WHAT MAKES A GOLF COURSE GREAT?

WHEN GOLFERS TALK ABOUT THE BEST COURSES THEY HAVE PLAYED, THE WORD 'GREAT' IS NOT LONG OUT OF THE CONVERSATION. SO WHAT MAKES A GOLF COURSE GREAT? IT IS A DEBATE AS OLD AS THE GAME ITSELF, SO WE ASKED SOME EXPERTS TO SHARE THEIR VIEWS ON GREAT GOLF COURSES.



The Old Course at St Andrews is regarded by many as the greatest course of all.

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TOM DOAK
• Course Designer

When most of us think of a 'great' golf course we all come up with the usual suspects – St Andrews, Muirfield, Royal Melbourne, Cypress Point, Winged Foot, Pine Valley, Merion … the list goes on.

So what makes a great golf course? As yet nobody has come up with some definitive guidelines which say this is a 'great' course and this is just a good one. Golf magazines list their top-50 or top-100 based on level of difficulty, quality of holes, location and even historic importance. All are equally valid but the game is all about opinions and the answers you get depend on who you ask and what day of the week you are asking.

Pebble Beach for example – one of the most celebrated places to play golf anywhere on the planet. It ticks many of the boxes required in a 'great' course but opinion is always divided. A testing course in a stunning location it has a run of holes along the Pacific Coast that consistently rank among the best in golf. But do a handful of 'great' holes make it a 'great' course? Some would argue not.

In my experience most players judge a course purely on how well they play it. Everything is subjective. If they hit the ball a mile, they like a long challenging layout. If they are strong iron players they favour small greens they can attack. If they can putt, they love fast sloping greens like those at Augusta National or Pinehurst No. 2. I have yet to meet any player – tournament pro or top amateur – describe a course with narrow sloping fairways as 'great' when they have struggled badly off the tee. No matter what its reputation is.

Length is also a consideration. A red flag issue at the moment, it's generally believed that many of the world's 'great' championship courses have to be excessively long as befitting a major venue. The same now applies to many of the courses used on the US PGA Tour.







Today, anything under 7,200-yards (6,580 metres) is considered short but this headlong drive for extra yardage is misleading.

I believe what the pro game does should not really affect how we judge a great golf course. I would argue that Rye, on the south coast of England, is a real test of golf at 6,474 yards (5,920 metres) off the medal tees. The same applies to Harry Colt's strategic masterpiece at Swinley Forest, in Surrey, at just over 6,000 yards (5,486 metres)! Extremely short by modern standards, I would have no hesitation in describing both of them as great golf courses.

Location is another key factor. With the notable exception of St Andrews, most great golf courses do occupy great land. Think of Royal St George's, Royal County Down and the many courses of the Melbourne Sandbelt.

Today most people believe that it must be easier to produce a great golf course if the ground you have been given to work on is exceptional. In some cases, not all, this is true. I have been asked to build courses on anything from swamps to former waste dumps. Every job is different and every course is a product of the land it is built on. In simple terms, the land dictates which holes go where, how long they are and what design features can be incorporated into the design.

I have been fortunate to work on some really cool sites in places like Cape Kidnappers in New Zealand and the result has been hugely satisfying. But if you ask: "Is building a golf course on a great piece of property a slam dunk guarantee of building a great golf course?" Then definitely not.

So what about St Andrews? Flat and uninspiring at first look, nobody could have built a better course on the land provided; proving that great course design was around even five centuries ago, it presses the golfer to put the ball in the right place off the tee and the right place on the green. What more can anyone ask?

As with St Andrews, time also plays its part in assessing the greatness of any particular layout. All golf courses evolve and few, if any, are considered design classics right off the bat. A good example is Augusta National, which looked like a potato field when it first opened in the early 1930s.

Thankfully opinions change and mature, including my own. In the mid-1980s, I was fortunate to have spent nearly a year travelling throughout Scotland, England and Ireland. Exposed to some of the finest golf courses in the world, it taught me a deep and lasting appreciation of what elements make up a truly 'great' golf course. Back then I was a 25-year-old student but many of the views I hold today about course architecture were born out of that time.

Will any of my own designs be described as 'great'? I will leave that decision to others. All I know is that over two decades after my first visit to the United Kingdom, I am still in awe of the many wonderful courses that part of the world has to offer.

JOHN HUGGAN
• *Golf Australia* Columnist-at-large

It pays to be suspicious of the word 'great' when it comes to golf and, in particular, golf courses. It is surely the game's most overused – and misused – adjective.

Take the Pebble Beach Golf Links, venue for this year's US Open championship. Our American cousins, perhaps understandably, have long felt that what novelist Robert Louis Stevenson called "the most felicitous meeting of land and sea in creation" doubles as one of golf's greatest courses.

But it doesn't.

Whisper it, but Pebble Beach is not a great golf course. Pebble Beach is a spectacularly beautiful golf course containing a handful of holes along an endlessly picturesque coastline that can legitimately be called 'great' and, more to the point, more than a few that are mediocre at best. So, taken as a whole, Pebble Beach is far from great; "pretty and great in places" would be a more accurate description.

By my definition at least, a truly great course cannot have more than one dodgy hole. It must also have at least six holes that literally take the breath away, whether scenically or architecturally or strategically or by various combinations of all three.

By way of example, I give you Muirfield in Scotland. The dodgy hole, to my mind, is actually the 1st – a brutally difficult par-4 into the prevailing wind that relies too much on long grass for protection and gives the player little in the way of options.

And the six 'gaspers?' I give you the 2nd (a sometimes driveable par-4), the 6th (majestic par-4), the 9th (wonderful par-5 that could be even better if they cut the rough away next to the wall on the left), the 13th (living proof that an uphill par-3 can be 'great'), the 15th (my ▸

ABOVE: Rye packs a challenging punch despite being short by the modern standard. Nonetheless it remains a great golf course.

RIGHT: Royal St George's is a fine example of a great course being so because of its location on idyllic golfing land.

BELOW: Pebble Beach might have some world-class holes along the ocean but does that make it a great course? Many think not.





PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES X2: MATTHEW HARRIS/TGPL (RIGHT)

CONGRATULATIONS
Graeme McDowell

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According to Huggan,a great course can't have more than one dodgy hole. Muirfield has one, but the uphill par-3 13th is one of its best.

favourite green in all of golf, subtlety everywhere) and the 18th (the ultimate suck-it-up, 'four to win' hole).

That's the sort of thing I like, a mixture of all things great. But in the bigger picture, all 'great' golf inevitably must be compared with the Old Course at St Andrews, the model for every course that has ever been built. I like what Bobby Jones had to say about his favourite course: "There is always a way at St Andrews, although it is not always the obvious way."

In other words, call me either selfish or arrogant, but in my perfect world I'd like to play courses where the architect allows me to make up my own mind about how to play each hole.

In other words, I want the course to make me think.

In other words, I want to stand on a tee with strategic choices to be made.

In other words, what I don't want to play are holes where I'm looking aghast at yet another overly narrow strip of fairway between two huge expanses of long grass, holes where the committee and/or the greenkeeper has already decided how I should plot my route from tee to green. I'm a big boy, I can do that for myself, thank you.

In other words, if I want to hit my drive 60 yards left or right of what the unthinking see as golf's Holy Grail – the middle of the fairway – then I want to be able to.

It's taken me a while to work all of that out, mind. Long ago, in a previous life when your correspondent played a form of golf that involved a lot more pars than bogeys – and at least semi-competence from 75 yards out – I knew what courses I liked (and didn't like) but I didn't know why. Now, after much thought, I know both.

I like Royal Melbourne, both East and West. I like Kingston Heath. I like Augusta National, at least the old Augusta National. I like Sunningdale. I like Woodhall Spa. I like Royal Dornoch. I like Morfontaine and Fontainebleau. I like Barnbougle Dunes. I like Merion. I like Cypress Point. I like Royal County Down. I like Portrush. I like Royal Aberdeen. But, most of all, I love the Old Course.

The Old Course lets you play, no matter how good or bad you are at the greatest game of all. Indeed, apart from the crossings of the Swilcan Burn on both the first and last holes, even a non-golfer can get round using only a putter. That is the mark of the truly great course, one that can be enjoyed by all.

Yet again, Bobby Jones had it right with his thoughts on the early Augusta National. The great man – there's that word again – was happy enough to let the 90-shooter have their bogeys. That was the easy part. But as soon as greater ambition came into play, all kinds of numbers would do likewise. And that is the essence of the Old Course, the greatest golf course on the planet.

MIKE CLAYTON

• *Golf Australia* Playing Editor, European Senior Tour player & course designer

Great is one of the most overused words in the language and in golf it is often used in reference to both players and courses. 'Great', if the word is to be used in context, needs to be truly great – something in that rarefied place that distinguishes the great from the almost great.

Jack Nicklaus was without question a great player. Tiger Woods is a great player as were Bobby Jones and Ben Hogan and Tom Morris and Sam Snead.

We Australians often put the word 'great' and Greg Norman in the same sentence. Greg was an incredible player – no one wins 80-odd tournaments without uncommon and rare talent – but he is not in the same class as Nicklaus or Jones, or Nelson, or Hogan, or Watson or Hagen.

You can argue he was a 'great' player, but then you have created different levels of greatness and I don't think you can do that. Great needs to be great.

The subject here is golf courses and what distinguishes the best courses in the world.

The most important element is great holes. No course can be great without brilliant holes. Perfect conditioning won't get it there and nor will difficulty – but every great course will ask players to hit shots that are beyond the capabilities of the average player.

The best courses have world-class holes in abundance. The Old Course at St Andrews begins the run home from the far point of the links with the great short par-4 12th, followed by the wonderful long two-shotter at the 13th and then probably the best par-5 in the game.

The shortish par-4 16th hole with the bunkers right in the middle of the fairway and the boundary fence down the right is a brilliant strategic hole. If you are brave enough to play down the right, you get a simple line into the flag and every metre left of that perfect line is a metre more difficult the angle for the second shot. The amazing 17th, the Road Hole, follows and is the ultimate example of a great hole that they wouldn't even let you build today.

Many revere the Old Course for its mystique; its place in history

GETTY IMAGES X 2

MACKENZIE'S IDEAL GOLF COURSE



Dr Alister MacKenzie is arguably the most celebrated golf course designer in the history of the game. His work at Augusta National and Cypress Point in the United States as well as his gems here in Australia, Royal Melbourne and NSW, are revered.

Of all the course architects of the Golden Age of course design during the 1920s, MacKenzie has exerted the greatest influence on modern design.

In his book *Golf Architecture*, published in 1920, MacKenzie listed 13 essential features of what he believed to be an ideal golf course. These 13 points have influenced many architects and their designs during the past 90 years.

MacKenzie's 13 essential features are:

1. The course, where possible, should be arranged in two loops of nine holes.
2. There should be a large proportion of good two-shot holes, two or three drive-and-pitch holes, and at least four one-shot holes.
3. There should be little walking between greens and tees, and the course should be arranged so that in the first instance there is always a slight walk forwards from the green to the next tee; then the holes are sufficiently elastic to be lengthened in the future if necessary.
4. The greens and fairways should be sufficiently undulating, but there should be no hill climbing.
5. Every hole should have a different character.
6. There should be a minimum of blindness for the approach shots.
7. The course should have beautiful surroundings, and all the artificial features should have so natural an appearance that a stranger is unable to distinguish them from nature itself.
8. There should be a sufficient number of heroic carries from the tee, but the course should be arranged so that the weaker player, with the loss of a stroke or portion of a stroke, shall always have an alternative route open to him.
9. There should be infinite variety in the strokes required to play the various holes – interesting brassy shots, irons shots, pitch and run-up shots.
10. There should be a complete absence of the annoyance and irritation caused by the necessity of searching for lost balls.
11. The course should be so interesting that even the plus (handicap) man is constantly stimulated to improve his game in attempting shots he has hitherto been unable to play.
12. The course should be so arranged so that the long handicap player, or even the absolute beginner, should be able to enjoy his round in spite of the fact that he is piling up a big score.
13. The course should be equally good during winter and summer, the texture of the greens and fairways should be perfect and the approaches should have the same consistency as the greens.



MacKenzie's spectacular 15th at Cypress Point – great hole, great course.



CONGRATULATIONS
Ernie Els

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The Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore-designed Sand Hills boasts all the elements of what makes a great course.

and its reputation but it is one of the great courses because it has so many world-class holes.

Pine Valley in New Jersey may be the only course in the game where every single hole is a brilliant piece of architecture. Every hole at Pine Valley would be the best hole at some of our most highly regarded courses. It is a difficult course but the fairways are wide, creating strategic options by giving players space to drive into and making them decide for themselves where best to aim. It is an extraordinary property and the greens and bunkers are beautifully constructed to make, as Dr Alister MacKenzie described as "man-made construction indistinguishable from nature".

Golfers may judge a course to be great because they have a great – even a world-class – experience when they play. The condition may be perfect, the views extraordinary and even the chocolates on the bed could be flawless, and all those things sway critics, but there are a lot more great experiences in golf then there are great courses.

Some say a great course makes you hit every club in the bag. Well, it is hard to find a course anywhere that doesn't ask that question. More relevant, and what all great courses do, is ask you to hit a variety of shots – high shots that need to stop quickly, shots that should be run into the flag, drives that should turn both to the left and to the right, and shots that need to be shaped both ways into the flag – as well as a variety of interesting short shots around and on the greens.

And, as importantly, a great course will ask players to wrestle with the strategy of particular holes by asking questions to which there is no right answer. There is no right or wrong way to play the multiple option par-5 12th hole at Kingston Heath and the MacKenzie-sketched 14th hole at St Andrews, expertly showing the five distinct options of line and length. That is a hole you could never grow tired of answering its questions and players never grow tired of courses that ask confounding questions.

One of the great misconceptions of the modern game, especially in America, is that golf is a straight-hitting contest. Fairways are narrowed to the point where strategy is virtually eliminated because there is not the space off the tee to give players options about where best to drive. The task is simply to hit where you are told.

The test is one of pure execution but the great courses ask for more than that. Royal Melbourne, the Old Course, Cypress Point, the National Golf Links of America, Pine Valley, great courses all, are tests of both execution and thought with their holes offering an intelligent purpose to the striking of a golf ball.

The great modern course in America is Sand Hills, in Nebraska. Designed by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw it winds through tumbling sand dunes and it has all the elements of greatness. So remote is it that there is not a man-made structure in sight save for the tiny half-way house. There are huge expanses of short grass that give players a multitude of options off the tee. It asks for all the shots and the ever-present winds make for holes that vary wildly from day-to-day. The greens and bunkers are beautifully constructed and the routing expertly exploits the wild terrain without the need for hill climbing or long walks from green to tee.

> One thing great courses do not do is obey any strict guidelines as to what constitutes a 'proper' course.

The great courses all feel 'natural' because they all play over the land the way it was before they were golf holes laid over the property.

Great courses, including Muirfield, Royal St George's, Royal Dornoch and the Old Course, play over the links land by the sea; the heathland courses of London – probably the finest collection of courses in the world – lie on the undulating heath of south-west London and there are the great American parkland courses including Merion and Oakmont. There are brilliant courses in the dunes including Sand Hills and Shinnecock Hills. The one thing they have in common is that no one has tried to change what they are by planting trees that don't belong in order to change the feel and that is a trap we have fallen into in Australia. The surest way to distort the natural feel of a piece of land is to plant vegetation that doesn't belong.

One thing great courses do not do is obey any strict guidelines as to what constitutes a 'proper' course. Merion has only two par-5s and you have played them by the time you get to the 5th tee. Cypress Point has four par-5s in the first ten holes and back-to-back par-3s at ▸

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IN DOAK'S VIEW

American Tom Doak is one of the most sought-after course designers in the world today. His work at Cape Kidnappers in New Zealand and Barnbougle Dunes in Tasmania has been widely acclaimed.

He is also the author of the cult classic *The Confidential Guide To Golf Courses*. Here he reveals his confidential guide to some famous and/or great (and not-so-great) courses in Britain and Ireland.

Old Course St Andrews: "Still the best golf course in the world."

Carnoustie: "It's a great championship course but not a great course for everyday play. It has three or four great holes but not enough to be considered a truly great golf course."

Muirfield: "Absolutely a great golf course."

Cruden Bay: "Not really a great golf course but really a fun course to play. I would much rather play it than Carnoustie."

Brora: "A really cool golf course to play."

Machrihanish: "Great front nine but is it one of my top-50 golf courses? Then, no."

Royal Troon: "Great championship golf course but I cannot say it is a great golf course."

Wentworth West Course: "I'm not a big fan. There are plenty of other golf courses within 15km I would much rather play."

Turnberry: "I played it 25 years ago when I was in Scotland as a student and never really felt a need to return. It always seemed a little 'American' to me in the sense that it incorporated the sea views without using them as an integral part of the course. In truth it never seemed that 'linksy' to me."

Prestwick: "A marvellous course. Complex and confusing in parts, you are never really sure which way to go."



Royal Liverpool: "I played it once many years ago and I remember loving the experience."

Royal Porthcawl: "A great golf course."

St Enodoc: "You hesitate to call it a great golf course because it has one or two holes that are quirky beyond anything anyone has ever designed! But if you accept the quirks with the undoubted quality (which I do) it is a really fun place to play golf."

Swinley Forest: "A really great golf course. It doesn't look that challenging on the scorecard but it has some really tough short holes and it's hard to make a good score."

Brancaster: "A tremendous place to play golf. My only fear is that global warming will sweep it into the sea one day. What a huge loss that would be for British golf."

Rye: "I absolutely love it. It really should be rated among the top-20 or 30 courses in the world but with a par in the high 60s it will never be considered seriously by the selection panels."

Pennard: "I had read some snippet about it years before and thought it looked a really cool place to play golf. And when I finally got the opportunity I was not disappointed. I loved it."



Royal St Georges: "Of all the great British Open courses it has the most interesting greens. That is what makes Sandwich special in my view."

Royal Dornoch: "Another great course with superbly designed greens."

Royal County Down: "After playing the 9th hole you think this is the greatest golf course in the world. But by the time you play 18 you don't feel that any more. It's like they built 15 great holes then had to fight their way home to the clubhouse."



CONGRATULATIONS
Phil Mickelson

4th PLACE
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Royal Melbourne's West course has more world-class holes, like the par-4 6th, than any other Australian layout.

the 15th and 16th holes. The Old Course has only two short holes. Swinley Forest is 6,000 yards long with a 68 par but it is one of the most idyllic places to play golf in the world – and it asks for every shot in the bag.

The National Golf Links of America has a number of blind shots as does Royal County Down, so they are clearly no impediment to great golf.

Great courses are rare things that are always fun to play and the more you play them, the more you uncover the mysteries of the holes and the questions they ask – questions of which you can never tire.

MATTHEW ECOB
• VETERAN TOURING PROFESSIONAL

What makes a golf course great? During the past 25 years, I have had the opportunity to play a lot of golf courses here and overseas. Unfortunately, there's only a handful of them I would consider great. My criteria may be a little harsher than most, however, when you describe something great, to me it means something really special.

A great golf course to me is described by a certain number of qualities that other golf courses don't have, or only possess in small quantities. A great golf course is one that can be truly enjoyed by all players.

Strategy plays a major role in covering these qualities. Being rewarded for a good shot and penalised for a bad one seems the most logical way to enhance a golfer's feeling towards a course. Within this strategy, variety is a vital element in determining whether the strategy works or not.

The best way to describe this variety is catering for every golfer's needs. Varying the depths of bunkering, greenside and fairway, comes to mind immediately. A short finesse shot out of a shallow greenside bunker and reaching a green from a fairway bunker seems unheard of in today's modern course design, so the variance of skill and one's multiple talents have subsided.

There should be a few small greens to help cater for the good ball striker, while tilted greens also play a role in variety, from the player who likes to shape the ball to the player who relies on their own strategy instead of brute strength to score well. Easy run-up areas for the beginner gives them a reason to enjoy, come back and play.

This variety, I think, is lost in most golf courses designed today and in recent years and, unfortunately, most of you reading this won't get the opportunity to play some of the great courses of this world. It seems like so many developers in their briefs to designers are obsessed with building the biggest, longest and most terrifying course they can – big greens with massive tiers, bunkers so deep that elevators need to be installed, all with the hope that this will be their masterpiece, their stamp.

Time is an asset to all great courses. Years ago when land was in abundance, designers had a better choice of land than they do now. Most great golf courses are built on premium golf land, good soil and beautiful, naturally undulating topography. The years of weathering, subtle ground movement and the maturation of the correct tree planting helps in the development process.

Ambience is also a crucial element of greatness. I remember playing Cherry Hills in the United States some years ago, walking into the clubhouse for the first time and feeling somewhat overawed by the history of the club, seeing the photos on the walls of all the great players and championships that have been played there. Standing on the 1st tee looking at the plaque with Arnold Palmer's achievement in the 1960 US Open sent a chill down my spine. I felt nervous even playing a social round with some mates. This atmosphere, created by history, cannot be replicated by any course designer but rewards the ones who have great artistic talent and foresight. Great golf courses are pieces of art.

I am sure there are plenty of reasons why a great course has come into being. Many of us enthusiasts have differing opinions. We see a golf course's beauty from different angles.

In my opinion the icing on the cake is the synergy and balance between the golf course and its surrounds. I love the old courses, where the golf course is at one with the landscape. The designer has created an individual sculpture with each bunker, with each green, and marrying it to the land and strategy of the hole at hand, without much movement of soil. Unfortunately we don't seem to see that love or desire much anymore. Don't get me wrong, I think course design has many challenges, but the lack of artistic flair is lost through computers and technology.

I suppose time will tell if a golf course will stand as a 'great'.

PHOTO: MATTHEW HARRIS/TGPL