The Shape of things to come

What trends can we expect in course design in the next Millennium? TOM DOAK forsakes his balata for a crystal ball

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN MORGAN

A twist in the tale. Loch Lomond, the pride of new Scottish courses, looks very like an exclusive American club...

Everyone knows that golf in Britain and golf in America are distinctly different by nature. One follows the spirit of the original links courses – rugged and natural – while the other's courses have been more artificially constructed and more extensively groomed.

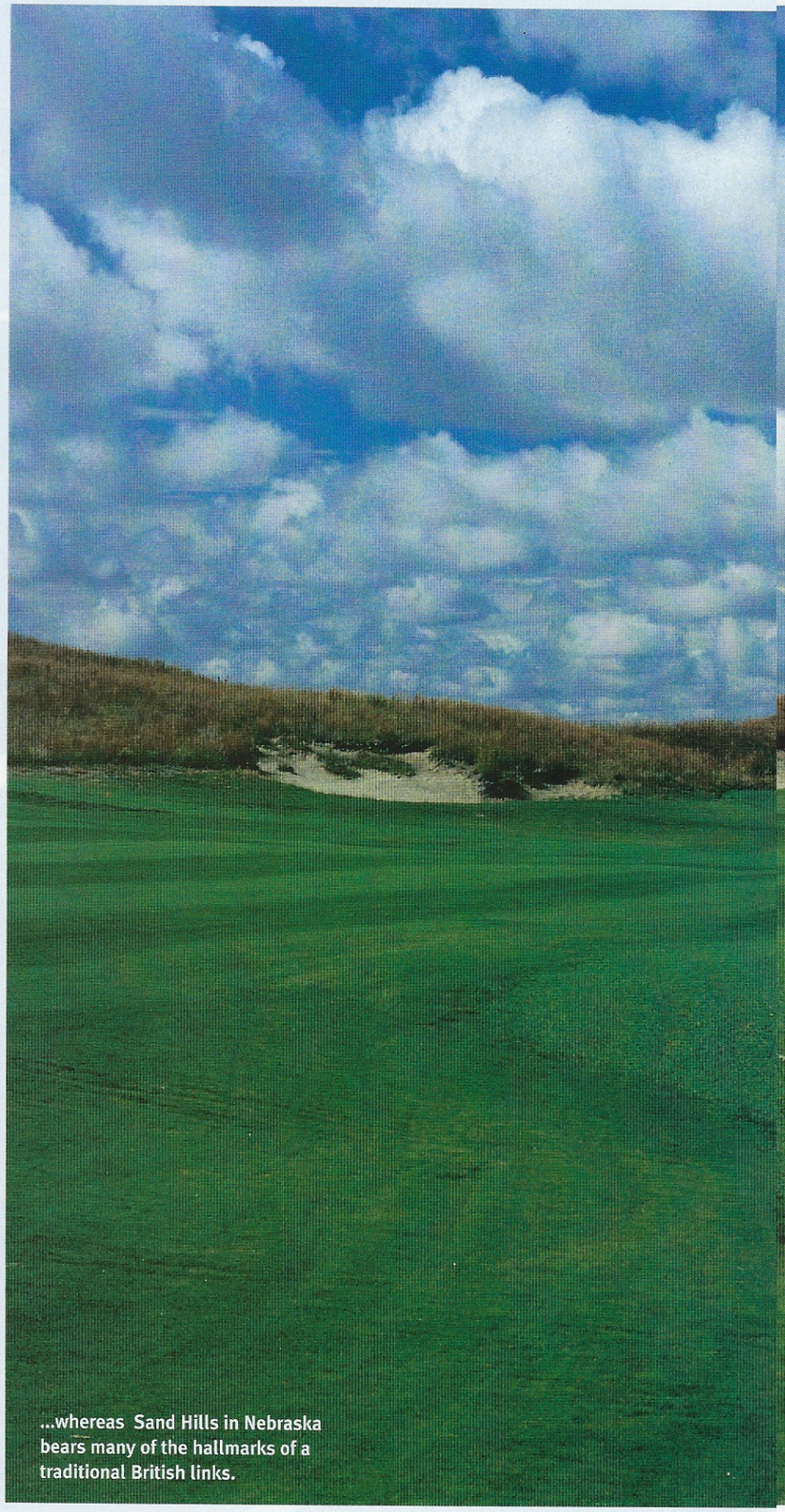
In the present day, however, these stereotypes have been turned on their head. The most celebrated new course in Britain is Loch Lomond, a deluxe private club designed by an American and now owned by one as well. Meanwhile, the most celebrated new course in America is Sand Hills Golf Club in Nebraska, a minimalist layout through natural sand dunes in a location more remote than Dornoch or Machrihanish.

To be sure, these courses are still exceptions to the general rule, but golf architects on both sides of the Atlantic seem to be running in opposite directions – in fact, Donald Steel is starting to find work in America, while several American designers are more busy in Europe than at home, despite a bustling American golf market. So what will the future be like? Which side knows where it's going?

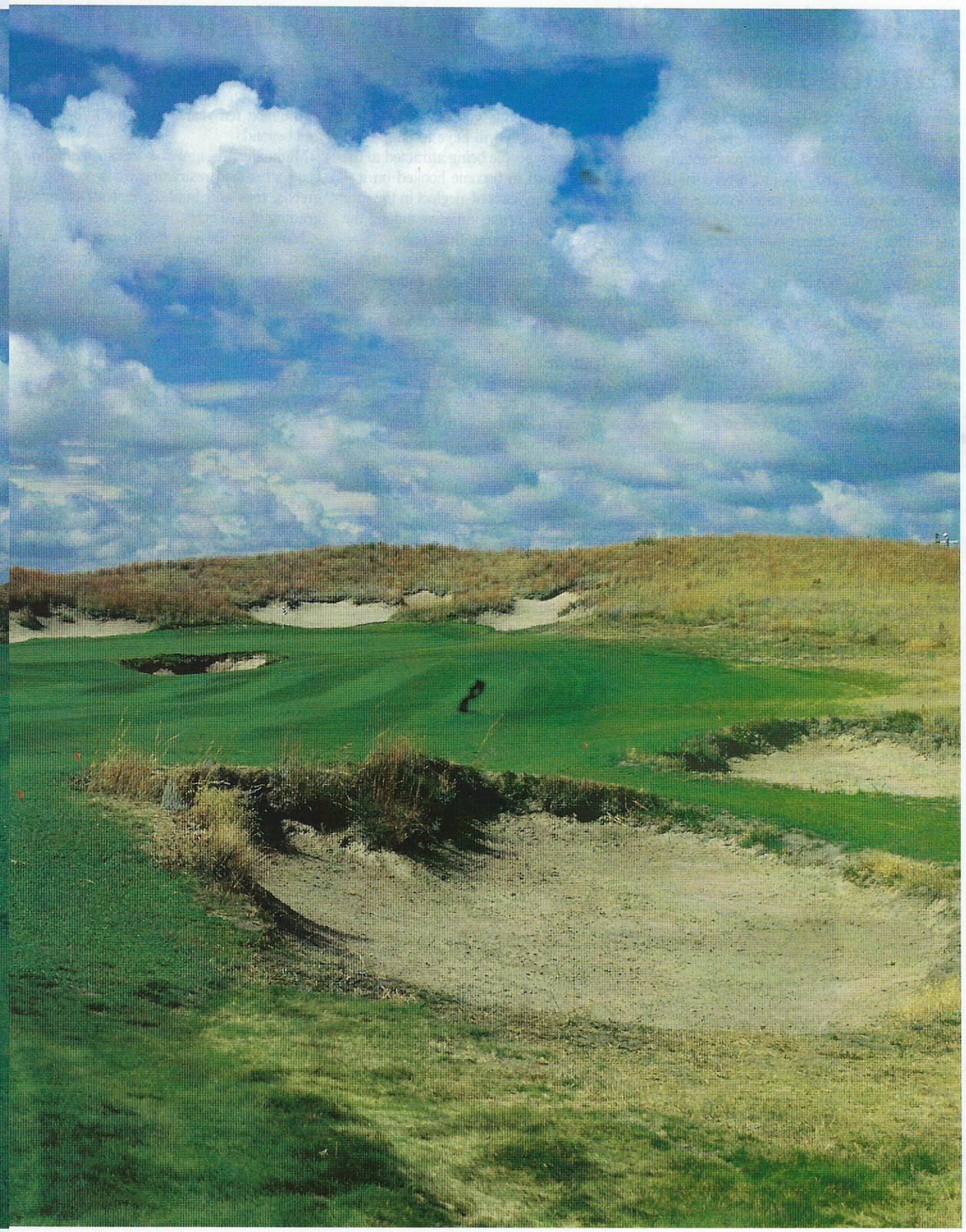
In general, golf course design trends in Europe, including the UK, have tended over the last 30 years to follow those in the United States, with a delayed reaction. American ideas were accepted more quickly in Europe, where owing to a short supply of home-grown architects, the first wave of new courses was built by American designers and to very top-end standards. [In fact, there was a development slowdown until recently, as many of these courses struggled financially, and local designers looked for more cost-effective strategies.]

Britain resisted longer than the continent, since there was an established base of designers who had been trained to build for less. But the lavish courses of the last ten years have been designed not only by Americans (The Oxfordshire, East Sussex National and The London Golf Club, for example) but also by home-grown designers who have loosened the purse strings, such as Nick Faldo (Chart Hills) and Pat Ruddy (Druid's Glen and The European). As money continues to drive golf course development, can motorised buggies be far behind?

Ironically, just as the trend in Europe has been established towards heavy spending, the current buzzword in American course design is 'minimalism', which purports to limit heavy earth-moving and leave the contours of the ground through the green largely intact. Partly this is a recognition that not



...whereas Sand Hills in Nebraska bears many of the hallmarks of a traditional British links.



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all markets can afford top-end prices, partly an effort to reposition the sport against charges that it is elitist or environmentally unfriendly. And partly it's just a reversal of roles, as new courses with water features and extensive mounding had become so common that bunkers and greens now attract attention again.

However, the minimalist movement in course design still runs counter to many recent trends that may be difficult to reverse. These include:-

1. Faster and faster greens – so much that architects have become afraid to design much contour within greens, and keep making them bigger to spread out the wear.
2. Rising maintenance standards 'through the green', where the acreage has enormous consequences on costs.
3. Higher green fees, the result of rising construction costs, both the factors above, and the profit-mindedness of independent course developers, which in turn leads to further demands by players on the standard of maintenance.
4. Longer courses, to preserve the challenge of the game against good players with improved equipment.

If history holds to form, you can expect all the above to run their course in Europe before common sense prevails.

Eventually, though, golf is headed back towards its roots. It will have to happen so that all the new people being attracted to the game can afford to become hooked on it – family golf, after years of neglect in the race for profits, is the prime initiative among the major US golfing organisations today.

No participatory sport can grow unless it remains affordable, and golf courses are becoming too big for their own good. Sooner or later, the golfing organisations will find a way to roll back the distance standard for golf balls, just as the motor-racing bodies have done, recognising that it is the excitement of the competition, not pure distance or speed, which draws people to the game.

Eventually, too, more golf course architects will come to the realisation that great players and improved equipment cannot be countered by making courses even longer and proportionally more expensive to maintain. Instead, placing the emphasis on the details of greens and bunkers, and on the short game – a scale within the grasp of seniors and juniors, as well as tour players – will become the standard by which courses are recognised. Whether this comes about before or after the effort to restrict equipment will be an interesting one to follow.

With the above in mind, the following are nine things you might expect to see more of in the next ten years, up to the Millennium and beyond:-

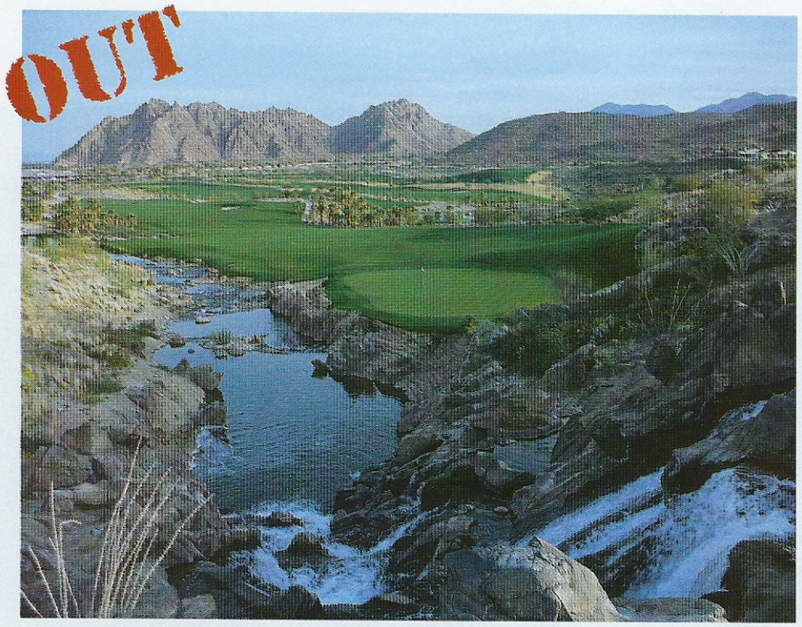
1. Minimalist design: the value of finding good sites, and restricting earth-moving to greens, tees and bunkers instead of mass grading of 175 acres.
2. Movement towards more privately developed top-end daily-fee courses, which are now very popular in the United States. There, it is getting hard for people to buy memberships of a club run by a developer's ego, and there are so many affluent new golfers who are willing to pay top dollar for a good course but don't yet want to commit to a long-term membership. Of course, tax laws and lack of reciprocal play have forced the issue in the States; as long as people can still easily pay a green fee to play the better private clubs in the UK and Europe, that daily-fee trend may not kick in.
3. Low-budget family golf facilities adjacent to larger courses, so that newcomers can afford to take up the game.
4. More contour within greens, as architects realise the only way to maintain the challenge for good players (in the light of improved equipment) is in the short game.
5. Shorter, at least eventually. This will be needed to reduce the real-estate requirements and the construction costs of new courses, and to preserve the challenge of classic



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Pat Ruddy built the fabulous new links at The European in Ireland.

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Last year's model. Water features, such as at La Quinta in California, are on their way out.

venues. Perhaps the Overall Distance Standard, that governs the performance of the golf ball, will be rolled back by the Royal & Ancient and the US Golf Association, but I suspect it will more likely result from a gradual switch-over as the US PGA Tour develops its own ball for tournament play, much as the R&A switching away from the 1.62-inch ball for the Open Championship in 1974 eventually led to its extinction.

6. Elaborate bunkering, as a way to distinguish a new course from the competition. Several recent American courses have tried revetted bunker faces, which may last longer with improved maintenance techniques.
7. Brown grass, as restrictions on pesticide and fertiliser use continue.
8. Fewer water hazards in play, as environmental regulations concerning wetlands have a greater impact.
9. More golf carts, unfortunately.

Tom Doak is a golf course architect. His company, Renaissance Golf Design, Inc., is based in Michigan.



Back in vogue. Making a special feature of bunkers – seen here at Bel Air, in Los Angeles – is likely to become increasingly prevalent.