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Trees on golf courses: A growing concern

By W. DUNLOP WHITE III

Many golf courses today are stuffed with trees. Historically, layouts did not appear so cluttered.

Just look at photographs of Pinehurst in the 1920s. It's no coincidence that Donald Ross designs were once windswept and barren. Ross stated, "as beautiful as trees are, we must not lose sight of the fact that there is a very limited place for them in golf."

Most established courses were originally treeless, including Perry Maxwell's Reynolds Park in Winston-Salem. Because classical architects were influenced by The Old Course and links golf in Scotland, they naturally embraced pastureland and prairies as ideal sites in America. If wooded areas were used, clearing plans were typically spacious and wide.

As courses have evolved, it's hard to determine which have been the most damaging: newly planted trees or specimen hardwoods that have not been kept at bay. Oddly enough, trees have a habit of growing taller and wider. It's difficult to notice during any one season, but over the course of 50 years, golf hole corridors have lost nearly half of their original playing areas. Countless golf holes today are simply too narrow as straight patterns of trees tend to choke fairways from both sides.

Consequently, laser straight ball flights are required in the modern game. Because good shots are restricted to the center of play, golf can no longer be approached like the game of billiards - where the lateral angle of the first shot can be chosen with the diagonal of the next shot in mind. Strategy is all but lost when alternative angles of approach have been straight-jacketed by tree plantings and overgrown vegetation.

If areas of turf on a course are lean and brown, likely trees are the root of the problem. Turfgrasses struggle to grow near trees. Their canopies and foliage screen air circulation and conceal

essential morning sunlight. Trees are dominant plants to grass, and when competing for nutrients and water, trees invariably will win.

When all attempts to grow grass fail, bare areas beneath trees are frequently smothered with costly landscaping materials. Worse yet, mulch and pine bark are routinely shaped into inverted pods around virtually every sapling on the course. When crucial areas of play have been landscaped, the playability of the golf course is compromised.

Golfers also should be wary of elaborate drainage schemes. After all, soggy areas and shade go hand in hand. Without six hours of unfettered sunlight each day, critical turf areas cannot properly dry. Moist turf attracts diseases which must be chemically treated with herbicides and fungicides. A chainsaw represents an alternative remedy.

During the winter, trees also block precious sunlight, which prevent frozen turf from thawing. The end result is winterkill. Evergreens and conifers are too often the culprits as they do not lose their leaf material and shield the low-lying, winter sun. These varieties are poor maintenance selections, because they possess shallow surface roots and shed considerable debris.

Golfers should also avoid evergreens and conifers at all cost. Their low-reaching limbs restrict golfer's swings and obstruct opportunities for recovery. When engaged, golfers are simply forced to punch the ball laterally out of harm's way.

Recovery play is much more challenging from wooded areas that have been thinned of low-branched species. Without the underbrush, specimen hardwoods will brilliantly emerge and offer golfers with a variety of openings to safety. Simply tempting golfers with more aggressive recovery options also may lead to higher scores.

Clearing trees from the interior of a course has a remarkable influence on aesthetics. Kris Spence, golf architect from Greensboro, recognizes that gor-

geous vistas of rolling hills and terrain can be captured when a barrier of trees does not block your vision between holes. Spence says, "clubs should embrace the visual depth and splendor of long, sweeping perspectives. Golfers are usually astonished with the beauty of distant site-lines that can be uncovered."

A tree's capacity to screen should be reserved for the perimeter of the premises instead. Trees can partition the course from external structures and noise, providing they don't follow a particular formation, such as a single-file line. Rows of trees appear much too ornamental and contrived in a natural setting.

Other design issues arise when trees grow too close to bunkers. Their proximity to one another creates the dreaded double hazard. In addition, many trees block full-scale views of other important design features. Creeks, for instance, cannot demand the proper attention and awareness from approaching golfers when they are partially camouflaged by foliage.

Bradley Klein, golf architecture and design consultant, believes that trees should complement the dominant function of the site, which is to enable golf to take place. Klein says, "the problem is that people who embrace trees on courses are truly more interested in trees than golf." Often the contention is for safety between holes. Countless others are all too eager to defend par. Besides erecting memorial trees, many others are planted to beautify and attract beneficial wildlife habitats.

Whatever the motivation, trees regrettably have grown more important than agronomy, playability, course strategy and aesthetics. Golfers should take notice.

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