

SOME GENERAL PRINCIPLES IN COURSE CONSTRUCTION

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IT is a curious thing that in all the treatises that I have read—and they have been more than a few—about the laying out of courses, placing of hazards and so on, I do not remember to have read one which set forth the first principles—the primary qualities—that we want in our courses. Perhaps these are taken for granted, as if everybody knew them, but perhaps too they might come out more clearly for a little statement.

We want our turf to be as good as possible both through the green and on the putting greens; that is an essential that no man has a doubt about. But there is a quality that I would place far before this, and state it to be the quality of chief importance—we want our course to be interesting; to give us amusing, eventful, dramatic golf. Do not lose sight of that point. It has been missed again and again in the laying out of many of our courses over here and the consequence is in some cases that those in charge of them are going back on their tracks—are trying to introduce artificially a new interest by the making of immense bumps and excrescences which never look as if Nature had taken a hand in their construction. Had they left Nature more to herself in the first instance they would not now be making these very poor attempts to repair the damage they did to her original face.

It is difficult to have a course truly interesting unless you lay out a good length of holes. On the other hand, you will make a great mistake if you suppose that ideal length of holes alone will give a course interest. It will lead to that interest; it will help and make for interest; but it will not of itself make interest—sufficient interest. Some of those dull courses on our side where they have been throwing up the big mole-hills to relieve the monotony are absolutely ideal in the length of the holes.

Length of holes is an essential in giving the best test of golf. That is to be admitted freely. It is also to be conceded that some of these dull courses, having this ideal length and often good putting greens and good going through the green, provide an admirable test; but the very fact that they make so fine a test and yet give us such uninspiring golf goes to show that we want something besides a test, and more than a test, if our courses are to content us.

It is not of any use for me, who have experience only of the soil, the climate and the grasses of these islands, to offer any suggestions with regard to the grasses that are the best to sow on American courses. You have fine grasses, such as Rhode Island bent, for instance, which will not do well with us, and I

am quite sure that in a country of such a vast extent the special conditions of many separate localities will require to be studied clearly before you can arrive at the best conclusions on this important subject. I understand that your more dry climate causes greater trouble in the growth and maintenance of turf in summer than we ever encounter, and I cannot think that this difficulty can be met better than by the means of which you have a fine example on the National Links where, as I am told, there are two sprayers each able to throw water into the air over an area of a hundred feet, and each distributing a hundred and fifty gallons a minute. This should go a long way to counteract a lack in rainfall, and would, no doubt, be more easily arranged where there was a municipal water supply available to draw on.

But though it is impossible for one who does not know all the circumstances to give any hint of value as to the species of grass to be used, I might point out the value of the rough grass which we find naturally growing on the fringes of many a golf course both in this country and in America. Just as too much zeal has often been shown in smoothing down the hillocks to a level surface, so too there has been, on many a course, too drastic a clearing off of the rough grasses which are the natural product of the soil and therefore are likely to have a greater vitality than any that will be imported. This rough tangle of the natural grass is often as good a side hazard as any other, and it is stuff that has a tough life and will reassert itself after being worn away. It has its value for this purpose not only on the sides but also for a hundred yards or so in front of each tee, to punish the topped shot. I see many a course laid out with all the natural tangle cleared away, at much expense and labour, right up to the tee at every hole, whereas this rough had far better, from the golfing point of view, have been left to serve as hazards, and the saving of expense, in not clearing and planting again these eighteen hundred yards or so of surface, would have amounted to something.

I have no space, in this paper, to deal with details. I merely wish, if possible, to make clear a few generalities—points universally true of statement; and one such point I will make bold to say is that almost without exception, when the course constructor gets to his work, he is not nearly careful enough about making good the approaches to the holes. I mean that he is disposed to leave in a state of only slightly modified "rough," or no more finely polished up than the general "through-the-green" course, that region just before the putting green proper on which nine-

GOLF ILLUSTRATED

tenths of the approach strokes will pitch. This is, in my humble judgment, a very great although so very general sin of omission. It is a piece of the surface which it is extremely important to get good and true. If it be left at all rough, the ball off the approach shot, when it pitches, may kick this way or that, may be arrested abruptly or may get a shoot forward at an altogether iniquitous pace. There is no relying on it, and there is no justice in it. But not only does this roughness of the ground on which the approaching ball must pitch make for injustice at each particular hole, it also has the effect of making the player despair of ever playing his approach shot right. It drives him desperate to see the ball thus maltreated time after time. It robs him of all his confidence. It provides the worst possible school in which a man may attempt to learn this most essential of shots. The importance of this particular piece of the surface is very much underrated by the majority of our course constructors.

Often, when I have tried to reason gently with a green committee on the point, they have answered in a liberal spirit. "All right, we'll enlarge the putting green." That really is too liberal, and it does not show a clear understanding of the question. What is really required is that the putting green shall be enlarged, indeed, but that the extension shall be in one particular direction, towards the line from which the player will approach it. It is not a general widening of its circumference that I am suggesting, but only the making good of the ground on the hither side of it—speaking from the point of view of the approaching player—so that he shall be able to reckon fairly on what his ball will do when it pitches. I do not apologize for elaborating this argument at perhaps greater length than the reader's patience will bear with cheerfulness. I think he would be more patient of it if he realised the golfing importance of the point discussed, and it is just because its importance is so little recognised that I have been rather insistent on it, so as to lay emphasis on its value.

A very good maxim that has been laid down by, and for, the course constructor is that you should begin by getting your short holes, your one-shot holes, right. That is a good scheme, but it has to be taken reasonably. We see courses on which far too much has been sacrificed to four or five good one-shot holes, so that the rest are very poor. Much more might have been made of the whole had the constructor not been so fast bound in the fetters of this maxim, excellent as it is as a servant and guide. Do not let it become a master idea, or *idée fixe*. For my own part I should rather phrase it, and understand it, thus:—"Look out first for suitable places for the greens for your short holes, and keeping these in the back of your mind see how to work in the rest of the course round about them. But you must always be ready to give up any one or more of these

first conceived ideas for your short holes if you find that the general big interest of the course needs it."

It is impossible, however, to lay down a rule that shall be anything like universal; because so much must depend on the character, the gradients and the area of the ground that is at your service. The way that has seemed to me by far the easiest, whenever I have been let loose to set out an eighteen-hole course, has been to go over the whole of the ground once, making a general survey; then to go to some point or points of vantage from which as much as possible of the whole extent could be seen at one time, and draw out a rough outline plan of the whole, sketching in the principal features and details. Once I have got this fairly complete and detailed, it is hardly necessary to look at the ground again. What you have to do then is to go home and sit with this outline plan in front of you, probably with the shot hole greens marked in tentatively, and set to work to think about it. Gradually you find yourself able to dot in the holes. Almost always the ground seems to lend itself with wonderful kindness to the fitting in of seventeen, or of nineteen holes, but it appears almost impossible to piece in the one missing or to join all up properly if the one too many is dropped out. But at long last the final flash of illumination comes and you have the eighteen, complete and perfect—or more or less perfect. Unless you are very confident, very audacious, you will take back that plan with fear and trembling, comparing it with Nature's face, but if you have been reasonably careful with the outline sketch you are likely to be both flattered and surprised at the little modification you have to make when you come to look again at the real material of the links. Naturally there will be infinite levelling, grading, clearing, hazard making and all the details to be settled on the ground itself; but that is all "another story." You ought, after some hours of thinking about it, to find that you have marked out the holes on your plan so satisfactorily that they will not want a great deal of attention.

I may here give a hint about the best general disposition of the ground if it is so limited in extent—say only a little over a hundred acres—that eighteen holes make a tight fit in it. The problem then is to turn this limited area to the best advantage. If it is of long and narrow form it answers the problem for you—you must work out and back again, according to the classic model of St. Andrews and other courses. But if it is of an amorphous, roughly circular, or square form, the first tendency, as I have found, of the course designer, is to deal with it in two circles—an outer and inner. This is not really nearly as economical a way of using your ground as to begin with a hole or two along the outside of your boundary line and then to take a dive in to the middle, for one hole. Thence you should come out again to the same boundary again, having made a "V" shaped dash into

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the middle and back again. If you work on the principle of having one or two places near the middle of your ground on which you may have a group of three or even more greens you will find that you can fit in many more holes than if you stick to your circular sailing. After your dive in, you must remember that the easiest plan is to come back again to the same boundary. If you cross your ground to the other boundary, then, unless you exercise great care, you will find that you have been laying the first foundations of a criss-cross pattern which will bother you badly when you come to fitting in the later holes. But there is always this, too, to remember, that if you have three or four greens together, or (to say the same thing differently), three or four holes on the one big green which you are approaching from different

directions, so that there shall not be a cross, there is no reason in the world why you should not, after playing the westernmost hole, walk across the green to a tee on the easternmost side, for the next hole. In this way you may avoid a cross and yet avoid the monotony of coming back to the same boundary; and it is never a good scheme to lay out your holes so that the players will have the out-of-bounds line on their same flank too long together. If they are in peril of going out of bounds with sliced shots for two or at most three holes successively, you should then try to engineer a change for them by giving them the out-of-bounds line as a danger for a pulled shot.

These are but a few brief and general hints on a large and infinitely detailed subject, but so far as they go I hope they may be a help.