COURSE WORK BY TOM DOAK



Radical Arborectomy

Consulting Report Part II: Tree Management

Many years ago I wrote a consulting report for Stonewall in Philadelphia, the first private-club course I had built (and the site of last year's U.S. Mid-Amateur). The site was an old dairy farm before it became a golf course, with big stands of mature trees at the margins where it got too rocky to farm, but where we needed to build a couple of golf holes. In building the par-3 15th, I'd been much too conservative in clearing trees out, and the superintendent was having trouble growing grass on the small green because it got so little sunlight.

Now in a position of greater trust, I told them that this wasn't a matter of just pruning back a few trees. It really was going to require a "radical arborectomy." My client got such a laugh out of the term that it convinced him to do the work that was needed.

That was an easy one; I was dealing with a client I'd known for years, and there were no arguments to be made about what the original designer would have wanted. Convincing a private club that trees are in the way is rarely that easy, because of the political nature of clubs with 300 members. Clearing is always going to be contentious, even though few would dispute that a golf course is a growing thing and, eventually, trees will grow into the way of play. Often, you are in the position of trying to convince the same people who planted the trees in the first place [or perhaps their offspring] that they made a mistake. Self-inflicted landscaping mistakes like choosing the wrong species of tree can lead to years of expenses for removing leaf litter, seed pods, or other debris that messes with mowing operations.

Even if the membership is on board, some towns have written restrictive tree ordinances that make it difficult to remove any sizable tree without bringing in a consultant to pronounce it diseased. In our renovation of North Shore G.C. on Long Island, you can tell where the property crosses a township boundary, because on one side of the line we could remove trees however we wanted, but the township on the other side wouldn't let us touch any tree with a trunk more than four inches thick.

There are three general reasons to remove trees, and a clear hierarchy among them: to promote the health of the turf, to open up views across the property or off site, and to restore the playability of a hole where trees have encroached too far.

As with grassing lines, my general m.o. is to start slowly. The obvious place to start is to take any trees that are competing with the health of the turf on greens and tees. Your superintendent probably has a handy list of these, and if you want your playing surfaces in great condition, it's crazy to argue in favor of trees that are doing harm, even if they are big and beautiful. Nowadays there are software apps that can show you right on your mobile phone which trees are causing critical shade issues on your greens.

Playability should really be the next concern, but because it's such a subjective thing and tree removal is so contentious, I usually concentrate on aesthetics first. I'll try to find a couple of spots where tree growth has blocked an especially attractive view and remove the obstacles. When members suddenly notice a view they'd never seen before, the project gains credibility.

On my first such job at Garden City Golf Club, I started with a single tree – a beautiful flowering cherry that had been planted in isolation behind the tenth green. Everyone was going to notice if it went away; what they didn't realize is that in its absence, golfers would see all the way across to the other side of the property toward the 15th green half a mile distant, an amazing effect on what is a fairly small piece of ground for golf. When the committee expressed doubt, I resorted to psychology: I said that at a typical country club I would have expected such resistance, but at a men's club I was surprised at all the concern over one flowering tree. Soon it was gone, and eventually whole blocks of trees were cleared away to open up the course; today I'm more concerned that I'll come back one day and there won't be any trees left at all!

The deforestation of Oakmont in Pennsylvania has been rightly praised by many, and it was true to the roots of the original design. But in one sense the publicity surrounding it has backfired, because when we start discussing trees, some members believe we are out to chop them all down. For me, anyway, nothing could be further from the truth. My goal is to highlight the best of the trees as features of the golf holes, and it's amazing to see just how often they've been hidden behind two rows of newer plantings.

Self-inflicted landscaping mistakes can lead to years of expenses for removing leaf litter, seed pods, or other debris.

Playability is the most contentious part of the debate, because there are two factions opposed: those who don't want to kill a living thing, and those good players who value every tree for making the golf course harder, in whatever stupid location they might be found.

It's rare for a golf hole on a classic course to have been designed around a tree, because their architects understood what would eventually happen, but it's not unknown. Sometimes there is plenty of room on the other side for the hole to grow laterally and keep the tree relevant; other times not, and the tree may eventually sabotage the original strategy of the hole – when, for example, the design was intended to reward carrying a hazard on the inside of a dogleg, but an overhanging tree farther along blocks the next shot for the successful gambler.

I went to landscape architecture school for three years, every minute of which my professors tried to drill into us how much the spaces we were designing would change over the decades from tree growth. It's not just that the trees grow taller – it's how much bigger around they get, bulging into the airspace of the golf hole.

The most acute problems arise when a tree dies and the committee plants a replacement inside of where it used to be because the new planting is smaller than the first. It only takes a few years before the tree has encroached on the centerline of the hole, and the fairway is narrower than it used to be. The infestation of Dutch Elm Disease on the east coast was a critical turning point in the landscape of Met Area courses, because their replacements (often sugar maples, pin oaks, lindens, or ash trees) did not have the arching form that allows for recovery play as gracefully as the American elms did.

The loss of a single American elm, on the approach to the 10th hole at Winged Foot East, serves as a caution about the eventual result of using a beautiful tree as an integral part of a golf hole. Does that mean A.W. Tillinghast should have cut down the tree in 1929? Surely, he would tell us that 'tis better to have loved and lost such a tree, than never to have loved at all. ■

