



Shady trees and heated club politics

W. Dunlop White III

Golfers simply adore trees. The proliferation of trees that encumber many golf courses today serves as proof. An alarmed member of our club approached the green's chairman and inquired why the poplar trees behind the first hole had been removed? The inquiry was met with the response that the trees were dying. The member exclaimed, 'Well I'm dying too; I suppose you would like to take me down as well?' Clearly, golfers can become emotionally attached to trees.

Undercutting the tree planting trend

Proliferation of trees clutter and suffocate all too many golf courses. Pioneers of the classical design era did not believe that golf needed trees, so original sites were usually windswept

and barren. Clearing plans for wooded areas were typically generous and wide. Such spaciousness provided unmatched variety as broad fairways offered many angles of attack.

These days, golf holes have become much too linear and narrow as straight patterns of trees typically squeeze both sides of fairways. Lateral, alternative routes to the hole are often unavailable. Straight shots are dictated, and good shots are restricted to the dead centre. Nothing has diminished strategy more than the loss of expansive fairway widths due to tree plantings and overgrown vegetation.²¹

The installation of golf course irrigation triggered the tree planting barrage. These irrigation systems were single-row down the centre of the fairway. The extent of the water's

throw gradually became the demarcation lines for fairways, particularly since the turf was naturally greener in these locations. Thus, wide-open fairways became narrow, and their elaborate curvatures evolved into straight lines. In response, greens committees began planting sub-standard varieties of trees in the lateral areas that could not be irrigated.

The Dutch elm disease also served as a contributing factor. The American elm was a beautiful hardwood with unobtrusive root zones and high canopies. As the American elm perished, awareness of attrition escalated and the practice of planting replacement trees became the rage. A countless number of replacement trees were also planted in close proximity to healthy trees, just in case they too perished.



OPPOSITE: Seventh hole at Old Town Club, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, USA. Prior to its course restoration, a player's view of the bunkers located on the seventh hole was significantly impaired by trees. (Photo by Dunlop White III.)



Worse yet, their substitutes were cheap golf course selections. Soft wooded trees, such as willows, birches, and maples were planted much too often. Debris-ridden conifers and evergreens, such as white pines, hemlocks, cedars and spruces, were also poor choices.²² These varieties not only possess shallow root zones, a maintenance burden, but they also manifest low extending limbs which restrict the swing and obstruct recovery play.

Golf course rankings have also inspired tree plantings. The top ranked course in the country serves as an architectural model for all others. Naturally, the elite courses will be emulated. Such is the case with Pine Valley Golf Club in Pine Valley, New Jersey, which most publications perennially anoint as the best. Because one hole cannot be seen from another at Pine Valley, numerous clubs have initiated tree-planting programs between holes in an attempt to create the Pine Valley look. Interestingly, Pine Valley intersects 300 plus acres of land, while the average classical course contains a little more than 120 acres. Separating golf holes with tree plantings on much smaller parcels of land have grown to influence play.

Club officials can also be blamed for precipitating the tree-lined, parkland look. Often the bone of contention is safety between adjacent holes to reduce the risks of liability. Other times, committee people plant trees to defend par. Beautification committees also plant trees to adorn the golfing grounds.²³ Likewise, superintendents routinely plant trees to attract beneficial wildlife habitats. Regardless of the motivation, too many trees encumber our golf courses.

The root of the problem

Trees are most obtrusive from a turf management standpoint. Trees and turfgrass simply don't mix. Trees tend to block valuable morning sunlight from eastern and southern exposures, which impairs turf growth, and they screen air circulation thereby obstructing the necessary exchange of gases required for photosynthesis. Trees are dominant plants to grass, and when competing for nutrients and water trees will invariably win against other vegetation.

In the winter, trees block precious sunlight, especially from the south, which prevent frozen

turfgrass areas from warming and thawing. Evergreens and conifers are too often the culprits as they do not lose their leaf material and screen the low-lying, winter sun. Without five hours of unfettered sunlight each day, critical turf areas cannot properly dry.²⁴ Moist turf attracts diseases, which must be treated with expensive herbicides and fungicides. If turfgrasses appear sick, a chainsaw represents the better antidote. Ecological arguments are in favour of tree removal as well.

Worse yet, when all attempts to grow grass fail, bare areas beneath trees are typically covered with costly landscaping materials, such as mulch or pine bark. Regardless of your skill, recovery shots are often impracticable from these positions. Matters are compounded when this material is shaped into inverted pods approximately eight feet in diameter around virtually every sapling on the course. If critical areas of play need to be landscaped we suggest taking down the trees and grow thriving turfgrass instead.

Because of tree plantings and overgrown vegetation, trees provide a framework for many green sites. Typically, a backdrop of

trees aids golfers in their pre-shot routines. Intended ball flights are ultimately connected to a backdrop of trees, which visually assist golfers with shot direction, club selection, and shot execution. These trees navigate golfers by operating as points of visual reference.²⁵ Furthermore, tree backdrops evoke a sense of scale and dimension, which is comfortable and pleasing to the golfer's eye.

A green without any visual assistance requires golfers to possess the aptitude of sensing the depth and distance to the hole. This effect can be achieved by removing backdrops of trees in favor of vast expanses of open space. Whether the view is of an ambiguous skyline, an open body of water, or a vast span of terrain, golfers lack visual orientation and must trust their sense of depth in the approach shot to the hole. Such fortitude is often not required in the contemporary game because of tree plantings and overgrown vegetation behind greens.²⁶

It is always good advice to avoid planting memorial trees. Determining desired tree types and locations are always at issue. Their sense of permanence also becomes debilitat-

OPPOSITE ABOVE: A framework of trees behind the seventeenth green at Roaring Gap, evoking a sense of containment for the approach shot. (Photo by Dunlop White III.)

OPPOSITE BELOW: A digitally-altered photo of the same hole at Roaring Gap, conveying the disorientation golfers would surely experience without the backdrop of trees as a visual reference. The distortion of depth perception and distance to the flagstick would place a premium of astute club selection. (Photo by Dunlop White III.)

ing in an ever-changing environment. Allow one memorial tree, and soon your course will be inundated with remembrances. If families really want to show their affection to a loved one, trees can always be removed from your course in their memory.²⁷

Trees located too close to bunkers should be assessed. Their proximity to one another often forms a double hazard.²⁸ In addition, trees that block full-scale visuals of golf course hazards should be logged. For instance, bunkers and creeks cannot demand the proper attention and awareness from golfers when they cannot be seen.²⁹

Instead, golf committees should utilise a tree's ability to screen on the perimeter of the premises. Trees can partition the golf course from unattractive structures and bustling noise, so long as they do not follow some formalised arrangement such as a single-file line, which appears much too ornamental and contrived in a natural setting.

Selectively clearing trees from the interior of the golf course produces the added visual dimension of depth. Gorgeous vistas of rolling hills and terrain are available when your eyes

are not isolated by a dense barrier of trees.³⁰ Newly planted trees tend to clutter open spaces because their limbs and shadows tend to camouflage intricate undulations of natural ground game contours. Many golf courses should embrace the visual depth and splendour of long, sweeping perspectives. Besides the beauty, golfers will experience a unified spirit and a sense of camaraderie with other golfers throughout the course, as their site lines will periodically meet during the round.

Dense wooded areas with low reaching limbs restrict recovery play. All too often the golfer is forced to punch the ball laterally out of harm's way. Instead, clean out the brush, raise the canopy to a reasonable height, and remove undesirable evergreens within the hardwoods. Under these conditions, the golfer may at least assess the risks for their next angle of attack, and depending upon skill, may shape the ball through alternative openings to safety.³¹

Here, grand signature trees may be exposed. Bring to view prominent trees which have always been hidden among impinging neighbours. Grand oaks and other specimens will become accentuated and highlighted

upon the removal of unattractive evergreens and miniature saplings nearby.³²

Although many trees are not a virtue to a golf course, they have a funny habit of always taking root. Curiously, trees grow larger while their limbs reach wider. As such, trees must always be assessed, trimmed or removed. Because of their negative effects on agronomy and course strategy, combined with their aesthetic impact, massive tree removal programs have emerged as the most dominant trend in golf course renovation. Removal is simple. The greatest challenge is attempting to negotiate the landmine of club politics.

Walk softly but carry a big axe

There are a number of methods for tree removal, but don't notify or alert the membership. Many club members are tree-huggers. Slip-up and mark a tree for removal with an orange ribbon or a surveyor's flag, and enraged golfers will track you down in protest. An 'X' drawn on the tree trunk with red spray paint is much too conspicuous as well. Unless it is an outright specimen, don't bother trimming overgrown trees either. The



The removal of ornamental Christmas trees from the fourteenth hole has recaptured beautiful sweeping vistas of an original Donald Ross design. Roaring Gap Club, Roaring Gap, North Carolina, USA. (Photo by Dunlop White III.)

wound typically leaves an obvious scar to remind all golfers of your exploits.³³

Begin removing trees on the interior of the course, as opposed to the holes adjacent to the clubhouse, to avoid early detection. The best time to remove trees is when the club is closed or when no one is around. Snowstorms offer the perfect opportunity for extensive tree work. If trees are removed in the middle of winter, no one will notice the next spring. Similarly, if trees are removed in the dead of night with a high-powered chipper, a tarp, and a sod crew, no one will likely miss the trees the next day.

With tree removal, a discrete and methodical approach builds consensus. Do not send the membership into a state of shock or panic. Prioritise and start removing cautiously. By the time members start noticing tree loss, they are supporting an agenda that they never would have honoured at the outset.³⁴ Typically, members who are emotionally attached to hardwoods are the ones taking credit for their removal once they have mysteriously disappeared.

Superintendents should be prepared to answer membership inquiries. Perhaps they

should nickname their chainsaws 'ice' or 'lightning'. As tree loss becomes evident over time, superintendents may honestly report that either ice or lightning destroyed those trees during the last storm.

If tree removal is not urgent, copper nails and toxic chemical applications are fine choices to promote a slow departure. Ordinarily, members don't object to the removal of rotten, brown hardwoods once they have inexplicably perished. Golfers will offer good riddance when these trees become unsightly and present safety or liability concerns.

Stumping the opposition

A negotiable approach is advised where club democracies demand membership approval and consent. Because members are more concerned with good agronomics than with strategic shot making, it would be good politics to approach tree removal with the emphasis on the ability of growing healthy turfgrass. Architectural principles are generally less accepted as justifications for tree removal.

For instance, if you explain that a tree was removed from behind the green because its

roots were penetrating into the fill pad, then you will satisfy those who are most alarmed. However, if you try to convince a committee that a tree was unoriginal, unattractive, unduly penal, or strategically improper, you had better hide beneath that very tree for cover.

Also, never refer to the project as a tree removal program. Instead, label the project as a tree management program and members will be less likely to resist.

Compromises work just as well. Golfers who are sentimental about trees, ordinarily appreciate flower gardens and other formalised beds adorning the premises. Focus on such arrangements in conspicuous sections around the clubhouse. Thus, if you erect a shrub bed beside the parking lot, you will not appear as ecologically insensitive for logging a few menacing trees on the golf course.

Committees should always endeavour to reassure their members and limit their initial fears by transplanting trees at the beginning of a project. A preliminary presentation of tree care is essential. Relocating smaller trees into proper places on a golf course is a suc-

cessful political tactic if implemented at the outset of the program.

Also, never divulge the actual number of trees designated for removal. Initially, two hundred trees sounds devastating and will likely send shock waves throughout the club. Most members do not realise that an average golf course contains between 20,000 and 30,000 trees. It is better not to explain. Instead, hedge significantly to the downside when disclosing the actual numbers.

Independent third party experts are often the most persuasive influence on members who tend to trust those who do not have a personal interest or agenda in club politics. Arborists and horticulturists are not qualified though, as proper evaluation would include more than an inventory of tree care. Rather, authorities should assess how trees interact with golf course strategy, aesthetics, agronomy, and safety. So hire an informed golf course architect with tree management experience.

The problem is that people who embrace trees on golf courses are truly more interested in trees than golf. Prosperous tree management programs often depend upon the ability



Convening regularly with chainsaws, high horse-powered chippers, large tarps and a sod squad, club officials at Oakmont Country Club, Pennsylvania, USA, organised 3500 trees to 'mysteriously' vanish. (Photo by Mark S. Murphy, courtesy of *Golf Digest*.)

of club officials to evade the wrath of emotionally attached members. Success is also determined by their ability to negotiate, educate, and win consensus. Different clubs may

require different approaches. Evaluate which posture is most appropriate at your club, and initiate this long overdue process.