Goofy Golf

Today's course designers are changing the nature of the game by resorting to all kinds of gimmicks

by TOM DOAK
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Depending how you look at it, the item pictured below is either a fish out of water or, given that it's a bunker, a fish out of sand. But either way, this concoction from the new Aberdeen course in Boynton Beach, Florida, is noteworthy not because of its strange piscatorial shape, but because it's a good example of what's bad in modern golf course architecture.

A boom in course construction in recent years, combined with the inherent competition among designers and real estate developers, has made it downright rare to find a course that hasn't resorted to some form of bizarre trickery, be it 20-foot-deep bunkers, huge boulders, mammoth mounds or vast beds of flowers.

Or take island greens—please. They're one of the hottest items in architecture ever since the island green Pete Dye built at the 17th hole at the TPC at Sawgrass garnered so much publicity as the centerpiece for the PGA Tour's controversial championship layout. Never mind that Dye didn't invent the concept: Previous attempts at the Ponte Vedra Club, also at Sawgrass, the Golden

continued

Tom Doak

The new age of golf course design: Desmond Muirhead's outrageous fish-shaped bunker at Aberdeen in Florida.



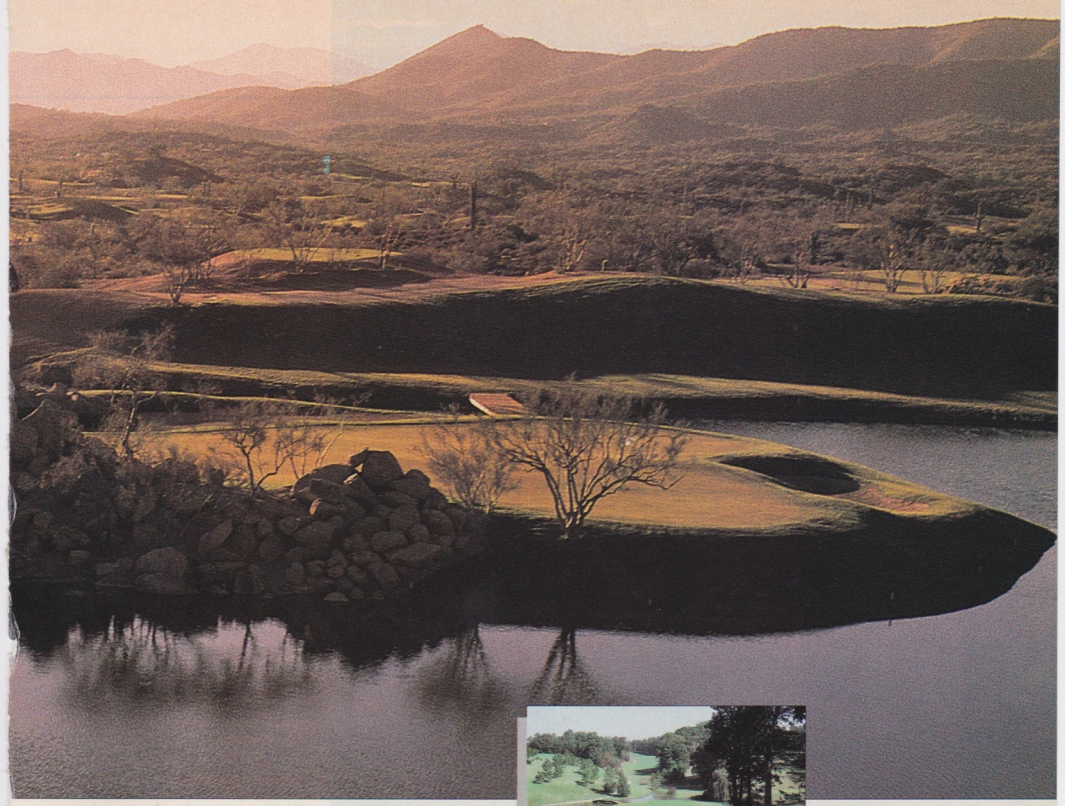
Brian Morgan

Horseshoe in Williamsburg, Virginia, and The Woodlands, in Houston, didn't catch on. But it was Dye's island that set off a wave of imitations. "About half of our clients ask for an island green or some other special feature," says Tom Pearson, the senior designer for Golden Bear, Inc., Jack Nicklaus' firm. There seems no end to the fad: Nicklaus' recently-completed Cochise course at Desert Mountain, outside Scottsdale, Arizona, features an island with a double green, while a developer up in Lake Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, is searching for an architect to build the first *floating* island green. Let's hope that baby sinks in dry dock.

Granted, golf course architects traditionally have had their own eccentricities. Going back to the turn of the century, Henry Fownes had his Church Pews bunker, a vast sandpit traversed by seven parallel grass ridges, at Oakmont, outside Pittsburgh. Charles Blair Macdonald dug a five-foot-deep swale across the ninth green at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, and George Thomas sunk a bunker in the middle of the sixth green at Riviera in Los Angeles. Even the pond Donald Ross put on the 16th hole at Pinehurst No. 2 probably was considered daring.

But these were rare departures from a generally conservative style. Today, what were once occasional vices have become bad habits. Architects, hellbent on demonstrating "that inordinate thirst after novelty" that Macdonald decried, seem determined to throw in a double green, railroad ties or a waterfall on every hole.

Contrary to the claims of some architects, much of the gewgaws with which they adorn their courses weren't even part of golf in Macdonald's or Ross' day. Railroad ties on early Scottish courses were an occasional feature used to prevent a bunker face from blowing away; Pete Dye made them chic. Rock walls around ponds were once found only where rock was on hand; it's not uncommon today to truck rocks in from 100 miles away, as was the case at PGA West in Palm Desert, California, where they were stained red to fool golfers into thinking they were chiselled fresh from the nearby Santa Rosa Mountains. Waterfalls, first employed by Joe Lee at Bonaventure, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and popularized by



Nicklaus at The Hills of Lakeway in Austin, Texas, are created nowadays in areas with neither water nor a place for it to fall. One Ted Robinson layout in Palm Springs even has more waterfalls than holes.

Free-standing boulders also are *de rigeur* these days, whether for 150-yard markers, such as at Boyne Mountain, Michigan, or as vast stone pom-poms atop mounds, such as those on the new Nicklaus Private Course at PGA West. Then there are the flowering plants that interfere with play, such as the pampas grass sprouting around Florida courses or the sprawling floral displays at Robert Trent Jones Jr.'s SentryWorld in Wisconsin.

Often the features of a hole are manipulated for some purpose other than originally intended. Double greens, for instance, evolved at St. Andrews in Scotland because the original outgoing and incoming holes had played to the same greens. They make no special contribution to shot values. But many architects, including Nicklaus, Bob Von Hagge and Bruce Devlin, and Jay Morrish and Tom Weiskopf, employ them because

continued

Tom Doak



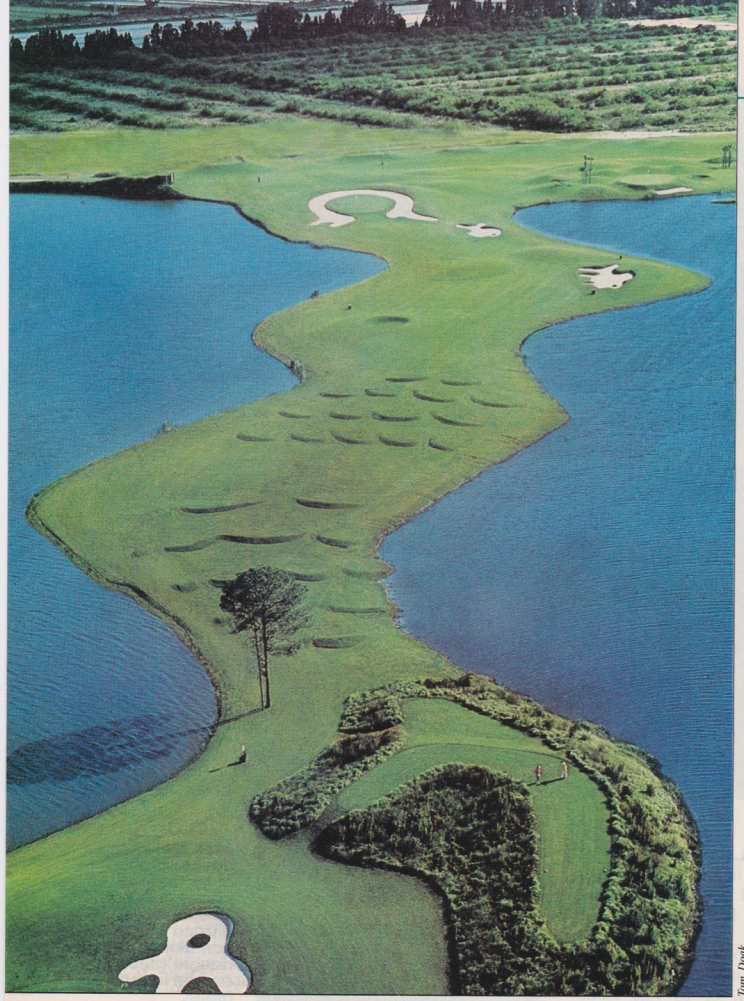
Tom Doak



Brian Morgan

Jack Nicklaus double-dipped at his Cochise course in Desert Mountain, Arizona (above), combining a double green and an island green.

The island green is not new. Robert Trent Jones built one at The Golden Horseshoe in Williamsburg, Virginia (top left), in the 1960s. But when Pete Dye unveiled the 17th at Sawgrass (middle left) in Florida in 1980, the idea took off. Dye built another at PGA West in Palm Desert, California.



Tom Doak



Brian Morgan

Muirhead's Aberdeen doesn't rest up. Above is the 11th hole, titled "The Mermaid." At right is the ninth at the Honors Course in Ooltewah, Tennessee. Even though the green is lined by rocks, the Dye design has been praised for its lack of gimmicks.

they sound good in the advertising blurbs: "A double green, just like at St. Andrews." Now there are more double greens in America than there are gorse bushes on the Old Course.

There are even a pair of triple greens in the United States, one designed by Robert Trent Jones at Turnberry Isle in Florida, the other by Jack Snyder at Cave Creek, Arizona. Nicklaus has permutated greens to extremes at his Renegade course at Desert Mountain: alternate greens on some holes, alternate pins on double greens at others and a couple of double greens with bunkers in them.

Other weird greens of recent vintage include one at Gene Hamm's Cape Golf Course in Wilmington, North Carolina, where a tree grows out of the putting surface (how do you read roots?); Nicklaus' 13th green at the Country Club of the South, which has a bisecting creek (at least Nicklaus was kind enough to position the green so that chipping from one part to another should be rare); a green at the bottom of a quarry at Dan Maples' Cramer Mountain course in North Carolina; and Pete Dye's five-tiered green at Carmel Valley Ranch, California, which cascades from where Dye thought the green should be to where the developer wanted it. What kind of golf shot is a 90-yard putt that has to clamber up five levels? Not much of one at all. After all, who needs two transcontinental whacks to get into three-putt territory?

Therein lies the main reason for all these gimmicks. Developers encourage architects to toss in everything including the kitchen sink. "They [developers] want every hole to look like a postcard," laments Dye. Adds Trent Jones Jr., "I spend as much time these days telling clients what I don't want to do as I spend telling them what I will do."

Another cause of gimmickry is the ease with which modern construction equipment moves dirt. "There's more water on courses today because of the capacity to excavate," says Pearson. Adds Carolinas designer Maples, "When my grandfather was building the early courses at Pinehurst with Donald Ross, they could move only one-third of a cubic yard of dirt at a time. It was hard to think big."

But "thinking big" may well be the problem with current design, not the cure. Zealous to create something new or "pay tribute" to Scotland, many architects are building things Old Tom Morris wouldn't recognize as golf. Vast boulders and flower beds, for instance, are unplayable situations. Choosing between three-putting around a hazard or chipping over it is ludicrous. In direct contrast to the essence of the Scottish game, which is to redeem one's mistakes with the next shot, modern architecture encourages picking up.

Architects would do well to remember that the top 17 courses in GOLF Magazine's 100 Greatest Courses in the World (as of September, 1987) were built without benefit of bulldozers. (Two new entries, Dye's Honors Course in Ooltewah, Tennessee, and Morrish/Weiskopf's Troon, outside Scottsdale, Arizona, were both lauded for their lack of gimmickry, even though the former has a fairway sunk into the dyke of a water hazard and a green shored up by rocks, and the latter has a double green.)

Bunkers, the architect's primary weapon, were once the architect's trademark: Macdonald, Ross, A.W. Tillinghast, Thomas, Trent Jones and Dick Wilson each had a distinctive, recognizable style.

continued

Glenmoor (right), a Dye design in Englewood, Colorado, has more railroad ties than the Rock Island Line. The 13th at Nicklaus' CC of the South (right) in Alpharetta, Georgia, has a stream in the green.



Tom Doak



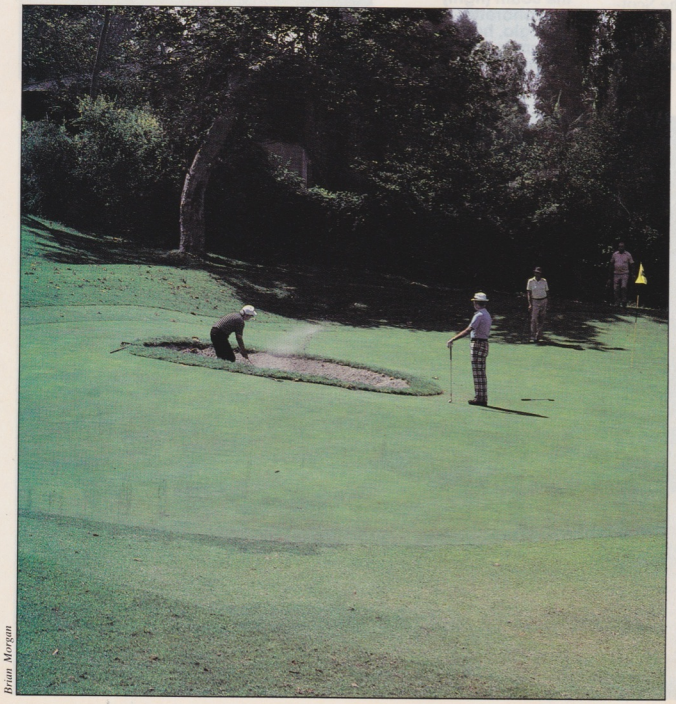
Tom Doak

Architects today seem to lean toward "waste bunkers" with flat sand bottoms and grass banks (like those at the TPC at Sawgrass), combined with the occasional small, round "Scottish" pot. (Never mind that most American courses have none of the abrupt contours that spawned the Scottish models.) The big three of modern architecture, Dye, Nicklaus and Tom Fazio, adhere closely to this style, and many of the pretenders to the throne (Morrish, Bob Cupp, Arthur Hills) mimic their style in searching for similar success.

So the only original looking bunkers are eccentricities. Sometimes an entire course will crop up with unique bunkering, such as Fazio's Desert Course at The Vintage Club, where the traps are huge and contoured, but more often the special bunkers are limited to a handful per course. Fazio has been big on pot bunkers with stacked-sod faces, such as those at Carnoustie or Muirfield in Scotland; a more recent innovation has been the "beach bunker," which rises out of a water hazard (and saves the wayward shot from the drink). Dye gave us the 20-foot-deep waste bunker at PGA West.

As bunkers have become indistinguishable, mounding has become the trademark of most architects, who swear their hillocks look or play like the dunes of the great British links courses. Nicklaus' cone-shaped mounds at Grand Cypress and Loxahatchee, both in Florida, resemble "a line of teepees," according to one Tour player, who adds, "The seventh hole at Loxahatchee looks like a meeting of the Indian nations." (A popular, though less eloquent, comment describes Loxahatchee as "a walk down mammary lane.") Whereas Nicklaus' mounds are of consistent dimension, Fazio's are growing knobbier as more appear and are pockmarked with grass pot bunkers. Rees Jones' mounds are the biggest and broadest. Cupp's New course at Indianwood, near Detroit, features mounds with surfaces so scarred that they may foster the return of the ancient rut iron. But the chief difference between the United States and Scotland is that the sand dunes in Scotland were there from the beginning. Artificial mounds on American courses look just that, artificial.

Perhaps the worst offenders in the gimmick category are the "theme courses," where an entire project is built around a story. Hey, the public relations people love it. These include Stadium courses; "torture tracks," such as the Stadium course at PGA West or the Lagoon Legend at Bay Point, Florida; "quasi-Scottish" layouts, few of which play anything like the genuine article; Nicklaus' Cayman (half-distance) courses, which flopped owing to the thrill of crushing a drive 125 yards; "museum" courses, which purportedly reproduce famous holes from famous courses, such as at Golden Ocala, Florida; and the "symbolic" layout, such as Desmond Muirhead's course at Aberdeen. About all you need to know about this course is contained in Muirhead's description of the par-four sixth hole: "I'm modestly claiming," he says not too modestly, "that it could be read as a metaphor for the creation and the entire human condition in general.... Devices are incorporated to symbolize the formation of the earth, the emergence of mountains, the symbolic rule of four, and the significance of Mount Meru, the mythic mountain and the center of the ancient universe which supports the heavens. Even gestalt psychology is brought in again. Obviously I had a very good time designing it!" Aberdeen (note the Scottish name) includes holes in the shape of a rattlesnake, a mermaid and Marilyn Monroe; a yin/yang green and bunkers shaped like grasping hands, and, according to Muirhead, tributes to such diverse personalities as Freud, Kierkegaard, Henry Moore and The Beatles.



Brian Morgan

George Thomas built the bunker in the sixth green at Riviera, Los Angeles.

Muirhead isn't the only designer resorting to symbolism, just the most extreme. Trent Jones Jr. never finished his layout in Egypt in the shape of the ankh, the Egyptian symbol of life, and Hills has a par three under the main approach to McCarran Airport in Las Vegas with four teeing areas in the shape of a spade, a heart, a club and a diamond.

Fortunately, natural selection applies to golf course design. Good ideas perpetuate themselves. Fads without function die out. No better illustration comes to mind than the pastoral method Dye hit on a few years ago for clearing the rough waste areas at the TPC at Sawgrass. Small herds of goats were to be stationed around the course to devour the weedy growth, just as is done in some parts of Ireland and in other foreign countries. Unhappily for the goats, Dye and the developers forgot one thing: Ireland has no alligators.

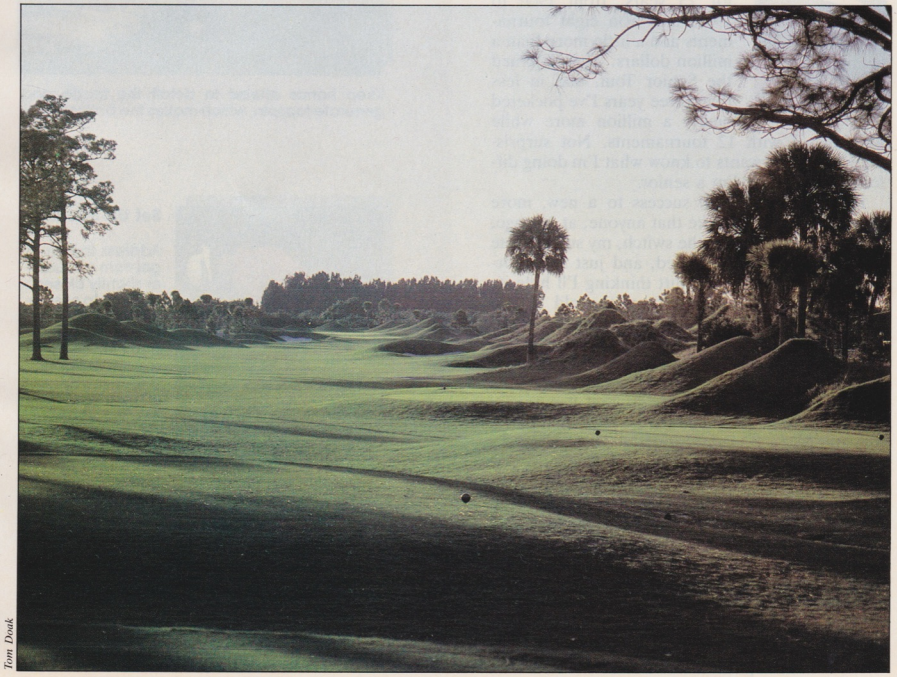
And the 'gators ate the goats.

If only some of the other gimmicks could sort themselves out as efficiently.■

More Nicklaus gimmicks: a waterfall (right) at the Hills of Lakeway in Austin, Texas, and drastic mounding at Loxahatchee in Jupiter, Florida, which has been described as "a walk down mammary lane."



Tom Doak



Tom Doak