



# Why Has Golf Course Design Changed?

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**T**HE GOLF COURSE co-exists in a time-and-space relationship with the players, their concepts, and their equipment. This relationship is in a continuous state of change. If the golf course architect is to be successful, he must design for his time and place, while retaining the values and traditions of the game.

Golf, of course, relies on tradition more than any other game. Nobody invented golf — it evolved.

The linksland along the Scottish seacoast provided the first important

playing fields from which our concepts of the golf course evolved. Golf was first played along these common grounds. Indeed, St. Andrews and Royal Troon still play on public lands.

Early on, the formalized golf course, as we know it today, did not exist. Match play was the order of the day and was played in various locations on however many holes there happened to be. Leith and Musselburgh had five each, Perth had six, North Berwick seven, Prestwick 12, St. Andrews 22, and Montrose 25.

The first golf club — “The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers” — was established in 1744 and played on the Links of Leith, where the holes measured 414, 461, 426, 495, and 435 yards; adjusted for today’s equipment, these distances would be roughly equivalent to 600 yards.

Two events combined to shape the game in the late 1700s.

1. The golfers of St. Andrews achieved the reputation of being the pace setters and unofficial authorities on the game — largely a result of a



*Royal Dornoch, Scotland.*

tourist promotion. The Society of St. Andrews Golfers put up a trophy in the form of a silver club for open competition.

2. The success of this contest established St. Andrews as *the* premier golfing town, and when the Society changed its course from 22 to 18 holes in 1764 — other clubs followed suit. Hence — 18 holes became the “correct” number for a full course.

**T**HE EQUIPMENT and playing techniques of the early players dictated courses suited to low-trajectory shots. The oldest surviving set of clubs consists of six woods and two irons.

Of all the various changes and modifications of equipment, the changes and

modifications to the golf ball have had the most impact on golf course design. The early balls were wooden, and as long as this was the case, the game changed very little. In the early 1600s the featherie — a sewn leather hide ball stuffed with feathers — was introduced. Upon becoming wet, the leather shrank and became quite hard while the ball retained its lightness and ability to become airborne. These balls were able to travel higher and farther than wooden balls. Distance records are not accurate, but we can assume that a good player could drive a ball 200 yards. It is recorded that on a frosty morning in 1636, a schoolmaster playing the Old Course at St. Andrews hit a drive measured at 361 yards. He had a following wind.



In the mid-1800s, gutta percha — a rubber-like substance — began being molded into golf balls. These cheaper, more durable balls began to be favored by the thrifty Scots. This ball became very hard, and wooden clubs began to be replaced by iron-headed clubs. In 1898, in the United States, a Cleveland chemist named Coburn Haskell invented a method of making golf balls by winding rubber thread under tension around a central core.

The last decade has seen the introduction of covered solid balls with new dimple patterns.

In the late 1800s golf came to the United States and flourished.

In 1894 representatives of leading clubs were brought together to form an association to conduct open and amateur

championships. Thus the United States Golf Association was born. Interestingly, the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews was not invested with the management of the open and amateur championships in the British Isles until 1919.

By 1931, there were 283 public courses in the United States and golf was established as a game for everyone. The quality of courses built to accommodate the expansion of golf was a significant factor in the rise of American golf. American golf course architects, while looking to the old Scottish and English courses for inspiration, used the old courses as a point of departure and concentrated on an analytical approach resulting in more strategic design concepts.

**I**N AMERICA, the architects had the land and opportunity to effect the evolutionary concepts emerging in golf. The courses designed by the American architects reflected the new attitudes, the use of better equipment, and improved methods of construction and maintenance.

As the equipment changed, the design changed to reflect these improvements. Other developments have also caused modifications in the design of courses:

1. The use of the wooden tee and the concept of teeing grounds. Originally the practice was to tee up the ball within a club's length of the hole just completed.
2. The introduction of the riding golf cart in the 1950s.

3. The use of mechanized power maintenance equipment wherein design has been modified to accommodate this equipment, such as:

a. Irregularly shaped tees with ample turning radius for triplex mowers.

b. Adequate space between greens and greenside bunkers to allow for turning off the putting surface of mechanized mowing equipment.

c. Small sand bunkers designed for hand maintenance have been replaced with larger bunkers designed to accommodate power rakes.

d. Side slopes must not be too steep for large riding mowers.

4. Television brought the game into America's living rooms in the 1950s. The

nation's households were exposed to the world's finest courses and greatest players. This stimulated a great new growth of the game.

5. In the 1960s, the universities began producing great numbers of highly qualified turf management professionals who quickly established high standards of golf course maintenance.

Today we can look around us and see that: our population is living longer — senior golf is a growing segment of the game; juniors must attend school longer and need more opportunities to take up the game; women are changing roles in society and definitely making an impact on a game which was previously a predominately male preserve; and the work week is being shortened with more and longer vacations.

Golf has a tremendous opportunity to be a major factor in solving the recreational needs of our population. However, there are also problems: inflation, unemployment, high interest and an ever-decreasing supply of potable water for irrigation. However, problems are opportunities in work clothes. If golf is to survive and prosper, courses must be designed for family play where all classes of players can be accommodated. Courses must be designed to be water- and energy-efficient.

Time moves on — circumstances change — the game changes — and the courses must also change. It is up to us to act as stewards of the game and protect the characteristics and traditions of golf.

*The Cardinal bunker, Prestwick Golf Club, Scotland.*

