

Green Committees

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ONE OF THE FLAWS in golf course architecture is that, once the architect has signed the final certificate of the contractor and perhaps, if he is lucky, been invited to the opening of the course, he ceases to have any influence in the way his course is maintained and cared for. He has no wish to interfere with the important and separate job of the greenkeeper, but condition does have a direct bearing on whether the strategic elements of the architect's plans are being fully observed.

In too many cases the greenkeeper himself may be overruled by the majority vote of a green committee that is invariably made up of poor and inexperienced players who see golf only through their own eyes. Their inability to play properly has led them to use their position in office to ensure that courses are prepared with them in mind. Their motto is that there is no point in hitting a good shot when a poor one will do just as well. In order to accommodate them, they have been guilty of gross overwatering and overfeeding of greens and invariably of fairways as well.

They like to see grass sprouting everywhere, oblivious of the fact that grassy fairways make it far harder to hit proper golf shots and oblivious of the neat definition of Peter Thomson, who believes the art of greenkeeping is not in getting grass to grow but in how to keep it down.

Thomson was the master of British conditions, showing by his approach and skill that golf is a game of maneuverability and control, not of raw muscle. In many ways golf has a lot in common with billiards, where the key lies in playing every shot with the next one in mind. With the proper control of the cue ball, the next shot is that much easier, but at golf it is a weapon that is blunted when greens are so soft that they will hold shots from neighboring fairways or pitches that may be skimmed.

The billiards analogy can be taken a step further. Billiards is only half a game

on a slow table with dead cushions, and golf is the same without true, fast greens. Much thought goes into an architect's green designs — the shaping, the angling, the contouring, and the bunkering. On plain ground it can be the main way of providing challenge. The best holes are those where there is a definite side of the fairway that opens the best line to the flag.

Not that green committees are the only people who like to twist the arm of the greenkeeper. Professionals are not slow in speaking up if they find conditions that do not suit them, although some of them are also inclined to believe every shot to a green should stop where it pitches.

MY ANSWER is to do away with green committees as outmoded as the penny farthing, a view echoed by Bill Campbell, a former President of the United States Golf Association, in an address to the Golf Course Superintendents, in 1983. "Communication is important in any endeavor, but it is crucial for golfers to develop a close relationship with their golf course superintendents," Campbell said.

"Under the ideal situation, there would be a key person, and only one person who would represent all golfers at a club and communicate with the superintendent. The key person should be respected by his fellow members and should be knowledgeable enough to understand what a superintendent may explain.

"The key person ought to be honest in his dealings with the superintendent, meet frequently with him, and be practical in his suggestions. At a private club, the key person will be the Chairman of the Green Committee, but frequently the chairmanship changes every year. If the club has a green committee chairman who is really effective, really trusted, and works well with the superintendent, the club ought to keep him in that position for as long as it can."

I have sat through enough green committee meetings to know the futility of them. There is no sense having an expert agronomist to advise if a green committee is going to start questioning every point of policy they put forward. Far better for all concerned to let them

get on with it, give them all the encouragement possible, and allow their policies to be judged over three or four years.

Golf courses in Britain have to be made as playable as possible 12 months a year. What you do, or do not do, in June will influence the condition of a course in December. It is not too difficult to get good greens for two or three months in summer; the secret lies in having them good all year round — those forever on temporary greens in winter, please note.

MEMBERS ALLOW their clubs to be run on the lines that they would never allow for their businesses, but Tom Simpson, a late lamented golf course architect and great character, was fond of quoting Disraeli on the subject:

"It is much easier to be critical than to be correct"; or the words of Napoleon to his brother, "It is the greatest of all immoralities to engage in a profession of which one is ignorant."

The outspokenness of Simpson, who designed many masterpieces in Ireland and on the Continent, was legendary. Indeed, it set the tone of an obituary which the British journalist Henry Longhurst wrote before Simpson's death, because Simpson complained once that he would never see what Longhurst said about him. Given guaranteed immunity from legal actions, Longhurst immediately stressed Simpson's love of the unconventional, which made him the bane of so many golf club committees.

"His life has been one of unwavering hostility to government by committees in any shape or form and of ceaseless endeavor to get one-up on them. His first move when invited to design or alter a course was to win the first hole by turning up in a Rolls Royce, it thus being tacitly understood from the start that, if they did not like the result of his labors, they could do the other thing."

Not many in any walk of life can afford to adopt such a belligerent stance, but why, when they are quite happy to take a doctor's, lawyer's, or stockbroker's word on things, do golfers always think they know better than greenkeepers or golf course architects?