



## Armed with visual challenges

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Today's innovative golf equipment has rendered many old-style golf courses vulnerable to long hitters. Titanium drivers and graphite shafts deliver a powerful punch. Plus, high-compression golf balls are flying implausible distances. Despite these technological advancements, additional length isn't the only defense for every ageing golf hole. Other lethal weapons are available to beef up your score.

Optical illusions, for instance, thrive on golf's most fascinating designs. It's not by coincidence that many difficult golf holes appear deceptive and misleading. Architects, who deal in the craft of visual deception use varying degrees of width and depth to distort a golfer's perception of sizes and distances. Consequently, target positions and landing-

areas can elude golfers by appearing abnormally small and ambiguous.

In contrast, architects can easily accentuate the appearance of bunkers and hazards by employing a rich spectrum of distinguishing colours and textures, which is guaranteed to garner a golfer's full attention. When architects illuminate unfavourable course locations and disguise favourable ones, golf courses can be mentally and emotionally stimulating, regardless of the overall yardage.

Even ophthalmologists cannot cure the following visual challenges.

#### Depth perception

When assessing the length of an impending shot, your eyes can play tricks on you. How often do you feel that a marked distance does

not look the yardage? Oddly enough, much of it depends upon the physical scenery left behind the green. Backdrops of trees, for instance, can be most accommodating.

Initially, trees may direct golfers towards the target by operating as points of visual reference. During pre-shot routines, a golfer's intended ball flight can be visually connected to specific trees beyond the sight-line of the pin. Ultimately, these trees aid golfers in establishing their aim and alignment. They also give the target a sense of scale and dimension.

Without a background of trees, however, a green can appear much like a basketball hoop without its backboard. Can you imagine? In any sport, it is quite difficult to find your range without definitive points of reference



OPPOSITE: Pine Valley Golf Club, Clementon, New Jersey, USA. Pine Valley's thirteenth hole—a wasteland perspective. Course architects: George Crump and Harry S. Colt. (Photo by Larry Lambrecht.)

OPPOSITE: Royal County Down Golf Club, Newcastle, Co Down, Northern Ireland. Course architects: Old Tom Morris (1889); later Seymour Dunn, Harry Vardon and, most significantly, Harry S. Colt (late-1920s). One of Colt's most revered holes, the tee-shot on the par-4 ninth hole is famously 'blind' and for best results it should be directed towards the large dune on the left of the fairway. Such boldness sets up the favoured approach to the green, but veer too far left and a gorse-covered dune will claim your ball. Extra room is provided on the right side of the fairway for shorter-hitting golfers, but the downside is a compromised line to the green. Two bunkers, some forty-five yards short of the green, lie ever ready to snare approach shots. (Photo by Larry Lambrecht.)

backing the target. This boundless effect is best achieved in golf when vast expanses of continuous colour and space loom beyond the green. Whether the panorama consists of an open body of water or a barren span of terrain, golfers often lack visual orientation and must trust their sense of depth and distance in the approach shot to the hole.

Skyline vistas also distort a golfer's perception of the actual distance to the flag. Nowhere are these perspectives more prevalent than on the primordial links of the British Isles, where a vast, ambiguous horizon frames countless greensites. On parkland layouts, the skyline concept works more effectively when the putting surface is perched on top of a hill or knoll. Given that the flagstick appears as a part of the distant horizon, even accomplished golfers are inclined to use stronger clubs. Consequently, approach shots may carry the green despite all the handy yardage information available.

Higher handicappers normally have a different impression of depth. They tend to approach the boundless target quite timidly, and often wind up playing short of the hole.

Much like a pitcher would throw to home plate without the security of a backstop, the lack of visual containment behind the green often discourages higher handicappers from playing as aggressively towards the hole. After all, their worst nightmare is knocking it through the zip code into an unknown area of peril.

Depth perception can be just as challenging when a greensite drops off appreciably in the rear and appears to empty itself into a shady abyss of trouble—again providing nothing to aid in visualising the scope and scale of the shot. Many fall-away greens, which tilt from front to back, create this type of stark impression. Likewise, a greensite that is close to grade and crowned in the Donald Ross-style also yields a monochrome backdrop.

In contrast, when a huge, distinctive structure behind the flagstick emerges within your frame of reference, the green should appear dramatically closer, yet disproportionately smaller. At the Old Course in St Andrews, Scotland, a large university dormitory, known as Hamilton Hall, dwarfs all perceptions of

size and distance on the final hole beneath it.

Similar vistas at The Royal County Down Golf Club in Northern Ireland appear to shrink in scope and scale primarily because the mountains of Mourne hover so enormously from behind. Slieve Donard, the tallest peak that serves as the backdrop to the ninth hole, makes the long par-4 appear much shorter than the 486 yards it plays.

Just as the scenery behind a green can suspiciously challenge a golfer's judgement of distance, so do architectural features in front of a green. For instance, carry bunkers that pop up considerably shy of a green complex often obscure the remaining distance to the pin. Golfers ordinarily cannot see over and beyond carry bunkers and therefore cannot visualise the extent of terrain left to the green.

The fourteenth hole at Carnoustie Golf Links in Scotland boasts a pair of 'Spectacles' bunkers, which emerge from elevated ground to obscure a golfer's view of the approach and putting surface some seventy yards ahead. As the flagstick appears immediately beyond the twin bunkers, approach shots routinely settle short of the hole.





### Visual width

The width of golf holes can also play optical illusions with the target. An example of this is when a shot must be played between two large hills or dunes. The smaller the gap or opening, the more a golfer's perception of the distance to the other side will lengthen.

Strandhill Golf Club in Ireland, and especially its thirteenth hole, exemplifies this type of devious illusion. Here, the close proximity of two sandy bluffs, which golfers must bisect, makes the outlying green appear unreachable from the approach.

Still other golf vistas expose the frailties of the human eye. A green typically looks much larger than it really is when the perspective funnels through a narrow corridor of dunes or trees. Likewise, a green often appears much smaller when plopped in a wide-open area of play.

Pat Ruddy is one of Ireland's leading architects. He explains that these illusions are enhanced when different presentations are offered in a single round. Ruddy states: 'By providing a variety of enclosed settings in valleys or trees followed quickly by panoramic vistas over miles of countryside or sea, the

eye will fairly quiver sending the wrong information back to the command post'.<sup>9</sup>

Like different light settings, a golfer's vision can adapt to any one perspective even if it's nearly dark. However, if golfers move back and forth between bright and dim settings, they may lose their sense of orientation and focus. Shifting between open and closed areas of play has a similar effect on a golfer's bearing.

A good illustration of this is at Cypress Point Club in Pebble Beach, California. Here, the landscape changes in midstream as golfers experience a transition from towering pines, to open, washed-out linksland on the grand Pacific. Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw also portray such variations of landscapes at Friar's Head Golf Club in New York. Here, the routing swings back and forth from tree-lined dunes off the north shore of Long Island, into windswept meadows closer inland.

### Visual contrasts

Just as ambiguous vistas of the target serve to puzzle golfers, conspicuous vistas of hazards tend to riddle them with fear. Hazards

intimidate golfers particularly when they stand out and appear brutally penal. John Low, author of *Concerning Golf* (1903), believed that hazards should be strikingly visible. Good bunkers, according to Low, 'refuse to be disregarded and decline to be ignored'.<sup>10</sup>

Classical architects captivated golfers by creating charismatic bunkers with irregular shapes. Their rugged faces and jagged edges provided a natural accent to the gorse-filled sand. Such architectural flair transformed ordinary hazards into bold, visually arresting obstacles. Only when their condition does not appear so neat and upholstered will a golfer's blood pressure mount.

Sadly, modern bunkers appear rather tame. The sand is uniformly prepared and the edges are meticulously groomed and manicured. Today's immaculate bunker style tends to blend in quietly with their tidy surroundings.

Instead, these hazards can be emphasised and illuminated through visual contrasts. For example, architects can apply different grass varieties to promote distinct turf colours and textures. Ornamental grasses,

OPPOSITE: Moonah Links (Legends Course), Rye, Victoria, Australia. Course architect: Ross Perrett. The view from the dogleg's outside corner at the 353-metre, par-4 fifteenth hole. Listed as Stroke index two, Perrett's excellent design offers golfers the opportunity to shape their tee-shot to the left—alongside an impressively sculptured bunker complex—or risk running through the fairway if too straight, or too long. The uphill, second shot to an elusive target fits the eye perfectly, and is one of the course's visual highlights. There are two courses at Moonah Links on the 196-hectare 'Cups Country' property: the Open Course, which held the 2003 Australian Open and is slated for at least every third one, thereafter; and the Legends—so-named to honour the many champion Australian golfers of the past. (Photo by Kim Baker.)



such as broom sedge, can be seeded on the shoulders of ordinary bunkers or on the banks of indistinguishable branches. Ordinarily, fine fescue grasses complement the broom sedge by growing tall, seeding out and turning brilliant shades of tawny brown.

Architects can expedite this transition by redirecting water distribution away from these turf grasses. Stressed fescues can rapidly change a variety of colours and textures, particularly in dry, lean conditions. They can stand tall like wispy eyebrows giving hazards a multi-dimensional appearance, or they also may fold over and mat down like coarse, woolly vegetation.

Either way, these hazards will eventually become visually accentuated against a span of smooth, emerald-toned fairways. Consequently, bunkers, which were once hardly noticeable, will emerge as signals eliciting attention and awareness from golfers.

A growing number of architects today admire the ghastly look of whins and heather that shore up many fairways in the British Isles. They also covet the rustic appearance of native wasteland vegetation in and around

the hazards at Pine Valley and Merion. Architects Mike DeVries and Mike Strantz are among this new breed who are recapturing a naturalised bunker style of their own. Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw also demonstrate the power of attaching wispy fescues to all hazards as a reminder of the peril ahead. Similarly, Tom Doak's use of sea-grasses at Pacific Dunes in Oregon leaves wayward golfers with little hope of recovery.

Thus, the next time the issue of 'scoring resistance' arises at your home club, instead of automatically stretching your course to the boundary, commission an architect well versed in visual challenges. Old Man Par can always be protected by golf perspectives that stir human emotions and capitalise on the limitations of the naked eye.



Royal Portrush Golf Club (Valley Course), Portrush, Co Antrim, Northern Ireland. Course architect: Harry S. Colt. The rugged dunes, which shore up the fifth green on a hole called 'Desert', make it appear 'Lilliputian' in such an immense breadth of space. The Valley Course developed slowly over time, whenever club finances and focus permitted. The better-known layout at Royal Portrush—the Dunluce Course, where the 1951 Open Championship was played—took precedence. One of the early configurations at Royal Portrush was the so-called 'Long Course' ... and it contained a hole called 'Valley'. (Photo by Larry Lambrecht.)

OPPOSITE: Strandhill Golf Club, near Sligo, Co Sligo, Ireland. Course architect: unknown. Founded in 1931, a nine-hole course opened in 1940, while the present eighteen-hole layout opened in 1973. An image of the 376-yard, par-4 thirteenth hole, where the tightly positioned sandy bluffs make the green appear much further away. (Photo by Larry Lambrecht.)