



Play on this hole is compromised because of the tree on the left. Even from the back right portion of this tee, a large portion of the green is blocked. The bunker on the left is obscured, and the usable teeing area is reduced.

CHECK THE VIEW FROM THE BACK

Evaluation of a maturing golf course starts from the back tees.

by **DARIN BEVARD**

THE GOLFER steps up to the tee for his drive. He remembers years ago when a long, right-to-left shot would leave him a perfect approach to the green from the right center of the fairway. Now he must hit a short lay-up shot to avoid hitting the ball into the hazard on the left side of the landing area. "It was never meant to play this way," he thinks. What has happened?

* * *

At the time of construction, many golf courses have very few trees in their landscape. Often, trees are planted as an afterthought to make the course more difficult, more visually appealing, or to provide safety buffers and visual separation between adjacent holes. However, as the trees mature, the intended lines of play from tee to fairway and fairway to green can change

greatly. Features such as bunkers and water hazards may also become less visible to the player, especially from the tee. It basically comes down to the effects of these additions on the original design or presentation of the hole, especially as viewed from the tee.

Oftentimes the golf course superintendent is the one person who provides continuity to the course maintenance and improvement program and can observe how the golf course changes as it evolves and matures. Green Committees change. The turf manager has the opportunity to monitor changes in golf holes over time by evaluating the golf course on an annual or semi-annual basis. One way to perform this evaluation is from the back tees of each hole, keeping the other tees in mind as well. This allows the hole to be evaluated from tee to fairway from much the same perspective as the golfer

experiences it. In fact, it may even be beneficial to take pictures of each hole from the back tees to keep a record of how the course changes from year to year.

There are several different issues that can be evaluated during this process. These include alignment of tees, effects of trees and underbrush on visibility of hazards, effects on direction of play, and how this vegetation affects wear distribution on tees. There are other agronomic factors to consider as well. If these factors are evaluated on a regular basis, playability and fairness can be maintained without having to implement drastic changes. Oftentimes smaller trees can be moved to better locations where their impact on play is minimized, eliminating the need for the tough, emotional decisions that need to be made when a mature tree is involved.

Tee Alignment

This article will not address the issues of free-form, purposely unaligned tees vs. square-cornered tees. Rather, for this article it is assumed that the course wants tees aligned to the direction of play.

Through the planting of trees or through poor mowing practices, proper alignment between tees and fairways can be lost. Over time, a tee that once aimed to the centerline of the fairway may now be aligned off to one side of the golf hole. It has been my experience that if a tee is angled to the right, so is the golfer. If that golfer slices, as most do, the shot ends up in the rough or in the trees. This can add strokes, slow play, and frustrate the golfer.

One way to address this problem, in the worst case, is to rebuild and properly realign the tee, keeping in mind the changes that have occurred. However, another solution may be to simply alter mowing patterns. This is an inexpensive solution, but adds to the appearance and playability of the hole. By reshaping the mowed area of the tee to align in the proper direction, the player perceives the tee as being properly aligned even though the actual tee may not be. This can aid the player in preparing to play a shot more than most would suspect.

Hazard Issues

Another aspect that should be carefully evaluated from the tees is the effect maturing trees have on visibility and playability of hazards. Hazards can become obscured from view, and the player has no way of knowing a hazard is present except for local knowledge. The integrity of important features can be lost. Hazards, once positioned to challenge and even define a golf hole, can be hidden or lost. A lack of visibility can also present Rules of Golf problems. Questions come up, such as "Where did the ball last cross the margin of a water hazard? Did the ball, in fact, enter the hazard?" It is not imperative that the player sees the entire hazard. However, if the hazard is more visible, it can allow effects on playability to be known.

Planting trees can take hazards out of play altogether. Generally, where no trees were called for during the original construction, and a hazard is present, the architect intended for the hazard to provide the obstacle for the player. By planting trees, the trees can become the obstacle, and the hazard no longer

is needed or, worse yet, creates a double hazard situation and the player is forced to negotiate both the trees and hazard.

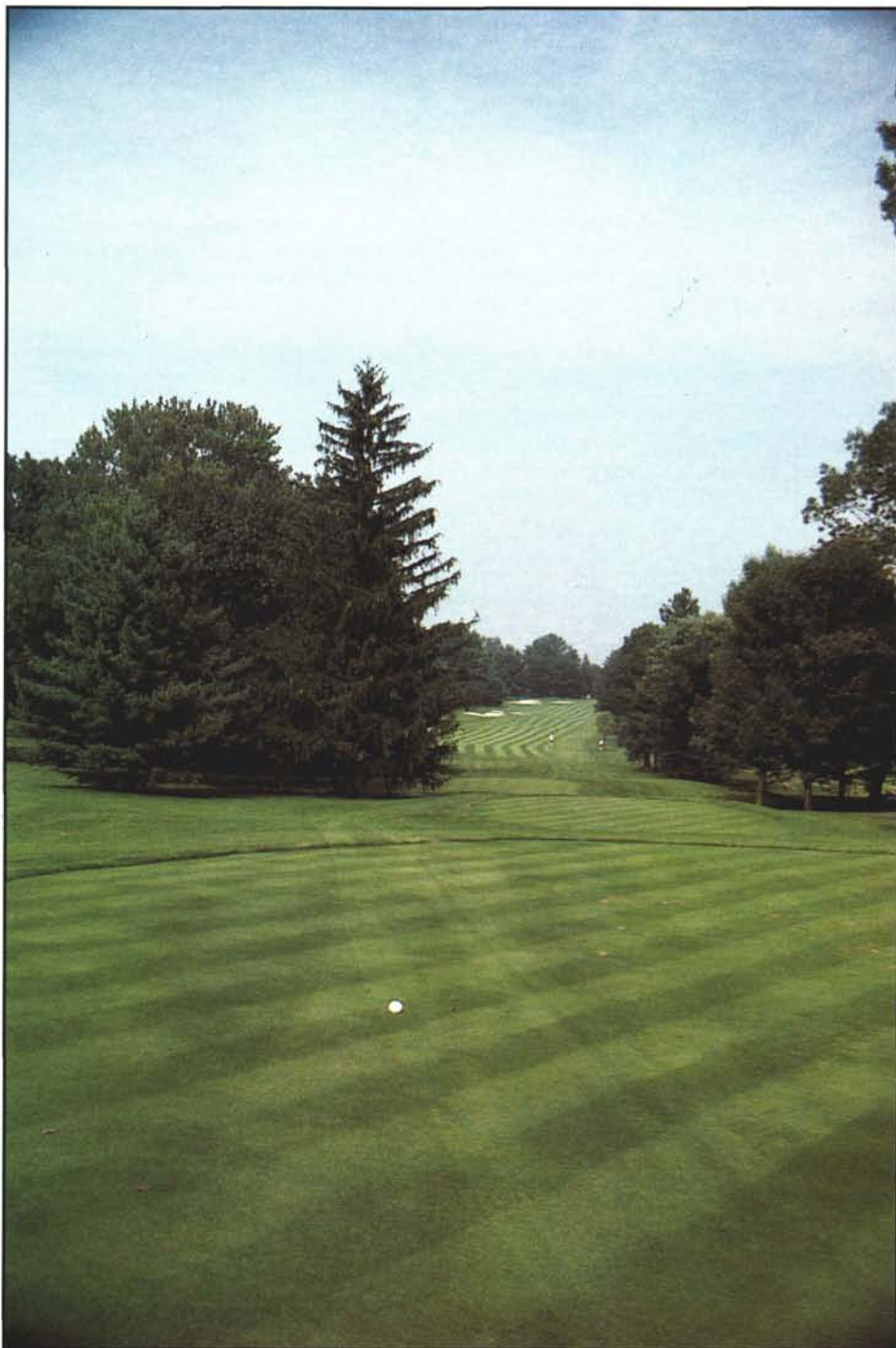
The other problem with blocking the view of bunkers as well as water hazards is that the aesthetic value of the hole is often decreased. The contrast between the sand or water and the grass is no longer present.

Unfortunately, when these situations occur, there are no simple solutions. It

is often a question of maintaining the hazard or removing the trees or vice versa. It makes little sense to continually provide maintenance for a bunker that rarely, if ever, comes into play, unless it defines direction.

Direction of Play

As they continue to mature, trees or other added obstacles can force a change in the direction of play for a



The left portion of this tee is virtually unusable due to the presence of the trees on the left. Wear is concentrated on the right side of the tee while the left side receives little traffic.

golf hole. For example, when trees are first planted, a shot can be played over them. As they grow, they force play to go around them. This forces the player to hit a lay-up shot or to manufacture a shot to avoid hitting into a bunker or water hazard that at one time was never even in the line of play for a properly played shot. Worse yet, these types of plantings can force play in the direction of adjacent holes, presenting a safety hazard for other players. Efforts should also be made to prevent weed trees growing in waste areas from becoming large enough to affect direction of play or the view of the hole.

Agronomic Considerations

The effects of maturing trees on the playability of a golf hole from tee to fairway are often obvious. However, the effects on wear distribution on the actual tee are often not noticed by the layperson.

Placing an obstacle of any kind in the line of play between tee and fairway will generally cause the player to select one side of the tee or the other. For example, if a tree blocks the line of sight to the left side of the hole, shots will generally be played from the right side of the tee box in an effort to avoid interference. This often leads to one side of the tee exhibiting poor turf quality due to high amounts of divots being taken in a very small portion of the tee. Usable teeing space can be



This tree provides a double hazard situation. The location forces the player to hit out of the bunker and negotiate the tree as well. One or the other should be considered for removal.

greatly reduced when trees encroach on the line of sight from tee to fairway.

One other agronomic factor that should be examined on championship tees is not related to trees at all. Thatch accumulations on back tees are often extreme. This can be a result of these tees being ignored to some degree from a maintenance standpoint. However, thatch accumulations generally result from the lack of traffic these tees receive. It's ironic that thatch accumulations are usually the worst on the

back tees. The golfers who play from these areas are the ones who find the spongy surface most objectionable and can actually tell the difference while playing the game. Evaluating this aspect of the championship tees can also be important.

Summary

Evaluating your golf course on a regular basis and correcting small problems as they occur can prevent major changes from occurring with regard to tree encroachment and other factors. The architectural integrity of individual golf holes and their associated hazards can also be protected. Trees or other obstructions can add to the character of a golf hole when they are properly placed. Remember that trees grow, and as they do, they can have a profound effect on the golf course.

As a suggestion, take some time and evaluate the appearance and playability of individual golf holes from the back tees, and don't forget the more forward tees. As a turf manager, it is easy to be consumed by agronomics and forget what the golf course is really for. To the golfer, it's how the hole looks and plays!



A slight altering of the mowing pattern on the tee can provide much better alignment to the fairway and eliminate the need for costly renovations.

DARIN S. BEVARD is an agronomist in the Mid-Atlantic Region. He has been with the Green Section since 1996, visiting golf courses in Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia.