COURSE WORK BY TOM DOAK



Consulting Report Part I: Mowing Lines

A few small changes can make a big difference for little money.

When I started to consider ideas for this column, it occurred to me that most of our consulting work covers basically the same territory, the same problems that every golf course faces as it evolves over time. Over the next several columns, I intend to address these subjects in a general "consulting report" that will give every club an idea of what a golf course architect would look at if asked to consult. Since so many local clubs were kind enough not to throw me off their courses while I was trespassing to study them – well, except for that one time at Lido Beach! – it seems like the least I could do to thank them.

The first club to hire me as an architectural consultant was Garden City Golf Club, back in 1989. In those days, the idea of a million-dollar restoration would have made any green chairman faint; we called our master plan a "long range plan" because it would take a while to implement. There were still lots of new courses to build, so architects didn't have to push renovation work to feed their families!

I was only 28, and I understood that I would have to gain the members' confidence, even with the green committee fully behind me. I could see that there were three greens that needed restoration, because they had been moved in the 1960s and didn't hold a shot the way they used to since they were built with different materials. But rather than immediately tackling a big and controversial project like the 12th green, I started with what I call the "low hanging fruit" – inexpensive details that might awaken the membership to how the course had lost its subtleties and become overgrown over time. (New green chairs, take note: Club politics often demands that you overlook the most glaring problem with the course for a couple of years after you take over, to avoid sticking your thumb in the eye of your predecessor. If you start slowly, you can gain momentum for the changes you really want, rather than jumping into the most controversial hole and hoping everyone likes the change.)

The easiest thing to modify on a course is the mowing lines. Most courses designed in the Golden Age of the 1920s were built with fairways 45 to 60 yards wide, as C.B. Macdonald had recommended in his writings. Years later, nearly all of them were narrowed to 35 or 40 yards, because that's all a single-row irrigation system would cover. If the USGA or MGA came in to prepare a course for a tournament, they probably brought it down to 30 yards in the landing areas. (These days, it's more like 25.)

The problem with all these changes was that they rarely had anything to do with the topography of the hole or the positioning of the bunkers; it was design by tape measure, and to hell with what the architect had intended. Some bunkers wound up 15 yards deep in the rough, where they were only in play if you flew directly into them – and why would you? The fairway behind them that used to reward your daring was now three-inch rough! The strategy designed into many courses was gone, replaced by a rote test of driving between the lines. (This is exactly what Pinehurst No. 2 had evolved to in the early 2000s; for all the hullaballoo about its early 2010s restoration, 75% of it was about restoring the mowing lines.)

Sometimes it's hard to take the mowing lines back to where they belong, because the club has also planted trees in what used to be the fairway, and the politics of tree removal can be mind-numbingly difficult. (More about that in my next column.) But if there aren't trees in the way, dig out the oldest aerial photo you can find of the course; it can be a treasure map of ways to make the course more interesting for everyday member play. The Met Area was one of the first places in the nation where local governments used aerial photography to map every county. The oldest of these date back to 1926, when the Golden Age courses in the area were virtually brand new. I can still remember going to the Nassau County Planning Department for the first time and having them pull out a single large sheet that showed not only Garden City but The Creek, Piping Rock, the original Deepdale, and Macdonald's Lido in crisp black-and-white detail.

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At Garden City, we widened many fairways in strategic spots by 10-15 yards, so that members could play for better angles of attack to the greens, and the shots along the edges might leak into the pot bunkers that Walter Travis had dug to guard those ideal spots.

Now for the question I get most often from club members wherever I work: But won't making the fairways wider (or cutting trees, or anything else I've proposed) make the course easier? The strange part is that the guy who asks is often a 15-handicapper for whom the course is plenty hard. It's taken me years to sort out this dynamic, but I think he doesn't want the better players to accuse him of making the course easier for himself; as a result, he lets the low-handicappers take charge and favor ideas that make it even harder.

My response? Maybe the course will wind up half a shot easier. But you won't have to wait while the guy in front of you dribbles two hybrids trying to escape the rough, and we can get that half a shot back easily with some of the other things we might have in store.

Another place to pay attention to the mowing lines is at the entrances to the greens. Many superintendents tend to formalize the approach into a symmetric neck, leaving as rough the undulations at the margins that could steer a ball down into a bunker – or around them to a tight hole location.

Some clubs have recently added tightly-mowed chipping areas to the sides of the green where there are no bunkers. In the right conditions, these can add a great deal of short-game interest, but beware – in the Met Area, the bentgrass fairway surface doesn't work well for chipping and "Texas wedge" play unless it's mowed super-tight, in which case the chipping areas will be quite expensive to maintain. At many courses, for my tastes at least, bluegrass rough around parkland greens is a classic look that needn't be abandoned for the latest thing.

Whatever your choices, these are changes that can be easily implemented at the end of one golf season and the start of the next, as long as the membership isn't too put off by a bit of scalped grass for a while. You can also re-sod the areas you're going to change instead of scalping them down and re-seeding them, but that turns a $20,000 project into a six-figure one, which defeats the purpose of gaining the members' confidence cheaply. ■

