

CONTEMPORARY GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE — SAGA OR SATIRE?

Controversy seems to follow golf course architects everywhere — especially during a golf boom like we're experiencing now. Are today's architectural styles of lasting quality, or are they more like the fads that enjoy lots of press and then fade into obscurity? Following an introduction by Frank Hannigan, three highly qualified speakers from three different sectors of the golf community give their considered opinions.

by **FRANK HANNIGAN**

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WE ARE HERE to discuss trends in contemporary golf course architecture, and for that purpose we have gathered an unusual panel of three men — a golf course superintendent who also happens to be an excellent golfer; a club professional whose experiences and opportunities to evaluate this subject are unique in that he has been a first-rate player, and as an administrator has been responsible for the selection and setup of national championship courses, particularly the PGA Championship; and a golf course architect with a distinguished record both as a designer and as a leader of his professional organization.

The title of this session, "Saga or Satire?" was selected not by the panel, but rather by the agronomists of the USGA Green Section. It gives us a hint of why we're here. A controversy centers round certain aspects of contemporary golf course architecture, and that controversy rages particularly among the inner family of golf. I would certainly include this audience in that group.

This inner circle often compares contemporary golf course architecture unfavorably with the best works of what some of us think of as the Golden Age of American Golf Course Architecture, which began about the time of World War I and ended with the onset of the Depression in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

I have seen it happen among the best players in the world. It manifests itself in an unusual way. In recent years the courses where we've played the Open Championship have been wildly praised by most of the golfers. On the other hand, 10 to 20 years ago, the same group of people or their predecessors reviled



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the same courses because they did not like the rough and they did not like the fast greens.

Now, what has happened is interesting. The USGA hasn't changed at all. We're still using the same courses and setting them up the same way. The players' frame of reference has changed. They are now comparing our Open courses to those they play on the Tour, particularly to the stadium courses of the Tournament Players Clubs. They simply don't like them.

The great architects of this Golden Age, if that's what it was, were Donald Ross, A. W. Tillinghast, Alister MacKenzie, and Seth Ranor. Courses designed by these men not only endure, but they seem to grow in stature. They are pleasant to look at, they are fun to play, and when they're gussied up and made long enough, still make excellent championship sites.

Lovers of these old guys' works claim modern architecture is in many ways extreme. They cite these faults:

1. Their design features are often bizarre and out of harmony with the land.

2. Some architects seem to be off on ego trips. The name of the game seems not to build an excellent golf course, but to attract attention, any kind of attention, particularly so your course is photographed and appears in *Golf Digest* magazine. It's my perception that some golf holes are built today not to be played but to be photographed.

3. Costs are crazy, both in terms of actual construction, and in architects' fees. We hear of fees of \$1 million or higher in a couple of the celebrated cases. The whole thing has grown out of control, they say, and it's a terrible example at a time when what we obviously need are lower construction and maintenance costs, and more public facilities.

As far as the maintenance is concerned, we have common criticism about severe slopes that require hand work, and all that kind of thing. One of our speakers not long ago described his job as trying to maintain a golf course that some people have referred to as an agronomic zoo. As for costs, I think certainly the time can't be too far off when we will see bunkers or water hazards shored up not with pilings, but with Italian marble.

Finally, some people say that the profession of golf course architecture is itself sort of vague and fuzzy. Golf course superintendents have a *bona fide* organization and certification program. People look over your shoulder; a golf course superintendent is somebody with very specific education and training.



Yesterday's horses, wagons, and shovels vs. today's monster earth movers.

This isn't necessarily so in golf course architecture. Anybody can hang up a shingle. This was brought home to me recently on a personal level when a woman called me from California and asked me if I would be interested in becoming involved as an architect in a project in Palm Springs. I said, "I can't even get the water out of my basement, and you expect me to drain a green?" So those are the criticisms.

Now on the other hand, is it possible that today's golf course architects operate in a climate and under conditions that don't permit them to design courses that would rival what some of us think of as the great works of the Golden Age. Are they not often given poor sites, and work under terrific pressure to get in and out as fast as possible to get the thing open?

As for costs, well they probably reflect the market. The architect cannot be blamed for the cost of labor, for the cost of equipment, and for the cost of materials. Moreover, these costs may be, as far as I know, centered entirely or largely on high-profile courses. Those of us who come from these rarefied ivory towers of golf, as a matter of fact, see but a very few of modern American golf courses. For all we know, there are some very sound, basic, good courses being done that simply don't make it into *Golf Digest*. It needs to be said that architects build to satisfy their clients, and if a client says, "I want you to give me a course with the world's highest course rating and the world's highest slope rating," even though that will be a lousy golf course, and it will take five-and-a-half hours to play, somebody will build it for him, and it will draw a

lot of attention — for all the wrong reasons.

Above all, this is a different time, and the motives for building golf courses are different. The 20s was the period of the great boom in member-owned golf courses, and the architect was given just one charge: Go out and build us a good golf course, one we will enjoy playing, a place for pleasure.

Today the motives are different. The time of building member-owned golf courses is over; it's finished. There is probably a conflict between the profit motive and excellent golf. It's as simple as that, but when you have to take into consideration the number of rounds of golf, and the necessity for cart paths, that conspires against good art work. Those are some of the arguments in this world of ours.