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The Best Of Golf



Feature:

Riviera Country Club's 10th Hole

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By Tom Doak

Yard for yard, few holes provide as much temptation as the 311-yard 10th at Riviera Country Club. Players can reach the green with as little as 3-wood; but with even a small mistake, they'll do well to make par on a hole that Jack Nicklaus considers his favorite short par 4.

Although Riviera opened in 1927, the 10th is a late bloomer. The original green built by George C. Thomas and Billy Bell was bunkerless; the bunkers were added two years later. In 1993 Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw restored the green so more of the back hole locations could be used.

Also at the time, then-superintendent Jim McPhilomy and then-director of golf Peter Oosterhuis restored the right side of the fairway, which had been covered with rough, and reintroduced closely mown grass in front of the green—bringing back temptation and options.

Most recently, Tom Fazio's design firm has consulted on additional changes—moving the fairway bunker to tighten the lay-up area, and bringing the rear bunker back into play.

There are numerous ways to play the hole and part of the 10th's greatness is its staying power: Bobby Jones tried to drive the green when he played here in 1930, and the pros are still trying it three-quarters of a century later.

To further analyze the hole's qualities, we turn to a roundtable of experts:

Tom Doak: Of all the great golf holes in America, the 10th might be the least imposing to the untrained eye. It's certainly the flattest great hole I've seen.

Geoff Shackelford, golf architecture writer and former Riviera historian: Most holes ask you to cut a corner to open up the best angle; here it is the opposite. For the most consistent chance at birdie, you have to play away from the shortest, straightest line to the hole.

Ben Crenshaw: The key feature is that narrow little green—its angle to the fairway, combined with the greenside bunker on the right and the slope away from it. It makes you play left, left, left. If I laid up to the right spot, I would have a reasonable putt for birdie 65 to 70 percent of the time.

Peter Oosterhuis, television announcer and ex-Riviera director of golf: It's only 285 yards to the front of the green—the temptation is so great to go for it, even if you know it's the wrong play.

Amy Alcott, LPGA Hall of Famer and Riviera member: And short par 4s are what really make a great course. They challenge the good player's ego.

Doak: You have to be left, but you can't see over the bunker very well on the left side—the near bunker and the far bunker look like they connect—where you want to lay up.

Crenshaw: But you can see a lot of fairway on the right. And that bunker in the foreground is shaped like a crossbow that leads your eye right. If you miss the drive even a shade right, even hitting the fairway is no help; the approach is much harder.

Alcott: There is no depth to the green at all if you're at the wrong angle. Even from the greenside bunkers, you're concerned about keeping your shot on the green.

Shackelford: Bobby Jones tried to drive the green when he played here in 1930, when the fairways were faster. After the Kikuyu grass took hold in the '40s, there was no bounce and roll in the fairway, so driving the green was off the table for decades. The hole has come back into the spotlight in recent years, because the players hit it much longer.

Tom Marzolf, Fazio Golf Course Design, consultant to the club: Also, we removed the buildup of bunker sand at the back left of the green, which kept shots from bouncing into the back bunker. Now you really have to be precise to play to the back hole locations. Still, more players have hit driver every year since we started consulting in 1999. We may consider the possibility of a new tee one day, but for now, all we've done is pull in the left-hand fairway bunker about eight yards to tighten the ideal lay-up area.

Crenshaw: The younger players take a while to figure it out. For my generation the more you played it, the more respect you gave it. There are so many different, tough shots around the green. For me, it was just too much to take if I hit driver off the tee and it didn't work out. It could get me out of sorts for the rest of the round.