

GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE

Challenging the Best & Playable for All

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“A course of extremely difficult shot values, with each target nearly unreachable and each fraught with problems, is no better than a functional course with easy targets and no hazards.”

Cornish & Whitten, “The Architects of Golf”

With all the recent improvements to golf equipment, we mere mortals still suffer from shanks, hooks, slices, chili-dips, 3 – whacks, and the dreaded...whiff.. Average golfers and average golf has not changed much in the past 4 decades. Like most average golfers, I can butcher a shot no matter where it lays. But the better golfer has become.....much better. For the superior, and longer player, bunkers that were once in play, are no longer; Water that once generated fear, does not; length, that once encouraged a long iron, now offers a wedge to the “range rat”; Greens with slick, fast turf, afford little or no anxiety.

So how does a golf course provide a suitable contest for the better golfer, while simultaneously challenging the average player. The burden to create such a venue is placed squarely upon the golf course architect. Because golfing abilities range so widely, the objective for a golf course architect, according to Tom Fazio, is not about “risk and reward, but about challenge, vs. playability”. Great golf courses are great because of variety, setting, playability and challenge for everyone.

I am often asked to build in difficulty so that the course will be recognized as a “true challenge”...whatever that is. Clients insist, “Make it hard” “No pushover holes”....”the tougher the better”. This is an intriguing and perplexing issue, because golf is a tough game anyway. Tougher, more demanding courses are seemingly more attractive to course critics and can offer immediate media coverage. The signature-hole photograph illustrating steep grades, heavy shadows and water everywhere is compelling to the nomadic, average golfer.

However, these same facilities need more daily play by average golfers and satisfied members for ultimate survival. Difficult golf courses are not necessarily great. On the other hand, great golf courses are almost always challenging. Therefore, difficulty shouldn't be confused with greatness. Nor should it be confused with economic stability.

There are some who believe that to be considered a great architect, your courses must host championships. However, on an annual basis, Tom Fazio is voted as the world's premiere golf course architect. His courses are demanding while playable, beautiful and functional, and most importantly, fulfill the client's mission. For the most part, however, his courses are not championship venues.

Other architects like Norman, Doak, Kidd, Crenshaw & Coore, are generating wonderful facilities, suitable for the single digit or high handicap golfer. These architects produce some fantastic facilities worthy of high acclaim. But rarely does the PGA Tour make a stop at their venues. Does this make them any less a premier golf architect?

The ability to integrate challenge and playability is a difficult task. Simply, it is very easy to make golf courses tough. Like these architects, I try to avoid designing purely for difficulty. Specifically, holes that rely solely on length require little imagination by the architect, and even less skill by the golfer. If length is presented, then wider fairways may be desirable or even necessary. I subscribe to wide, forgiving fairways with more difficult approach shots. Donald Ross emphasized that errant shots should be offered a chance for recovery, no matter how remote. The intent is to offer risks, rewards, and challenges depending upon skill and nerve. Balance in golf course design is equal parts playability, difficulty and beauty

Aside from the obvious, (the best projects), great architects have a unique ability to employ a specific landscape and produce a wonderful golfing experience for everyone. They find a dominant landscape characteristic and exploit it. The best architects use subtle landscape characteristics to resolve playability issues. It is this creative and thoughtful ability that makes an architect and golf course great.

Golfers and architects, critics and novices must realize that this game is one of endless solution and variety. Answers to questions about design, difficulty, challenge and playability will be hard to find particularly as golfers are afforded a looser interpretation of any equipment standard. Some truths, however, are obvious. Some may deem the “the rub of the green” as fair, some will call it fickle. Maybe, “playable” could be defined as: “Equally challenging for all”.