A MASTERCLASS IN ROUTING A GOLF COURSE

An Exploration Into Perry Maxwell's Inspirational Routing at Old Town Club

Golf architects Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw don't often mince words when speaking of the brilliance of Old Town Club in Winston-Salem (NC). Crenshaw, for one, always touts Old Town for its extraordinary topography. "It's the best land I've ever seen for golf," says the two-time Masters champion repeatably, who has played and studied many of the world's most venerated designs.

Coore's reverence for Old Town goes even deeper. Coore, who first became enamored with the Perry Maxwell layout while attending college at Wake Forest, protests that the 1939 classic encompasses one fundamental design component that's in a league by itself.

Coore isn't referring to Maxwell's coveted putting surfaces and their world-renowned, internal "rolls". Coore isn't even talking about Maxwell's natural bunkering style, which he and Crenshaw artistically restored to its original identity in 2013 (and augmented again in 2023). That would be brassy for the soft-spoken Carolinian.

Instead, Coore claims that Old Town's true mastery emanates from its routing. Coore interjects, "it's actually *how* Mr. Maxwell utilized the land here—maximizing every inch—that's so fascinating." Coore always marvels at how each hole leans against the pitch of the land, showcases the natural features of the landscape and how flawlessly they all fit together on such a small, undulating canvas. Alluding perhaps to his own development as an architect, Coore elaborates:

> Any serious student of architecture must first come here to see how Mr. Maxwell laid out the course over such a small piece of hilly terrain. Given the hole variety and the fact that it's still very walkable, that's quite an accomplishment.

Coore, who always considered Old Town a cornerstone for his early understanding of extraordinary golf architecture, contends that Old Town's routing topography is ingenious and deserving of intensive study and examination. "It's textbook material," he says. "It's a masterclass in routing a golf course." As a result, Crenshaw projects that his design partner "will go down as one of the best routers in the history of the game." An in-depth analysis of Maxwell's inspirational, character-rich routing at Old Town is outlined below.

1. Hole Transitions and Connectivity

Many of the world's best routings contain a cohesive sequence of holes that meld together and fit on the land almost seamlessly. There's usually an harmonious-like flow from one hole to the next. Consecutive holes are often linked by a natural walk-path or a fresh fairway cut, and ideally, transitions are intimate and short so the mind doesn't stray. Today, there are some fascinating analytics dedicated to hole transitions thanks to Jeff Schley, a golf enthusiast from Chicago (IL). By charting golf course routings with ProVisualizer tools (specifically the distance between each green and the next back tee), Schley has created an aggregate *"connectivity index"* of GOLF Magazine's 2023-2024 list of the "Top 100 Golf Courses in the World." Accordingly, Old Town's routing sets the mark containing the tightest hole sequence with just 796-meters of transitions. *(See Index: Right)*

2. Variety Achieved With Undulating Topography

Maxwell didn't route Old Town straight into the teeth of earth-forms in a direct manner. Instead, Old Town's routing skirts landforms rather obliquely—weaving and twisting its way around the layout's boldest contours. While many holes bend with the pitch of the terrain, "much like a racetrack," according to Coore, other holes peel back against the land in "reverse camber" fashion. Coore professes, "shot makers must learn the art of shaping the ball high up against all sorts of side-slopes just to hold the grade of the terrain on the bottom side." The relationship here between hole-shape and ground movement yields some of the most varied challenges in golf. With 80-acres of tumbling fairways, swaying stances and hanging lies vex even the most accomplished golfers. Maxwell's unique use of tilting terrain at Old Town presents golfers with new discoveries round after round. So it's no big surprise that Crenshaw would hold such a strong appreciation for the adage that "*undulation is the soul of golf*" first gleaned from

the 1903 classic <u>Concerning Golf</u> by British architect John Low. "The character of the land always comes first in golf," says Crenshaw emphatically. Indeed, if undulation is the pillar of a gifted site, then Old Town rightfully earns its place among the noblest playing fields.

In its indeterminate form, undulation is free-flowing and multi-dimensional, so it's difficult to compare from one landscape to the next. To simplify matters, Schley devised a shrewd formula for assessing the character of terrain by "*measuring the extent to which all centerline ascents within a routing combine to be greater than the elevation change of the property.*" Calculating all the humps, bumps and rises along the central axis of each hole offers some context and a rough sample-size of a layout's internal land movement. Again, data analytics can be used to help corroborate sensory information normally derived from the personal experience.

After crunching ProVisualizer's data, Old Town's *"undulation metric"* matches Oakmont (PA) and Crystal Downs (MI), tied for sixth among GOLF Magazine's 2023-2024 list of the *"Top 100 Golf Courses in the World"*. *(See Index: Left)*

3. A Core Routing (Internal Integration)

Eight fairways run together without interruption of rough or vegetation. Plus, six holes converge around the nucleus of the gigantic double green, resembling a Jurassic burial ground and forming the communal epicenter of the layout. It's also rare to find both front-9 and back-9 loops start and end in such close proximity to one another—and to the clubhouse doors—located on the sentinel elevation of the property. By tracing each loop with your index finger, one will find that the front-9 wraps counterclockwise around the southern perimeter, while the back-9 turns clockwise around the northern boundary. Each nine represents an isolated loop until they meet back at the double green and then criss-cross briefly at the shared teeing grounds of holes 9 and 18. That's quirk to the max. It's a routing that's unrivaled for its intimacy, where golfers are continually crossing paths and are often within eyeshot—engendering a fraternal spirit among all.

4. Utilization of Natural Hazards

It's also difficult to route a course using a single water feature so prolifically. Silas Creek looms large on more than ten holes stretching almost two miles across the heart of the property. The diversity in which the creek and its branches are used (flanking left, flanking right, diagonally across, and blindly in front of green-sites) plays a critical role of impacting hole strategies throughout the layout.

OLD TOWN CLUB

WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA

DESIGNED BY
PERRY DUKE MAXWELL

EST. 1939

RESTORATION BY
COORE & CRENSHAW

CARD OF THE COURSE

Hole	Par	Yards	Hole	Par	Yards
1	4	426	10	4	410
2	3	167	11	3	220
3	4	428	12	4	454
4	5	526	13	4	453
5	4	408	14	4	339
6	3	190	15	3	248
7	4	443	16	4	367
8	4	418	17	5	629
9	4	469	18	4	443
Out	35	3,475	In	35	3,563
			Total	70	7,038

0   50   150   300

drawn by KEITH CUTTEN

Over: Aerial view of Old Town's double-green, where four fairways merge and six holes meet creating a natural epicenter. Two miles away, the Winston-Salem skyline appears prominently in the backdrop. (Photograph By John Cavalier)

Left: A vintage inspired map of Maxwell's master routing at Old Town following Coore & Crenshaw's 2013 restoration. (Rendering By Keith Cutten)

5. Mixing Up Target Elevations and Backdrops

The way a target looks often depends upon the topography of its location. Ran Morrissett, architecture editor for *GOLF* Magazine, has long been fascinated by the diverse presentations and elevations of Old Town's green-sites. For instance, golfers play up to hole 1, down to hole 2, back up to hole 3, down to hole 4, then up to five, down to six, up to seven, down to eight, up to nine and down to ten. "It's uncanny how Maxwell varied the looks and elevations of each target," says Morrissett, who was perhaps the first to recognize this constantly changing dynamic. And there's more — the routing finishes as it starts playing up the volcano landform at hole 16, down to hole 17 and back up to hole 18.

Target variety can also depend on the scenery beyond the flagstick. Some targets are framed by a backdrop of trees, offering visual scale and dimension. Other targets are reminiscent of a links design, where open boundless space removes any sense of depth and visual assistance. Old Town has it all — blind greens, skyline greens, infinity fall-away greens and some that are even "layered" beyond the sight line of the target.

As the former associate of architect Alister MacKenzie, Maxwell applied MacKenzie's trade of "layering" throughout the layout. Here, one will find distant green-sites benched in the backdrop of a hole tying-in visually to the one at hand. Without any sense of the distance between greens, layering can create visual deception from the approach. For instance, Hole 7 green-site dominates the perspective into hole 14, though its located hundreds of yards away. Hole 6 green also stands up prominently in the backcloth of hole 4, and the flagsticks at the double green stack up beyond the flagstick at hole 11 creating a similar distraction. In each case, layering serves as a visual examination, requiring golfers to hone in on the real target. As a collection, it would be challenging to find a more varied display of target settings anywhere.

6. Variety Achieved with Length and Direction

In rare fashion, Old Town's par-3s all face different directions and then build in distance throughout the round. What's more, newly-restored ribbons of expansive teeing space maximize a highly-diverse short hole configuration with additional day-to-day, set-up variability. Tee markers, for instance, may once again be placed virtually anywhere offering countless thought-provoking presentations, playing angles and yardages for all skillsets. Members never grow comfortable with anything here, not even a tee shot, without pause and deliberation. Once again, variety proves to be the ultimate seedbed for the mental side of the game.

Opposite: In the foreground, hole 4 contains a partially 'blind' putting surface hidden at the base of a dell. From the approach, golfers marvel at the commanding view of the formidable plateau green at hole 6 sited in the backdrop. "Layered" at different elevations, both green sites are prominently presented to the golfer. (Photograph by Jon Cavalier)

7. The Genius of Space and Place (External Separation)

Like city parks, many golf courses are distinctive and invigorating. Their routing configurations can play a large roll in their ultimate allure and appeal. David Normoyle, a noted golf historian and former Director of the USGA Museum, contends that Old Town's routing best utilizes the genius of "space and place" expounded by Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of American Landscape Architecture. According to Normoyle, Olmsted believed the human mind craves a long, open space. While addressing the Fenway Park Commission in Boston (MA) in 1870, Olmsted's prophetic words resonate at Old Town still today:

> What we most want to counteract the harsh realities of modern life in our cities, is a simple, broad open space; surrounded (but not interrupted or broken up) by a depth of wood, enough… to gain tranquility and rest the mind… and to completely shut out the city from our landscapes.

Much of Old Town's routing—14 holes in all—scales its perimeter boundaries, which are predominantly screened in green-clad vegetation. Of its 165-acres, Maxwell utilized exterior corners and off-shoots of the property so judiciously, allowing for a much looser, more expansive interior. Golfers are first exposed to this inner-vastness when cresting the fourth fairway. Many first-timers call this cosmos *"The Big Reveal,"* as tree management has reclaimed distant vistas and panoramas throughout the heart of the property.

In this way, Old Town's exterior routing configuration resembles the loops around countless Olmsted-designed parks. From perimeter perspectives, sweeping internal sight lines captivate those with anticipation for what's waiting to be discovered as they round the bend.

While shaking his head in disbelief, one observer mused, "there's nothing like it anywhere around here. It felt like we were in the Serengeti," he says. "No one would believe this is within two miles of downtown Winston-Salem." Thanks to Maxwell's Olmsted-esque routing and his use of open core space, a walk around Old Town can transcend anyone's sense of place. *by Dunlop White* ◆

Opposite: Aerial view highlighting an abundance of fairways and golden prairie grasses that blanket the topography offering vistas in every direction. These Elysian fields abut Wake Forest, where Wait Chapel stands tall in the backdrop. (Photograph by Andy Johnson)

Upper Left: aerial view of Olmsted's Shawnee Park in Louisville (KY) also showcases a perimeter routing buffered by dense vegetation with open views across interior fields. Naturally, it serves as a restorative haven or refuge from the city life outside. (By Broken Sidewalk)

Lower Left: The design plan for Olmsted's Cadwalader Park in Trenton, (NJ) also features an exterior "walk-in-the-park" routing with off-shoots along the perimeter to pique your interest for what's to be encountered ahead.(By Cadwalader Park Alliance)
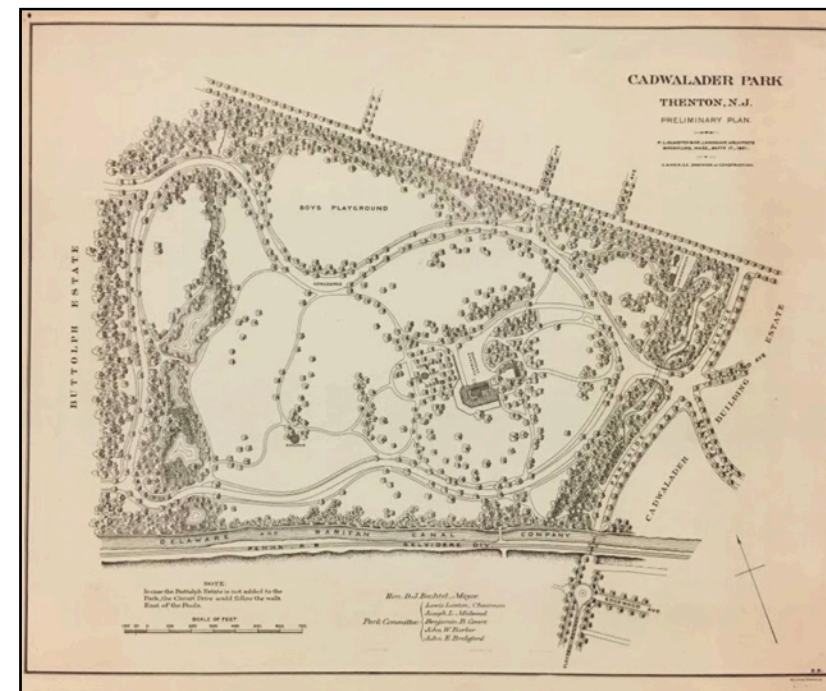
Right: The Big Reveal: nine flagsticks emerge from this vantage point. No seaside cliffs or mountain views are needed. The grandeur of open inland topography can also stir the soul. A sanctuary within city limits. (Photo by Dunlop White)