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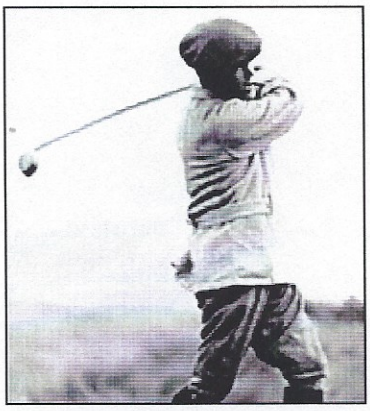
The Essential Eighteen

The most important golf courses in America

by Tom Doak
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The game begins with the land on which it is played. Play these courses and you will understand where the game comes from, where it has been, and where it is going. And, oh, yeah: One of them is not in the United States.



1. The Old Course, St. Andrews, Scotland. Three hundred years older than Old Tom Morris, the Old Course is the fountainhead of the game. The seminal American designers began there: Donald Ross was an apprentice in William Forgan's club-making shop. Charles Blair Macdonald and A. W. Tillinghast learned the game while attending St. Andrews University. Alister MacKenzie mapped the Old Course, and a copy of his map hung prominently in Bob Jones's office. And Jack Nicklaus won two of his greatest victories here, in the British Opens of 1970 and 1978. Every great golf course's design goes back to the timeless strategies of St. Andrews.

2. Garden City Golf Club, Garden City, New York. Devereux Emmet and Walter Travis, 1899. A flattish landscape punctuated by deep pot bunkers in the best Scottish tradition. Its uniquely tilted greens are simply an extension of the fairways, but their challenge remains daunting through a hundred years of technology, and the reason is simple: It's hard to get the ball close to the hole when you have to allow for a bounce-and that's true whether you're hitting a fairway wood or a wedge.

3. Oakmont Country Club, Oakmont, Pennsylvania. William and Henry Fownes, 1903. A club that has relished its role as America's toughest championship test of golf, most forcefully demonstrated in the U. S. Open of 1935, when only Sam Parks broke 300 over four rounds. Its huge, fast greens are full of undulations the likes of which were not found in Scotland, and

Places You Can Play

Woodlands Golf Club, Mordialloc, Victoria, Australia. Rowley Banks and Mick Morcom, 1913, with revisions by S. Bennett, C. Plant, and J. Scott.

In March, when the Northeast is too cold and the West Coast and Britain are too wet, there is no better place in the world for golf than the Sand Belt of Melbourne, Australia, which includes five courses once ranked among the world's best-Royal Melbourne, Kingston Heath, Victoria, Metropolitan, and Commonwealth, all but the last designed or improved by Dr. Alister MacKenzie. Had Dr. MacKenzie set foot at Woodlands, it might outrank one or two of its neighbors, but any course without the

created a new standard for America's elite courses.

4. National Golf Links of America, Southampton, New York. Charles Blair Macdonald, 1909. Conceived by the first U. S. Amateur champion as an ideal course to further the art of golf architecture in America-and it did just that, gaining worldwide acclaim as the first course outside Britain to rival the best links courses. Several holes are modeled after Macdonald's favorite holes overseas. There are some unusual blind shots, but it's a course loaded with imagination, strategy, and fun.

5. Merion Golf Club (East Course), Ardmore, Pennsylvania. Hugh Wilson, 1911. A brilliant design crammed into just 126 acres on Philadelphia's Main Line. It was the scene not only of Ben Hogan's stirring 1950 comeback U. S. Open victory but also of Bobby Jones's clinching of the Grand Slam in 1930. The quarry that dominates the finishing holes is justly famous, but it was Wilson's "white faced" (definition TK) bunkers, adopted by his pupil William Flynn and by other Philadelphia architects such as Tillinghast, George Thomas, and George and Tom Fazio, that became America's standard.

6. Pebble Beach Golf Links, Pebble Beach, California. Jack Neville and Douglas Grant, 1919, with revisions by Herbert Fowler, H. Chandler Egan, and Jack Nicklaus. The famed California coast resort is an American icon, and it invented the luxury golf destination resort. The nine holes along the Pacific coast make it famous, thanks to developer Samuel Morse's foresight in reserving the coastal property for open space and setting the homes back across a fairway. But for the pros and the amateurs in AT&T's annual clambake, it was (and still is) the small, tilted greens that make the course an enduring challenge.

7. Pine Valley Golf Club, Clementon, New Jersey. George Crump, 1912-22. Half an hour outside Philadelphia, this epic course is laid out with island fairways surrounded by the sandy wastes of the Pine Barrens. Architects of the day recognized that its bold and difficult design could not be the norm, but modern designers have envied its grand scale, the isolation of each hole-and its reputation as America's best course.

8. Winged Foot Golf Club, Mamaroneck, New York. East and West courses by A. W. Tillinghast, 1923. The epitome of the northeastern parkland course, with thirty-six holes of small, well-guarded, undulating greens, which the architect compared to human faces: "Of course, there are many greens [on other courses] which are no more impresssive than the vacant, cow-like expression of some people," Tillinghast wrote, "but then again there are some with rugged profiles which loom head and shoulders above the common herd." The MacKenzie stamp suffers in international renown. Yet the par-3 holes rival Melbourne's best-and therefore some of the best in the world. I found most interesting, however, the short par-4 third and fourth holes, at slightly less than 300 yards each, and the par-5 15th at 550 yards. On all three, the approach shot should be a short one, but the greens are so small and firm and hemmed in by trouble that the wise player will opt to play a running approach instead of a pitch. I can't remember the last time I saw a hole in America that suggested a run-up shot-and here are three on one course! Rating: 6.

The Challenge at Manele, Lanai, Hawaii. Jack Nicklaus, 1993.

A straightforward design stepped across a sidehill site, commanding magnificent views of Maui and of idyllic Manele Bay beach. The nonstop views provide such a buzz, you'll hardly notice that there are only three really memorable holes on the course. Two of them, the par-3 12th and the par-4 17th, are set on 200-foot cliff tops so vertical that they would make the perfect setting for a sacrifice to the gods. But even the cliff tops are overshadowed by the spectacle of nature in the springtime, when you can stand on the fairways and look down at whales spouting just a few hundred yards offshore. Whether you're a guest at the five-star Manele Bay Hotel or a day-tripper on the ferry from Lahaina, this place is a must-see, even if the golf holes are rather plain. Rating: 6.

John's Island West, Wabasso, Florida. Tom Fazio, 1985.
Years ago, when I asked Tom Fazio which was his most underrated course, he said he was baffled as to why John's Island West wasn't right up there with his best. Amazingly, it's kept a low profile, even as Fazio's reputation has shifted into hyperdrive. The dunesy site was liberally reshaped in places, but in other respects the design is the antithesis of Fazio's formulaic 1990's successes, featuring small greens that aren't always receptive and relatively tight

woods from which the course was cut made such a dramatic impression that other famous courses routed across farm fields were planted with hundreds of trees to resemble it.

9. Cypress Point Club, Pebble Beach, California. Alister MacKenzie, 1928. The most dramatic meeting of land and sea in golf. MacKenzie was the first to insist that a great golf course should be a beautiful one, and there is no more forceful example of his theory. There are fewer holes along the cliffs than at neighbor Pebble Beach, but the inland holes among the Monterey cypress trees provide a beautiful contrast of scenery, and then the course works its way across the dunes, building toward a climax at the rocky sixteenth and seventeenth holes on the point itself.

10. Augusta National Golf Club, Augusta, Georgia. Alister MacKenzie and Bobby Jones, 1932. As host to the annual Masters Tournament, Jones's monument to golf has been the scene of more dramatic moments than any other championship course, yet the club is constantly tweaking the design to ensure that it continues to challenge the world's best players. One thing it hasn't changed is the severely undulating greens, which are so hard to approach that Jones and MacKenzie decided that no rough was necessary. If you're out of position in the fairway, it takes a miraculous shot to get close to the hole. In recent years, the beautiful green fairways that television beams us from Augusta the first week of April have set an impossible standard for golf-course superintendents across the country.

11. Pinehurst Country Club (No. 2 course), Pinehurst, North Carolina. Donald Ross, 1903-35. Pinehurst was America's first multicourse golf resort, but Number Two was not designed as an ego booster. Its convex greens and tightly mowed chipping areas require more imaginative short-game play than any course before or since. Not even Ross built similar chipping areas on other courses in his day, but many modern architects have imitated them on the basis of Pinehurst's success.

12. The Dunes Golf & Country Club, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Robert Trent Jones, 1948. The Dunes was only the third golf course on the Grand Strand, and today there are more than a hundred, thanks largely to its success. The Cornell-educated Jones was the first architect to be schooled for the profession rather than jumping into it from another part of the golf business, and he drove the industry to new heights in the development-rich years after the Second World War. Robert Trent Jones became a household name-"Give your course a signature," he advertised, and soon no course could afford to be without one in the marketing-driven new world. The Dunes' long par-5 thirteenth hole, a boomerang landing areas. Its success all goes back to attitude: Developed as a pure golf retreat for a large Vero Beach development, the course is free of intrusion from housing and cart paths, which is an unexpected blessing. Hole by hole, what stands out most in my memory is not the par-3's or par-5's but the number of different sand-waste "looks" and the variety of green sites created. There are classically elevated small greens, punch bowls, tiers, and even a couple that are over-the-top-like the paean to the 9th green at Yale and the precipitous terrace in the back left of the 18th. Wow-remember when Tom Fazio used to take chances? Rating: 7.

Talking Stick Golf Club, Scottsdale, Arizona. North course by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw, 1997. A remarkable new design, given its location-not among the desert peaks of north Scottsdale but on the uncompromisingly flat Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian reservation. Jagged bunkers and native grasses set each hole apart, despite the fact that few places were raised or lowered by more than five feet. There are several holes featuring distinct alternate landing areas for the tee shot, based on bunkers or created washes that divide fairways. On another course, these would be overkill, but they add great interest to a flattish site. And like no other course since Royal Liverpool, Talking Stick has a distinguishing feature on the North course-the use of a boundary fence in the strategy of three holes. Out-of-bounds is seldom used as a hazard today, and the hard-line boundary is not only more intimidating and natural than the transition from fairway to desert, but it eliminates the need for awkward club-scuffing recoveries after an errant approach. The par-5 second, for example, is a terrific hole-out-of-bounds all the way from tee to green on the left and all the world of fairway on the right. The more one strays to the right on the first and second shots, the more frightening the approach back toward the fence. Rating: 7.

-Reviewed by Tom Doak, principal architect of

around the shores of Lake Singleton, ushered in water hazards as a major component of golf design and, indeed, the "signature hole" as a marketing concept.

13. Oakland Hills Country Club (South Course), Birmingham, Michigan. Donald Ross, 1915, with modifications by Robert Trent Jones, 1950. Jones's redesign of this Detroit classic was one of the most controversial moments in golf, making headlines when none of the professionals could break par-until Ben Hogan's final-round 67 made both men heroes. Jones's new concept included tight fairway bunkering that pinched the fairway 250 to 270 yards from the tee (instead of the "carry bunkers" that had been the standard and were easily carried by the best players) and greens that were designed with several distinct "pin placements" at the back and sides of each green.

14. Harbour Town Golf Links, Hilton Head, South Carolina. Pete Dye and Jack Nicklaus, 1969. Dye's short, tight, thoughtful design was a radical shift from the 7,200-yard championship courses in vogue, but the annual Heritage Tournament validated the design with a who's who of winners and put Dye at the forefront of the business. Golfers would never look at railroad ties the same way again.

15. Muirfield Village Golf Club, Dublin, Ohio. Jack Nicklaus and Desmond Muirhead, 1974. The Golden Bear's answer to Bob Jones's Augusta National became a springboard into the world of golf-course design for every Tour player to follow. But the perfect sight lines and immaculate conditioning of the course that Jack built became the standard for the industry.

16. TPC at Sawgrass, Ponte Vedra, Florida. Pete Dye, 1980. Built as the home course for the PGA Tour and the annual Tournament Players Championship, this controversial Dye design was immediately criticized for its difficulty, but it reinvented the golf course as theater. As a stage to test the skills and inner fortitude of the world's best players in front of huge galleries, the course has been a smashing success, but its instant success from the marketing side led many architects and developers to imitate the island-green seventeenth and the difficulty level that had made it newsworthy.

17. Shadow Creek Golf Club, Las Vegas. Tom Fazio and Steve Wynn, 1989. The absence of great land for golf in the barren Nevada desert was no deterrent to Wynn, who had already created a volcano and a tropical forest for his hotels there. He chose Fazio to prove that the hand of man could indeed produce a course to rival the world's best-as long as there was enough money to spend on landscaping it convincingly. Thirty-seven million dollars later, so they say, Shadow Creek was indeed a North Carolina mountain

oasis rising out of the desert and, like Pine Valley and Augusta, set a standard that everyone wanted to emulate but no one could afford to. The course ushered in the age of multimillion -dollar private playgrounds that flaunted the wealth of the end of the century and cemented Fazio's reputation as the designer of the "me" decade.

18. Sand Hills Golf Club, Mullen, Nebraska. Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw, 1993. The dead opposite of Shadow Creek, Sand Hills is laid into the most perfect dunescape in America, with wind-eroded bunkers begun by nature, and even natural green contours on several of the holes. In an age of lavish creations, its smashing success has been a timely reminder that great golf holes derive from interesting terrain, encouraging several young architects to form an alternative "minimalist" school of design. Perhaps more important, its low cost of construction allowed it to be a success despite its remote location, and encouraged other developments in far-flung places, fields of dreams for golfers of the new century to seek out and enjoy.

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