Troon's winds can test clubs and break hearts

Golf course architect Tom Doak gives his hole-by-hole assessment of how the famous old course at Royal Troon plays

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Of the courses on the Open rota, I could never say that Royal Troon is a particular favourite of mine, nor of any American players I know. It is not majestic like Turnberry or Birkdale, nor charming like St Andrews, nor a masterpiece of golf architecture like Muirfield. It is perhaps the bleakest of the Open courses, along with Carnoustie and Hoylake. It is a hard golf course to love.

In other words, Royal Troon is the epitome of links golf.

Links courses are as different as the variety of sand dunes themselves: you can play straight between the dunes, straight over them, or anything in between. The common thread is that on the links the weather is an integral part of the challenge. The sandy ground becomes rock-hard in summer, so that players can rarely play straight to the flag. Wind in the players' faces makes life difficult for modern power hitters who like to hit it high, by exaggerating any draw or fade. Crosswinds beg for shotmaking which counters the wind's direction, so that players are not allowed to hit their favourite shot time after time; it is like forcing a tennis player to run around to his backhand. Winds behind the players make it virtually impossible to judge where the ball will stop rolling.

At Troon the prevailing winds run directly along the axis of the links, so that most of the outgoing holes are downwind and the finishing holes head straight back into its teeth. Par on the card reads 36-35, but it plays more like 34-37.

Troon's first five holes going out are all blurred together in my mind, with no particular feature to distinguish any of them except a relentless wind at one's back. If the wind really blows this year it may be that the longest hitters will try to drive each of the first three greens, as John Daly took apart the Old Course at St Andrews in 1995.

The 6th is the longest hole in the history of the Open, but some slugger will likely reach the green with a drive and a six-iron this week. Length means nothing when links holes play downwind.

At the dog-leg 7th some real dunes appear on the horizon, and for the middle six holes the winds come from all angles. The Postage Stamp 8th is justifiably famous, a short hole from the top of one

dune to a sliver of green atop another dune; Gene Sarazen's ace here in 1973 did much to cement the hole in the consciousness of golfers worldwide.

The railway at the 11th offers another change of scenery - this brutal par four, scene of several disastrous scores in tournament play, is really the first hole played back into an opposing wind. Then at the bunkerless par-four 13th one turns back into the wind for good, and the course comes into its own. All of the holes coming in, with the exception of the 14th, are both challenging and unique.

The 13th and 15th have always been the toughest holes coming home, both of them requiring long-iron approaches and likely from a severe stance, though it is possible that today's long hitters will drive past the dip in the fairway at 15 which has always made the second shot so daunting.

The burn which crosses the 16th has always required long hitters to lay up off the tee, so few could get home in two; but who knows today how many might drive over the burn? Regardless, the golfer who isn't hitting absolutely crisply on these last six will be losing strokes to par, if not to the field.

I have not been to Royal Troon since the Open of 1982, when I was 21 years old and Bobby Clampett, only a year older than me, raced to an eight-shot lead before the links bit back with venom. The course has been strengthened since, with new tees and fairway bunkers; but such small additions are completely overshadowed by improvements in the golf ball and in the golfers themselves over the same 22 years. The puny strivings of golf course architects can no longer defend the honour of our great championship courses: Troon, like Shinnecock last month, must fall back on the elements to protect it. That is the nature of links golf, as it should be.

If the conditions are soft and the breeze gentle, Royal Troon will seem like child's play. If the winds are gusty and the fairways bone-dry, the players may cry like babies.