

Keep an open mind when toughening courses

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In an effort to defend par, clubs across the country continue to add length, grow rough and narrow landing areas. Yet golf architecture should assess more than the shot-making capability and physical skill of golfers. It also should examine golfers' abilities to think, observe and make astute decisions throughout a round. Difficulties will naturally ensue because thought and deliberation often breed a sense of indecision, uncertainty and doubt. Architectural elements that stimulate mental and visual analysis protect par in a more interesting manner.

Perspective

Variations

What is so inspiring about deep rough in collection areas around greens? The challenge is obvious. One type of shot is required, and the only suitable club in the bag is one with a high degree of loft. Instead, closely cropped collection areas provide a number of thought-provoking scenarios since a variety of clubs offer an array of shot making options.

At Pinehurst No. 2 in North Carolina, for instance, a 7-iron can be used to bump-and-run the ball through the fringe. Other suitable options include putting the ball or arching it toward the pin with a lob wedge. Tiger Woods actually favored his 5-wood several times in the 1999 U.S. Open.



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Golfers must assess the playing conditions and commit to one of many enticing shot-making alternatives. The added difficulty is derived from the selection process, particularly for better players; meanwhile, high handicappers are afforded opportunities to enjoy their rounds because they are presented with possibilities – even if they can't master them.

What is so intriguing about plush, green surfaces where the ball's reaction can be anticipated with certainty? Many golfers reach for their wooden tees just before their balls land. Little forethought is given to quirky bounces or extended rolls as native ground contours are no longer examined. But just as a brisk wind or a swirling breeze forces golfers to step back and ponder, so does the mystery of firm playing surfaces.

Dry, lean conditions require golfers to make a multitude of strategic decisions, including club selection, shot trajectory and preferable angles of approach. The challenge is more complex than simply determining where the ball will land. Instead, where the ball will come to rest is the ultimate dilemma. Here, thought and deliberation must accompany shot execution.

The recovery shot can be just as puzzling. Dense, wooded areas with low reaching limbs restrict golfers' swings and prevent opportunities for recovery. All too often golfers become stymied and must punch the ball laterally out of harm's way. Instead, clear out the underbrush, raise the canopy to a reasonable height and remove undesirable trees, such as evergreens, between hardwoods. Under these conditions, golfers may evaluate the risk of their next angles of attack, and depending upon their skills, may shape their balls through alternative openings to safety.

Simply tempting golfers with both conservative and aggressive recovery shots will often lead to higher scores. For instance, Phil Mickelson's errant tee shot found the woods on No. 16 at this year's Bay Hill Invitational in Orlando, Fla. After careful deliberation, Mickelson selected a more challenging route of recovery only to have his problems multiply. Without tree maintenance in this area, Mickelson would have been forced to pitch out, and his score could have been lower.

The visual challenge

Other design techniques create a mental endeavor for golfers. Chief among these is the visual examination.

Because of tree plantings and overgrowth, a framework of trees typically outlines today's greens. A backdrop of trees aids golfers in their pre-shot routines. An intended ball flight is ultimately connected to the backdrop, which visually assists players with shot direction, club selection



Above, a framework of trees behind No. 17 green at Roaring Gap Club evokes a visual sense of dimension and containment. But without the backdrop of trees, the same green, below, lacks visual orientation and reference, which distorts the golfer's perception of the depth and distance to the hole. A photo editing software program was used to remove the trees.



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and shot execution. These trees navigate golfers by acting as visual points of reference. Furthermore, tree backdrops evoke a sense of containment and dimension that is comfortable and pleasing to golfers' eyes. For example, see the top photo of No. 17 at Roaring Gap (N.C.) Club.

But a green devoid of any visual assistance requires golfers to possess the aptitude of feeling the depth and distance to the hole. In the photo directly above, I used a photo editing software program to remove the trees behind Roaring Gap's 17th green. The result creates an ambiguous expanse of space that distorts the golfer's perception of depth and distance to the green. No. 16 at Hazeltine National Golf Club in Chaska, Minn., and many holes at Muirfield Golf Club in Gullane, Scotland, are unique like this. Whether the view is of a nondescript skyline, an open body of water or a stark span of terrain, golfers lack visual orientation and must trust their sense of depth on the approach shot to the hole. Such fortitude is not often required because of tree plantings and overgrowth behind greens.

A few abandoned carry bunkers could be reclaimed just shy of a green complex to camouflage the distance to the pin. Golfers ordinarily cannot visualize the extent of the gap between the carry bunker and the green. If the flagstick appears marginally closer, approach shots would routinely fall short of the hole.

An offset tee that has become aligned with the center of the fairway could be repositioned to distort the angles of play through misdirection. Donald Ross employed this type of visual test; his tee boxes often deviated from the centerline of fairways.

Other design techniques also transfer crucial information to the mind's eye. Just as ambiguous vistas create difficulties for golfers, so do those that are prominent and well-defined.

Too many hazards on courses blend in with their surroundings. These hazards can be emphasized or highlight-

ed through visual contrasts. For instance, irrigation and grass varieties can promote distinct turf colors, textures and heights. Superintendents could plant ornamental grasses, such as broom sedge, on the shoulders of a plain bunker or on the banks of an indistinguishable creek. Likewise, you could simply redirect irrigation to prevent water from reaching their surrounds. Fescues could complement the broom sedge by growing tall, seeding out and turning wispy and brown. Consequently, hazards would appear multidimensional, as if they could reach up with finger-like extensions. Against a sea of smooth, green fairways, these hazards would become sharply defined and visually accentuated.

Bunkers and creeks that once were unnoticeable will emerge as signals eliciting attention and awareness from golfers. While Bethpage State Park's Black Course in Farmingdale, N.Y., manifested this technique at this year's U.S. Open, Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw's newly opened Hidden Creek Golf Club in Egg Harbor Township, N.J., best demonstrates the power of attaching visual contrasts to undesirable hazards.

Try removing trees that block full-scale visuals of bunkers. Concealed bunkers seldom register in golfers' brains. Classic architects believed that bunkers and other hazards should stand out like sentinels beckoning golfers' arrival.

The next time the issue of "defense" arises at your course, instead of automatically smothering it with rough, stretching it to the boundaries or squeezing it to death, consider reviving design elements that produce thought, deliberation, hesitation and uncertainty. Your members will wonder why their scores are up while they enjoy their rounds even more.

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