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WAYS TO PRESERVE CLASSIC COURSES

WHETHER YOU NEED TO RESTORE OR SIMPLY PROTECT YOUR PRECIOUS GEM, IT'S IMPORTANT TO TAKE ACTION. CHECK OUT THIS PRIMER

BY RON WHITTEN

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Restoration done right: Research helped architects Jackson and Kahn improve Wilson's original Sunnylands design (No. 1 shown).

You've joined the fan clubs for Donald Ross, Alister MacKenzie, A.W. Tillinghast, Devereux Emmet, Seth Raynor, Walter Travis or Robert Trent Jones. You've read the biographies of C.B. Macdonald, Perry Maxwell and the killer one on William S. Flynn. You know your Herbert Strong from your William B. Langford. You love classic golf course architecture.

But are you doing anything to preserve it? Especially if you belong to a club that possesses a course considered a classic, you ought to be doing something. Here are five suggestions:

Begun in the 1990s under the cover of darkness, Oakmont CC's extensive tree-removal program is an example of how a classic can be reclaimed.

1 NO FINGERPRINTS

It's the architecture of the course that makes it a classic in the first place, so engaging professional design assistance to preserve it would seem logical. Still, many clubs feel it's cheaper to turn everything over to a club historian or green committee or course superintendent. Don't do it. There are other, less risky ways to save money.

In this economy almost every architect is willing to prepare a renovation plan, but not every architect is comfortable dealing with restoration or the re-establishment of a particular architectural style. So proper choice might require some homework, investigating not only prior restoration projects done by that architect but also clubs that rejected his services.

For example, there's one designer (who shall remain nameless) who is considered an absolute expert on Donald Ross. For good reason. He does flawless Ross. Yet when hired to reclaim a 1950s Robert Trent Jones design, he couldn't develop much enthusiasm and was ultimately dismissed. That's OK. There are horses for courses.

It might prove worthwhile to take a chance on a newcomer who will have the time and impetus to do research. Tim Jackson and David Kahn were two former Tom Fazio associates who formed a partnership in 2009. One of their first jobs was restoration of the Dick Wilson-designed Sunnylands, the nine-hole backyard course on the Walter Annenberg Estate in Rancho Mirage, Calif. They knew little of Wilson's work (who died in 1965), so they took the time to visit several of his most prominent courses, including Meadow Brook Club on Long Island and Pine Tree in Florida. Their embrace of Wilson's characteristics, such as the long, runway tees and heavy bunkering in front of every green, ran counter to their training under Fazio but resulted in a restoration that actually improved upon Wilson's original plan while keeping faithful to it.

So the main rule in selecting a consulting architect should be: Hire a designer who can suppress his or her ego.

2 BREAK IT UP

Most classic courses were built with "push-up" greens, so-called because builders simply pushed up the existing soil into green pads and grassed them. Very few incorporated sub-surface drainage, and although the slants and cants of classic greens provided adequate surface drainage in the old days of infrequent watering, the same putting surfaces today can't handle the large amounts of irrigation needed to keep tightly mown shallow-rooted grasses from burning out or developing disease. Routine aerifying and topdressing has helped develop a sandy layer on top, but deep down, classic greens are constipated.

Rebuilding the greens to USGA specifications for optimum internal drainage is the ideal, if pricey, solution. But many clubs fear losing the genuine contours of their greens.

So the solution has been to amend the soil in the greens to loosen its density and improve drainage. For more than a decade the most popular methods were either Drill and Fill, which literally drilled a pattern of foot-deep holes across the green and filled them with sand, or a slit-drainage system such as WaterWick, which used a vibrating blade to cut foot-deep rows across a green before injecting it with sand. Some courses utilized both methods. The drawback was that such techniques still made a mess of a green's surface, and certain subtle contours were lost.

The recently introduced XGD drainage system by TDI Golf involves installation of lateral drainage from the top down, in trenches deeper and wider than methods such as WaterWick. The process involves less disruption to the putting surface and thus, hopefully, more preservation of the past. XGD was used successfully at Oakmont prior to the 2007 U.S. Open. Those greens, dating from 1903, used to drain one-half-inch of water per hour. They now drain six inches per hour.

For those desiring a complete rebuild from drain tile up using a USGA-specified greens mix, there are methods of mapping existing green surfaces to duplicate classic contours. Perhaps the most prominent is GreenScan 3D developed by Scott Pool, a former Pete Dye associate who now specializes in putting-surface replication. His digital scanning of a green creates more than 14,000 data points per square foot, allowing him to guarantee that every square inch of a green can be reproduced to the tolerance of two millimeters.

Many other contractors now offer similar technology, and Pool and others can modify the contours by slight degrees to establish more workable hole locations for today's green speeds.

The main rule in preserving classic greens: One way or another, get them to drain.

3 CHOP IT DOWN

Early classic designs done by Macdonald, Ross, Tillinghast and other masters featured wide fairways with strategies that required positioning the ball off the tee to particular spots for the best approach angle. Fairways built by Dick Wilson and Robert Trent Jones in the 1950s and 1960s were narrower, but both men contemplated that players would work the ball both ways in the air, off the tee and into the green, and left plenty of air space to do so.

Most of this has been obfuscated by 50 years worth of tree planting, programs initiated by green chairmen bent

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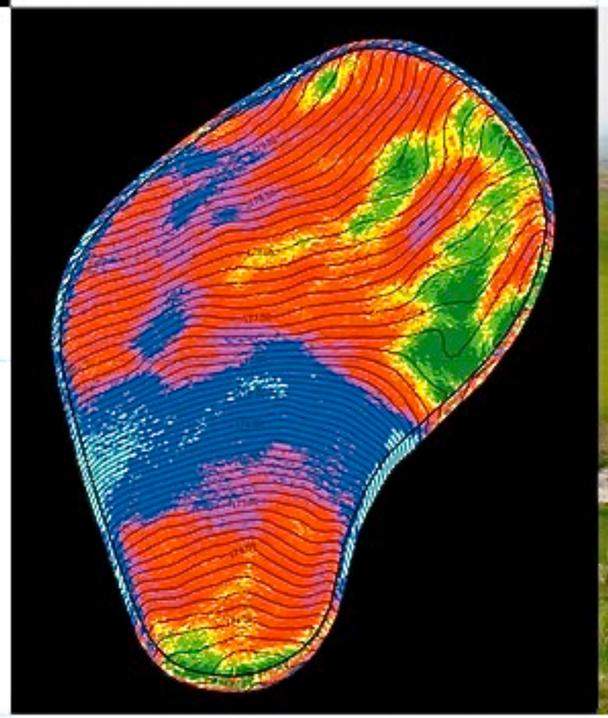

GreenScan 3D (far left) ensures accurate green replication. Robotic technology such as the Spider II, Hybrid 44-T and RoboGreen (clockwise from center) could be the answer for mowing steep slopes on classic designs.

on leaving a legacy or, in many cases, memorials meant to honor departed loved ones and club members.

Most trees were planted with little knowledge or regard as to how big they would get, how much water they would rob from turfgrass or, most importantly, how much sunlight and air they would block from tees, fairways and greens.

Aesthetics and playability aside, most classic courses are over-treed because of agronomic reasons. Clear-cutting all vegetation, in the manner that ultimately occurred at Oakmont CC near Pittsburgh, is probably not practical or reasonable for most clubs. If you're lucky, the varieties planted on your course have reached maturity, will soon die a natural death and will need to be removed. Or they're being wiped out by a disease or beetle, as happened at Olympic Club, the remarkably sunshiny site of this year's U.S. Open.

The task is how to convince tree-huggers at your club, who are probably a majority of the members, that tree removal will make for more enjoyable and playable conditions. ArborCom, a Toronto-based firm, leads the field in generating computer models that graphically demonstrate which trees need to be pruned and which need to be removed. Using astronomic algorithms to determine the sun's position throughout the year, it can show members just how little sunlight reaches certain tees and greens and why grass never seems to grow in those areas.

Too expensive? Well, there's a new smartphone app called the Sun Seeker that provides similar data but in a less graphic way. You can take a recalcitrant golfer to a spot on a green, point the phone at a giant oak and show how few hours of sunlight reach that spot, even on the longest day of the year.

If that's not persuasive, then print out and post in your club some of the writings of Dunlop White III, former president of the Donald Ross Society, who has written passionately and frequently on the virtues of chainsaws in reclaiming classic golf architecture.

When it comes to trees, a classic course is no classic if it's a shady, patchy, muddy mess.

4 GO HIGH TECH

Classic courses built with steam shovels or mules and scrapers feature steep, dramatic slopes around bunkers and greens. In their youth it didn't take much to maintain them. The slopes were plugged with clumps of fescue that grew slowly, nourished only by rainwater. Today, automatic irrigation covers all such slopes and the resulting fast-growing uniform turf that blankets them demands hand maintenance that gobbles up budgets. The solution is not to destroy the architecture in order to reshape the land into mower-friendly inclines. It is to be patient and wait for robotic technology to produce a mower that goes where no man can stand erect.

There are several such mowers already on the market, including the British company Ransomes Jacobsen's Spider II, big and cumbersome with a price to match, in excess of $40,000; the RoboGreen, which resembles a miniature bulldozer; and the Hybrid 44-T by Evatech, which sports rubber tank treads. But all those are radio-controlled and require an operator standing by. The next generation needs to incorporate the technology of Precise Path, whose fabulous RG3 robotic greens mower utilizes lasers and land-positioning devices to guide the mower on computer-designated paths, freeing up workers for other tasks.

However, Precise Path is probably years away from developing a rough mower. So for the time being, we'll continue to mow classic slopes with push mowers and ropes. But by the 2020s, robots will surely emerge and as with calculators, computers and cell phones, things will get smaller and smaller, including price tags.

5 GO OLD SCHOOL

There is a modest movement among fans of classic architecture that insists it's not modern technology that's making their beloved courses obsolete, it's consumerism. Nobody is forcing golfers to buy the newest, hottest, longest, most forgiving driver or iron or golf ball, but they do. While the latest and greatest in equipment in the hands of high-handicappers might not really pose much of a threat to a grand old course, there is a perception that it does, which has led to such defensive methods as longer yardages, deeper bunkers and faster greens.

Former tour player John Erickson has proposed a Persimmon Golf Tour. Its viability among champion players we'll leave to others, but its proposed rules make perfect sense for those who love classic architecture and are willing to go low-tech to prove it.

Woods must be carved from wood, irons forged from iron. The face of a driving club must be no more than three inches wide and two inches high, with wood or steel shafts, weighing no less than 13 ounces. Wedges cannot exceed 56 degrees in loft. No club can measure more than 44 inches. A low compression ball (a half-dozen good ones are on the market) must be played. In the interests of pace of play, putting without removing the flagstick is allowed and all drops for out-of-bounds, lost ball, unplayable lie and water hazards shall be the same, in the fairway, 30 yards back, with a one-stroke penalty.

Part of Erickson's motivation is to match the gear to the course. Let new 8,000-yard courses be tackled with the latest equipment, but play the classics with the implements that were intended to be used on them. He contemplates that club members would enjoy seeing their home course played by professionals with persimmons and forged blades, because the pros would be hitting from spots that amateurs reach with modern clubs. He also feels that if amateurs were to play with persimmons, they would gain a greater appreciation for professionals' skill.

This is but one wrinkle in the proposed bifurcation of rules, which is all the buzz right now. Truth is, it doesn't take a national movement to make it happen. It just takes one foursome, with old-school clubs and balls, who want to experience a classic course in all its glory. GW

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