Restoring Your Home Course

By Tom Doak and Bruce Hepner

Our love for classic golf courses and our studies of them have provided us with a number of opportunities to *restore* golf courses to their original design intent. Indeed, there are several practicing golf architects today who make their living exclusively from these jobs, and who claim to be particular experts in the work of Donald Ross, A. W. Tillinghast, Alister Mackenzie, or some other master of golf design.

Though it is always dangerous to assume that another architect [particularly a great one] had certain *rules* of design that were followed religiously, we often find ourselves regurgitating the same sort of advice to older clubs that have lost the lustre of their original courses -- whether designed by Ross himself, or some unheralded Scots pro of the same era. Since we can't get to every course, we've decided to share a few of these general observations, in the hope that not every club will need to pay for an expensive *master plan* for simple advice in restoring their courses.

Our assessment of older golf courses generally comes down to five critical topics: shrunken greens, *musical bunkers,* clashing styles, shifted mowing lines, and tree interference.

Shrunken Greens

It would be a natural assumption that vintage golf course designs featured very small greens, since the number of rounds played per year was nowhere near today's figures. In fact, though, we find that many vintage designs still averaged over 5,000 square feet per green, and some designers such as Seth Raynor built greens in the 7,000 to 10,000 square foot range. They may have been designed large because they were firmer in those days and approaches did not stop immediately.

In almost all cases, older greens were built out very near the edge of the plateau on which they were constructed, or very near the bunkers which guarded them. Many were reduced in area during the Depression or World War II, and after the war the change was forgotten. It is not unusual for this shrinkage to constitute 20 to 30 percent of the original green's area.

Further shrinkage has occurred over time as riding maintenance equipment was employed: curves tend to become softer and corners rounder, nearly always losing green surface in the process. [Maintenance workers get chewed out if they scalp the collar, but not if they go ½ inch inside the last cut.] Even my own first courses, which are less than ten years old, have seen changes in the shapes of the more irregular greens.

The tragedy of this shrinkage is that the areas lost were usually the most challenging pin placements on the course -- at the edge of a green hanging over a yawning bunker or behind a contour, forcing players to choose between aiming for the middle of the green or flirting with danger to attack the hole. Restoring the greens to their original size and shape will not only bring back history -- it will bring back the drama which was originally designed into the course.

Old aerial photos [pre-war if possible] can yield very exact readings of the original sizes and shapes of greens, but a green chairman with imagination can, too. If topdressing has built up on the smaller green over time, raising the original perimeter of the green to blend smoothly with the present surface requires a professional job; but in many cases simply scalping down the additional green area in the fall and overseeding will produce a good putting surface by the end of the next summer.

Musical Bunkers

Human nature compels volunteer green committee chairmen to attempt to leave the course better than they found it. The same human nature tends to search for improvement in things which the observer feels are unfair -- typically, bunkers which capture his shot.

Still other *do-gooders* set out to eliminate bunkers which "don't come into play for the good player." This is presumably a noble concept, but it is a modern theory, not really compatible with the philosophies of most prewar designers who placed their bunkers to demand strategy from all golfers, not just a few.

In either case, the most compelling bunkers are often the very first to be removed, because they are in places likely to cause trouble. To paraphrase Mackenzie and Ross, a controversial hazard is the best kind.

Again, an old aerial photo will settle what was where. You'll likely find that the original bunkers were much bigger, and that they were usually staggered down the hole, rather than placed opposite one another, so players of different lengths off the tee had different hazards to consider in thinking where to hit the drive. The problem with an *ideal distance* for fairway bunkers is that inevitably, as players and equipment improve, that distance will eventually be found to be too short for the experts.

Clashing Styles

One of the best reasons not to alter original bunkering is that it's so difficult to build something which looks in style with the original work. It is usually very easy to pick out a few new bunkers

on an older golf course, because they were constructed with different equipment, and the difference is discernible even to the untrained eye. And if a new hazard is going to distract from the style of the course, it has to add a great deal to the strategy of the hole to merit doing.

A few classes of modern bunkers are also easily identified. *Target bunkers* through the corner of a fairway dogleg are a 1960's invention; hardly any of them were built by classic architects, who wanted the player to struggle in choosing the ideal line of play, and who didn't generally place a bunker unless it threatened a certain number of players. Also, fairway bunkers on downhill grades are almost always added features: vintage architects usually set their bunkers into gentle rises in the existing topography, regardless of the distance from the tee, thus letting the terrain dictate the strategy of the hole.

When reconstructing the bunkers it's important to obtain a certain amount of variety -- there may be a general style, but without variation, the course quickly becomes monotonous. Even the *pot bunkers* on the best links courses like St. Andrews come in an array of sizes and shapes -- they aren't all small and round. Classic architects were sure to follow this example. When someone tells you they can build a *Ross bunker* as if they were all alike, beware.

Shifting Mowing Lines

Before the advent of fairway irrigation systems in the 1930's and 1940's, the average fairway on American courses was 50-60 yards wide. This provided far greater scope for driving down one side of the fairway to obtain a different angle of approach to the green.

Obviously, not many clubs can afford to maintain such enormous acreages of fairway to today's higher standards. But frequently we find that the narrowing of the fairway means that many mis-hits get caught up in the rough between fairway and bunker; or that the fairway has been shifted to the wrong side, taking away the option for which the hole was designed. [Example -- #15 Shoreacres.] It may be too complicated to consider moving irrigation heads to restore the original line of play, but when a new irrigation system is contemplated, a thorough look at the fairway limits is in order.

Superintendents also tend to establish their own take on *natural-looking* mowing patterns, frequently doing so by narrowing the fairway around the bottom of small undulations and larger slopes which intrude into the hole. In fact, it's most likely that these features were intended to be part of the fairway, so that a ball landing on them would be kicked sideways, held back, or whatever effect.

The approaches to greens are another critical area. Many superintendents have tended to *formalize* the approaches with a narrowing of the short grass at the entrance to the green, much like a person's neck leads into the head. Again, though, frequently this unnatural pattern smothers all the bounces on slightly wide approaches, whereas the early designer planned for them to nurse balls onto the green, or to deflect them away into a bunker.

Another rule of thumb is that vintage designers seldom ever surrounded the green with a collar of rough -- if bunkers did not intervene, then the fairway ran right into the putting surface at the front, or sometimes from the side. They reasoned that a following wind or a poor lie in the fairway might make it impossible for the average player to stop the ball on the green without bouncing it in. The same applies today. Many low-handicap green chairmen think the approach should be eliminated on a short par-4 to *punish a bad drive,* but their bad drive is someone else's Sunday special.

Finally, there is a trend in design today toward *classic,* square-cornered tees. The only problem is that Ross and Mackenzie, at least, didn't build rectangular tees, and clubs who insist on mowing them in that shape sacrifice valuable teeing surface to do so.

Tree Interference

In all the consulting work I've done, I have yet to visit a vintage American golf course where there weren't at least a few trees that had encroached upon play in a way of which the original designer would have approved. Club members get too attached to trees as a living organism: why not the grass under them? I personally place more value in the views across the course than in individual trees, unless they are unusually large specimens or they add to the strategy of a hole.

Trees along the fairways are frequently planted too close to play, because no one allows for their eventual growth. Committees overplant for *instant effect,* but then forget to remove the excess once they have outlived their purpose. As a rule of thumb, for straight holes, any ball within five yards of the fairway should in fairness yield an unobstructed shot to the green; that would keep tree trunks 40-50 feet removed.

Another landscaping cliché is the *target tree* planted behind a green, which provides an element of definition and depth perception that the original designer may not have considered desirable. For many early architects, lack of definition was used as an obstacle for the good player to overcome through experience. Sometimes, too, we find that the tree behind the green blocks a special view which was the real reason for the hole's alignment. Those trying to restore the intent

of their course's design should utilize their own *x-ray vision* to see whether the trees block a better view.