



Preserving the world's great golf courses

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Unlike other sports relegated to measured courts, fields, and rinks that basically look the same whether you're in Toronto or Timbuktu, the world's very best golf courses are remarkably distinctive.

In fact, one of golf's main attractions is the phenomenal diversity of the game's playing fields. Compare the Old Course at St Andrews and Kingsbarns on Scotland's east coast, for example, or Jasper and Wolf Creek in Alberta, Canada. And, perhaps the most amazing study of diversity in golf architecture: Shinnecock Hills and the National Golf Links of America, out on the eastern tip of Long Island, New York.

You can enjoy an early morning round over William Flynn's lay-of-the-land design at

Shinnecock Hills, then literally hop the fence for an afternoon game at the sharp-edged and quirky National Golf Links of America, which features Charles Blair Macdonald's brilliant renditions of a number of famous holes throughout Great Britain. These two giant courses occupy adjacent properties, yet each is astoundingly singular.

Unfortunately, there are too many courses throughout the world these days that exhibit similar character. Beginning in earnest during the 1960s, consulting architects frequently recommended dramatic changes to existing courses simply to justify their fees. Worse still, some designers accepted payment to carry out the uneducated whims of club committees and course owners with

narrow-minded perspectives on what a golf course should be. An over-abundance of trees were planted as a result. Sand bunkers were grassed over, and tidied up. Interesting green surfaces were flattened. And 'blind' shots were eliminated, along with the integrity of original golf-course designs across the globe. In many cases, too, a routine design-style was imposed upon the golfing landscape. An extraordinary number of original courses became homogenous as a result.

Thankfully, attitudes have changed over the past decade and more. Today, golfers are more inclined to inquire about the design history of their respective courses before approving wholesale changes. Particularly



where a course was designed by one of the master architects of the so-called Golden Age of Golf Design, between the wars. In fact, there is an extraordinary momentum-filled movement at hand: the restoration of golf courses designed by A. W. Tillinghast, Alister Mackenzie, Donald Ross, and their Golden Age contemporaries.

Tillinghast was a master at creating diversity by simply allowing inherent site characteristics to drive golf-course design. Comparison between Tillinghast's original designs at San Francisco Golf Club, New Jersey's Somerset Hills, and Winged Foot in Westchester County, New York, for example, suggests the works of three different designers.

Mackenzie and Ross also differentiated their design styles, relative to the nature of individual properties. Simply compare Mackenzie's Cypress Point and Augusta National. Or examine the variety of original bunker styles Ross employed throughout his prolific career. During the mid-1920s at Salem, Massachusetts, for example, Ross fashioned deep bunkers with irregular grass

faces pulled down to flattish sand bottoms. A few years later, at Seminole, on Florida's Atlantic coast, he designed bunkers with sand flashed on the interior faces, to those melded into native, seaside dunes.

Throughout the years, certain architects and contractors have erroneously proclaimed expertise in the 'Ross-style' of golf-course design, when in fact no such style is clearly definable. Worse still, application of such 'expertise' has resulted in the loss of diversity among Ross-designed courses throughout North America.

Thoughtful, contemporary architects with respect for the works of their predecessors are diligent before turning soil. As a first step towards devising a plan for future work at an aged course designed by Donald Ross or Donald Ducklthey dedicate time to carefully study its design history and evolution. Meticulous research over recent years has turned up classic writings, original plans, and invaluable historic photographs of Golden Age courses. Along with additional assistance from the collective memories of older, knowledgeable golfers, the restorative-

based work carried out at Golden Age courses over the past decade, and more, has successfully reversed the negative affects of blatant redesign and natural evolution. This situation has magnified the inherent diversity among those aged layouts.

A single rule cannot be applied to any true artist, including Pete Dye. A master of modern golf-course architecture, Dye is creator of a number of the most unique courses of the post-Second World War era. During the late-1960s at Harbour Town Golf Links on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, Dye purposefully rebelled against design trends of the time by fashioning an amazing and always appealing 6,600-yard course, with tiny, undulating greens, randomly placed pot-bunkers, and vast areas of unraked sand stabilised by railway ties.

Dye became even more creative in ensuing years with his astonishing output at places such as Casa de Campo, Oak Tree, and TPC at Sawgrass. Perhaps not surprisingly, his success prompted a legion of less-creative designers to emulate a perceived 'Dye style'. This unfortunate phenomenon detracted





from the originality of Dye's works, and also contradicted his ageless philosophy of allowing specific situations to drive design.

To flesh out his adherence to this philosophy, compare Dye's early work at The Golf Club in suburban Columbus, Ohio, with one of his latest efforts at Whistling Straits on the Wisconsin shore of Lake Michigan. The Golf Club is a relatively understated, *au naturale* design completed during the mid-1960s, long before lay-of-the-land golf architecture was actually back in vogue. The ultra-dramatic Whistling Straits, on the other hand, is a massive, *faux* links that overloads a golfer's senses. Completed nearly forty years apart, these two outstanding courses are remarkably individual.

The master golf architects of the Golden Age era have achieved cult status. In turn, a number of their original designs have been restored and preserved, and are now being protected rightfully. How, though, will the respective works of Pete Dye and ensuing generations of golf architects be treated in the future?

From a sheer business perspective, main-



taining the integrity of original golf-course designs should be an easy concept to embrace. Golfers are always in search of something new, and exciting. So, whether the impetus is a private club aiming to attract new members, a public facility in need of a sharp marketing scheme, or a resort intent on attracting golfing tourists, a course with unique features is a valuable commodity. To name just three courses, consider Pebble Beach, Pinehurst, and Pacific Dunes: the

powerful lure of those outstanding courses stems from their remarkable individuality.

Moreover, maintaining the inherent diversity of courses throughout the world is paramount to the sustainability of golf into the future. Frankly, if too many original courses are permitted to become too similar through natural evolution and redesign the game will sadly lose much of its ageless appeal.