Three Reasons Not to Hire a Golf Course Architect

By Tom Doak

There are lots of good reasons for existing golf clubs to retain the advice of a golf course architect. However, all too often we find ourselves called in to a club for the wrong reasons. Principally, there are three.

Turf Management Problems. This is by far the most common reason an architect is called in -- something on the existing course just isn't working properly, or perhaps the green committee wants a second opinion on how the superintendent is doing his job. Few golf architects are truly qualified to discuss turf management issues, and all have an ulterior motive, as new construction is how they earn their living. Expensive reconstruction will fix any turf problem, but it's seldom the most cost-effective solution. When your car starts running badly, do you immediately rush to a salesman? Talk to a mechanic first -- like the USGA Green Section, or an independent turf consultant. [Note, however, that some of the best turf consultants are now affiliated with a golf course architect, like Tom Mead, who works with us.]

Greens with Too Much Slope. I don't believe there is such a thing -- well, okay, I've seen a handful of greens out of 1,000 courses that were unplayable at a Stimpmeter reading of 8 1/2. Insert the phrase, "Greens Which Added Great Interest Until the Committee Got Them Too Fast," by trying to achieve an arbitrary speed. The speed at which you maintain your greens should be determined by the slopes on them, not by the Stimpmeter reading across the street. If you like the design of your course in general, it's much more economical to raise the mowing heights than to rebuild a green -- and it's better for the grass, too.

To Rubber Stamp the Green Chairman's Plan for Change. Even if there are things on the course which require architectural solutions, a lot of green committees don't really ask the architect for his best advice; they want him to agree with their idea. And, unfortunately, a lot of architects are willing to play along -- it's easy money. It's easy to delude oneself into thinking that you can improve a course's design, but for me anyway, only a major improvement would justify the risk of spoiling the style and character of the original design. It's much easier to make restoration work look like it belongs on a course than to make a new design fit in. Getting a second opinion is just as important in golf as in medicine. If you want to avoid unnecessary surgery, don't trust the first opinion you hear -- many golf architects are more successful salesmen than designers