unusual features around the greens at the Players Club. However, one is reminded of the old adage about crawling before walking, and the Players Club could well play a contributing role in the introduction of a new chapter in the history of golf course design.

Such changes in design philosophy and standard maintenance are more easily initiated and find quicker acceptance at a new course. The rough and ragged areas at Pine Valley are readily accepted because, well, that's what Pine Valley is all about. Initiating similar changes on existing courses, however, is far more difficult.

Years of intense grooming have fostered a high level of maintenance expectations. The degree of difficulty associated with bringing about these changes may appear overwhelming, and were it not for one fact, would provide sufficient justification for many to cast

aside this initiative. That fact is the alternative to economizing.

With this alternative in mind, let's consider a process by which a significant change in the maintenance practices and philosophies of an existing course can be brought about. An absolute prerequisite to the success of this process is an active communication system between the superintendent and club officials, and ultimately, each individual member. The desired goal, a marked savings in maintenance expenses resulting from a reduction in the total acreage on a golf course that is regularly maintained, has to be achieved slowly. It is dependent upon an educational program implemented by the finance committee, green committee and the superintendent. The superintendent must develop the facts and figures regarding the projected savings and present this material in a way that is difficult for the club to reject.

THE FIRST STEP in this process involves the development of an accurate map of the course, drawn to scale. Many a golf superintendent has maps of his course, but for this case, these maps may not possess the required degree of accuracy. The time and expense involved in obtaining and transferring an aerial survey of the course into map form will be worth the effort. The map developed in this step can be used for additional purposes, including master plans for irrigation, drainage, cart paths, landscape planting and the like.

With scaled maps in hand, the club should engage a qualified golf course architect. The architect, with help from the superintendent and club professional, and with factors such as topography, prevailing winds, aesthetics and strategy considered, can begin to develop a scheme of contour mowing for the fairways. Contour mowing will result in multiple fairway landing areas offering progressively smaller target areas and requiring greater accuracy as one moves farther from the tee. Additionally, the fairway cut will not begin closer than a distance of approximately 165 yards from that area of the tee serving the average golfer.

With the contour mowing plan developed, steps should be taken to make allowances for the women golfers at the club. If the women's markers are merely placed at the front of the single tee on a hole, the carry required to reach the beginning of the fairway cut will probably be too much. In the long run, the only logical solution would be the



The natural hills of Shinnecock Hills, New York.

design and construction of a properly positioned women's tee. The all-too-frequent response to this problem is the gross elongation of the fairway. Our goal here is to decrease maintenance expenses, and this goal may well require an initial capital expenditure for tee construction.

With these steps completed, the plan for contour mowing can be put into practice. By this time, the lines of communication must be fully operative. Questions, comments and complaints, especially with regard to "recontoured" handicaps, will be common. However, experience has shown that properly informed members will adjust quickly to the change and will actually benefit when they play other courses because they have had to develop a more accurate game on their home course. Contour mowing adds greatly to the strategy of the game, playing interest of the course, and aesthetics. Also, per-acre savings of upwards of \$500 have been noted for fairway areas converted to intermediate rough.

A FURTHER REDUCTION in maintenance costs can now be achieved by the final step in this process. Selected areas maintained as intermediate rough can now be converted to areas of deep rough or waste areas. These waste areas should necessarily be well removed from the normal line of play on a hole. This is not to say that they will not receive golfer traffic. Again, the importance of communication is paramount. The trade-off is between a member's occasional lost ball and a club's financial stability based on these cost-saving measures.

A process of natural selection will occur in the areas converted to intermediate rough and waste areas. These areas, by design, should receive less water, fertilizer and total maintenance. A population shift toward grasses and other plants able to sustain themselves under lower levels of maintenance will occur. This process may require assistance in the form of overseeding, as plants of this type may have been totally eliminated by years of intense maintenance.

The plant population in the waste areas can be quite diverse, including native grasses, ground covers and other plant materials indigenous to the particular environment. Depending on plant composition, these areas may require cutting a couple of times per year in order to keep trees and shrubs under control.

There are many unresolved questions concerning these low-maintenance areas. The answers will only be found through experience. The steps outlined here can be adapted and altered to fit the particulars of your situation.

The economics of the day dictate that positive steps be taken towards maintenance cost stabilization. It has taken a good many years to stray from the natural courses on which the game of golf was developed. There has to be an acceptable middle ground between our overly groomed golf courses and the old, "native" style courses of the past.

We have to take that first step towards that middle ground. Let's waste a little more!