The Best Hazards in Golf

By Tom Doak

Short Grass as a Hazard

Hazards on golf courses exist in two dimensions -- physically on the ground, and in the player's mind. Of the two, I am convinced that the latter has far more effect on the play of the average golfer. Take a simple pond immediately in front of a tee -- how often would we top the ball if the hazard were not there? And how often do we, because we have worried about embarrassing ourselves?

The real objective of golf architecture is to make the course difficult for the better golfer without making it too difficult for the hacker. [In USGA parlance, this would be a course with a high course rating but a low Slope Rating -- a very rare combination to find.] As such, the ideal hazard would be one which scares the knowing, but of which the average golfer is not aware.

Imagine, for example, a hole guarded by three buried land mines. The first-time visitor would walk blindly through the course and, thanks to the laws of random chance, probably not trip one in ten tries; but the wise would have a hard time taking one step for fear of their lives.

In golf architecture, tightly mowed grass is the nearest thing we have to a land mine. The average golfer sees acres of manicured grass and is encouraged to swing without fear. But the clever architect can utilize short grass in several ways to increase the difficulty of the course, and it will have the greatest effect on better players who recognize and fear the problems it will present.

How does short grass cross the line from player's aid to hazard? There are several forms:

The steep slope of a green -- epitomzied by Augusta or Oakmont, whose greens are so fast that to get above the hole is automatically raising the possibility of three putts. Good players are thus compelled to try and play their approaches "below the hole," bringing frontal hazards more into play.

The open approach, featured on many British links. It allows the average golfer to try for the green from his maximum range, but sometimes creates indecision for the good player on whether to approach in the air or on the ground, whether playing a full approach or chipping after a short approach. In extreme cases, players are tempted into playing an extremely difficult running shot which they have not practiced to try and get close to the hole, when they would be much better off taking their medicine and playing their straightforward shot to the back of the green.

The mowed bank of a green, as at Pinehurst (No. 2) or Royal Dornoch. Instead of letting the banks away from a green grow shaggy, so the wayward ball stops quickly, mowing them at fairway height allows gravity to take the ball further away from the green, leaving an awkward shot back. In the most extreme examples, such as the 6th hole at Royal Dornoch, the player must then somehow get the next shot sturdily onto the green, or the ball will return to his feet via the same slope.

Steep banks in fairways, as at National Golf Links or High Pointe. The appearance is of a wide open target, but a ball not played to the correct spot will be carried away by the slopes to a less desirable spot, perhaps even a bunker which did not appear to be within reach from the tee.

Gentler contours of fairways, as at Muirfield in Scotland, which "collect" balls toward bunkers and increase their sphere of influence.

Acreages of fairway which tempt players to cut over other hazards, such as on the 5th hole at Royal Portrush. Frequently the carry is more difficult than it looks, or the reward for hitting the shot purely emotional in nature, as the second shot is not made particularly easier even if the drive is pulled off.

Banks on the approaches to greens, which allow shots from some positions to bounce straight onto the green, while turning shots from other positions towards trouble. The European designer Tom Simpson was a master of this design.

Even -- a fairway so wide and devoid of hazards that it lulls the player into not concentrating on his stroke, or fools him into not playing for a hidden advantage of position for the next shot.

Of all the courses I have seen around the world, only a few have taken advantage of the possibilities of short grass -- probably because it requires a good budget to manicure extra acres of fairways. But consider the list: the Old Course at St. Andrews, Augusta National, Pinehurst #2, Royal Dornoch, Muirfield, and Ballybunion at the front. With so many new courses lusting after this sort of status, you'd think a few would try to implement this technique.