

A Golf Course Superintendent's Standpoint

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ISUPPOSE if you look at some of the architectural gimmicks and fads being used today, such as bunkers shaped like Mickey Mouse, or holes shaped like a mermaid, or greens shaped like a heart, or vast flower beds surrounding an entire hole, or 20-foot-deep bunkers, one might conclude golf course architecture is indeed a satire. To give golf course architects credit, I'm sure if you look past the gimmicks and focus on the overall design, most agree that contemporary architecture is simply the continuing saga that started long ago, when Allan Robertson walked the linksland of St. Andrews, laying out holes in the manner that God created them. It progressed to building courses with steam engines and horse-drawn equipment, and has evolved into today's methods, when huge earth-moving equipment moves mountains to build a golf course.

Golf is in a booming period. Much of the work done by today's well-known architects draws great amounts of exposure through television, magazines, and other information media, and makes an impact on the game and on golf course maintenance.

In the history of golf, different periods of architecture exposed trends and directions that were popular at the time. Today's architecture is no different. Some trends and directions seem apparent.

The concept of target golf has undergone a renaissance, particularly in the resort areas, where courses are being built in deserts, mountains, and wetlands. These designs make use of natural, unmaintained areas. The contours often have quick, sharp lines and features, and the mounding is often marked by steep, severe slopes. These courses are usually exciting to play, particularly for the low-handicap player, although the severity of the hazards and natural area sometimes makes such courses frustrating and too difficult for the average player.

It is one of the misconceptions about target golf courses that they are easier and less expensive to maintain because these natural areas need so little care. I have found that because of the severity of the grades, and the need to keep un-



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wanted vegetation out of natural areas, they require a significant amount of hand labor, often enough to compensate for the greater amount of fine turf that must be maintained on more traditional courses. In some cases, the cost of maintaining this type of golf course has exceeded what the architects and owners had originally planned.

Target golf is not a new concept. *Prairie Dunes* (1937) and *Pine Valley* (1922) are both examples of the target golf style. One must remember that these are private clubs, with memberships that recognize the intent of the design. They are not resort or development facilities that must cater to all types of golfers with widely varying abilities.

Another concept being employed by today's architects is multiple free-form tees. Courses of the past didn't need large teeing grounds. As golf grew, though, tees had to grow to accommodate the extra traffic. This was done in the 1950s by building large landing strip type tees. Today's designers are building multiple tees, which enable golfers to play a hole from various angles and distances, creating a more interesting course, and helping accommodate the various golfers' needs and abilities.

Even though the residential development golf course has been around for years, it has been my observation that the architects and developers are doing

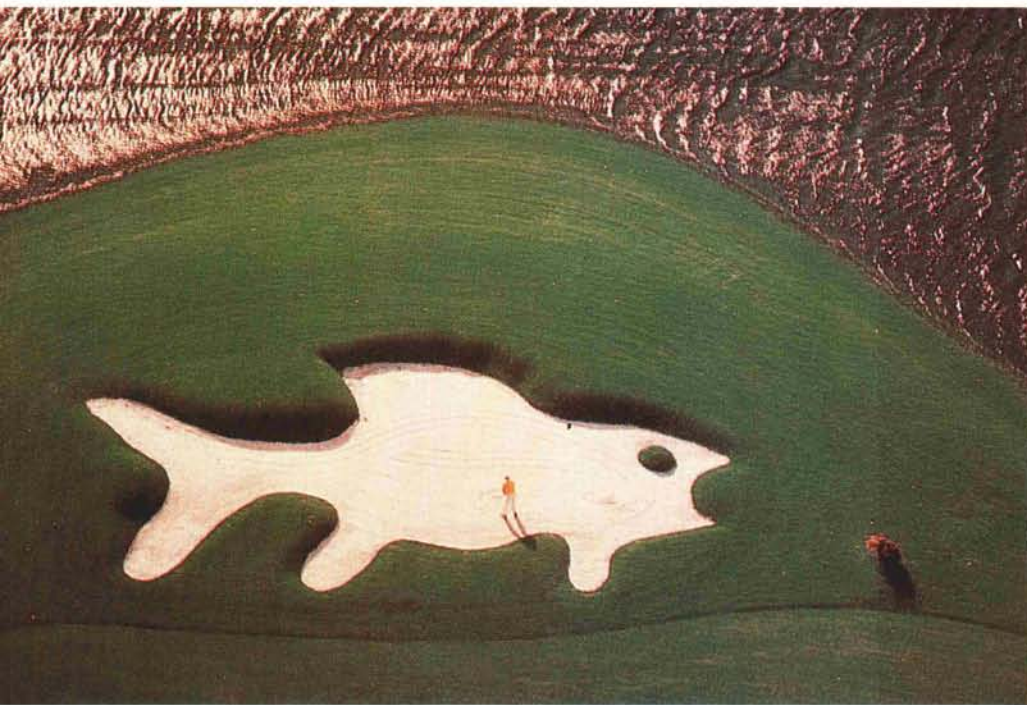
a job of making the frontage properties more compatible with the golf course. A beautiful tree-lined fairway is one of the more pleasurable sights in golf, while a fairway lined with homes, swimming pools, patios, and out-of-bounds stakes is annoying. Development projects today are using mounds, trees, different building materials, and various building styles to fit the property to the aesthetics and playability of the golf course.

More attention is also being paid to construction techniques and agronomics, including drainage, irrigation, grasses, and soil mixes. Unfortunately, shortcuts are still being taken in green construction, involving improper grading, poor drainage systems, inconsistent depths of material, untested materials, on-site mixing, and skipping critical steps such as the installation of the coarse sand layer between the pea gravel and the topmix layers. We have all seen enough disasters with respect to poor green construction methods.

In general, I think golf course construction techniques and specifications are becoming more of a priority to the architect than they have been in the past. I read somewhere, "Golf is played on grass. Grass responds to good management. Good management begins with good construction." Perhaps more than just the superintendents are beginning to realize this.

Practice areas have changed greatly in the past few years, and new areas are being given a great deal of consideration and planning in design. The practice range is no longer an afterthought. New ranges have become learning centers, with greens for putting, chipping, sand shots, and pitch shots, and tees facing in all directions. I think these practice areas are very well conceived and relevant to the times.

Flat bunkers with steep grass banks seem to be a trend in contemporary architecture, reminiscent of Charles Blair Macdonald and Seth Raynor, in the early 20th century. Some have claimed that this style of bunker is easier to maintain, but I'm not sure this is always the case. Mowing steep grass banks doesn't seem a whole lot easier than shoveling sand up bunker faces. I



personally like the Macdonald-style bunker, but I also like the beautiful flashing bunkers that Alister MacKenzie created at Cypress Point, and the Donald Ross wave-like bunkers at Seminole.

Bunkers to me are the accessories to a golf course, just as paintings are to a house. The walls would be bare without them. Bunkers are not just hazards; they help identify the golf course and give it emphasis, texture, and feel. I would hate to see such an intricate part of golf course architecture become too trendy and standardized.

This leads me to the trend of becoming trendy. To build a golf course that

is in vogue, so to speak, seems to be the means to economic benefit. What has happened is that some of the newer, more publicized golf courses have some definite trademarks and styles that have brought certain architects fame and notoriety. There is certainly nothing wrong with having trademarks or styles, but because of their popularity, a large number of owners and developers are asking for a particular look, or trademark, to market their development. This in turn has influenced many other architects to build elaborate, expensive, and trendy courses that look great on a calendar or a sales brochure, but are not always practical and economical to maintain, or fun to play.

In many instances, these elaborate, expensive golf courses have inflated the cost of golf to such an extent that many people just can't afford to play them. To pay over \$100 for a round of golf at a resort course is becoming commonplace. I should think new courses that are less expensive to build and maintain would be a big boost for golf in America.

Many of today's Tour players are jumping on the golf course design bandwagon. This might well be a logical market for them, since their endorsement of a golf course design would be quite valuable for selling the surrounding real estate. There is no doubt that some of these men, through their vast experience playing golf all over the world, have a keen sense of design, and could work well in a team with the right architect. To be a good architect, however, takes years of education, training, and experience in many fields, including engineering, golf, agronomy, business, landscape design, and architecture. I am sure these golfers make a definite contribution to the golf course design business, but I do wonder if the name on the course is the person who actually did the design work.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the influence of the golf cart on today's architecture and the game. The cart is certainly the direction that American golf is going. It is distressing to consider the percentage of golf rounds on resort and private clubs played with a cart. It would have to be in the range of 90 percent in some areas.

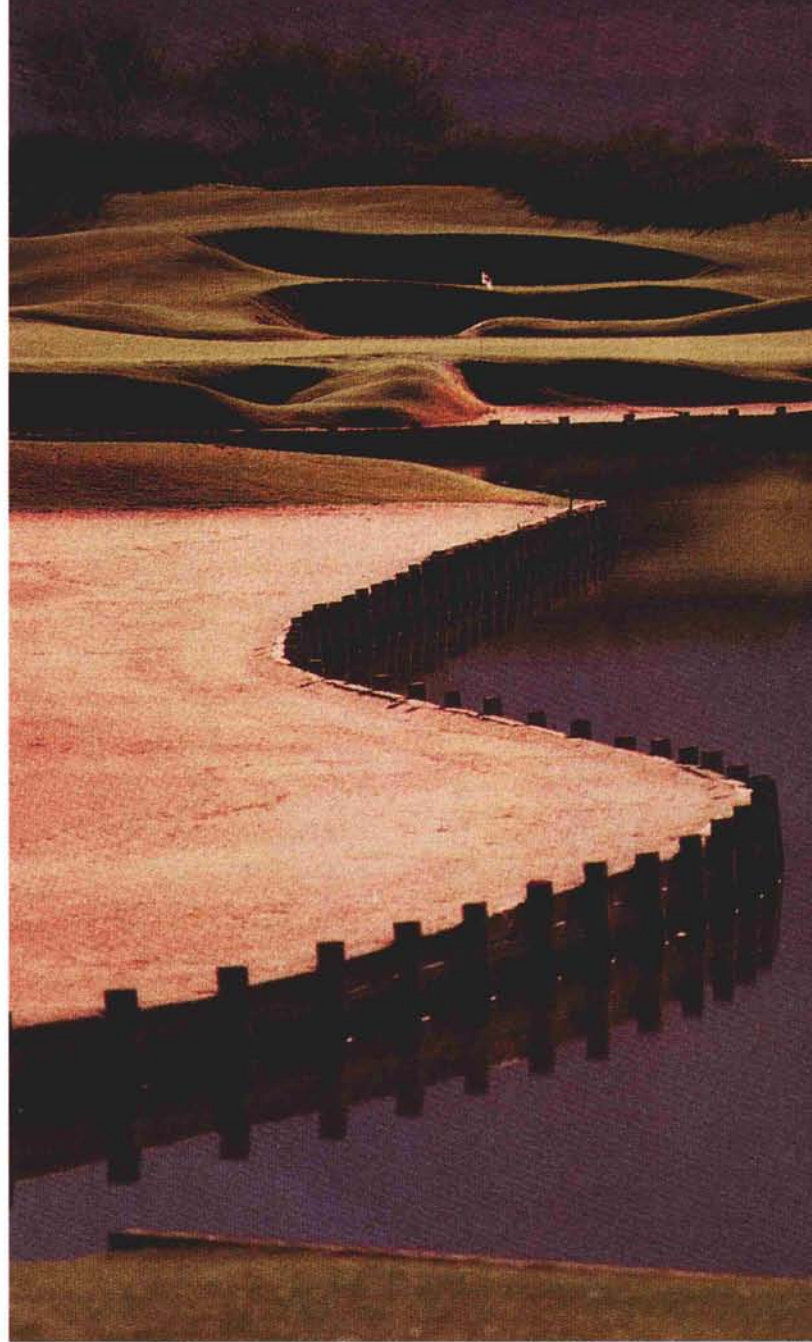
Indeed, a large number of the newer courses are designed to be played strictly with a cart. Although this is due partly to the severe terrain on which the courses are built, and on the amount of acreage needed for housing development, it is also encouraged by the fact that many other courses today do not allow walking. This not only is discouraging to those who enjoy walking, but it goes against the original concept of the game.

This makes me question our priorities with respect to golf. To me there are three priorities in golf: (1) the game, (2) the golf course, and (3) the golfer. In my view, this is the order in which the priorities should be placed. The order has been reversed today, and the golfer has become first priority at the expense of the condition of the golf course and the game itself.

Maybe a trend will develop in the future, and we will see more walkable golf courses. And maybe there will be



Many of today's courses are carved out of rugged, difficult sites.



Striking forms characterize some of today's architecture.

a concerted effort by all of our organizations to rearrange today's priorities and help preserve the image and integrity of the game.

I would like to read to you something written by Peter Thomson, five times the British Open Champion, regarding golf and architecture:

"Golfers in general have a certain passion for their sport which sets them apart. The game they play is not only a physical exertion, it is also a communion with nature and a walk in the great outdoors. For most of us this aspect brings a satisfaction almost supreme. Who has not noticed the

changing season, the cyclic nature of turfgrasses, the birds, and the trees in the course of a year's golf?

"It is easy to see that there is a certain similarity worldwide in all courses, and they vary in degree of beauty and turf quality. Greens come in all shapes and sizes, and bunkers come in various widths and depths. They all belong to a pattern of adventure which is the game itself.

"Golf architecture, like politics, is an inexact science. Almost anything is tolerated as long as it falls within the accepted scale. We do not argue with the absurdity of bunkers by the greens, trees

in the way to the flag, greens as islands in the middle of a lake. Without such things golf would be dull, and would never have grown to its present status and popularity."

Thomson's thoughts ring so very true. We have to remember golf course architecture is an art form; it cannot be bound by rules and restrictions. Fortunately, natural selection applies to golf course design. Good ideas perpetuate themselves. Fads without function tend to die out. That is why our great courses like Pine Valley, St. Andrews, Cypress Point, Augusta, and many others will prevail in the end.