

Golf By Design

Meet the group that makes losing golf balls downright pleasant

BY ROBERT CAREY

You've waded into the thick grass that rings the fourteenth hole at your group's annual tournament. The good news is you've found your ball. But the bad news is that it lies underneath this hellacious growth known as the rough. So you select a club, aim for the hole, swing mightily. . .and drop your ball straight into a pretty pond. Teeth clenched, face contorted, you vow that if you ever get your hands on the sadist who created this course. . .well, you know the rest.

Chances are, your atrocious performance is not the fault of the course's architect. The 122 members of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA), who design the 350 new courses unveiled in the United States each year, do not strive to frustrate golfers. Instead, their goal is to create aesthetically pleasing, environmentally sound courses for players of particular skill levels. And despite your contention that a few of them know as



ASGCA group photo. The absent-minded member missing his checkered blazer is none other than Pete Dye.



much as Charo does about designing good golf courses, that simply couldn't be further from the truth.

"Our people must know engineering, agronomy [the study of turfs and grasses], and drainage, combined with a knowledge of golf—how courses must be laid out to compensate for the winds, the local terrain, and the path of the sun," says Paul Fullmer, executive secretary of ASGCA. "Add to those topics a slew of environmental regulations, and you see that our people have to understand many fields just to come up with a plan that is reasonable and acceptable to the course owner, as well as to the various regulatory bodies."

To help members keep up with the changing regulations, in addition to the latest developments in course design and construction, ASGCA holds a convention every spring, at renowned golf destinations in the United States and the United Kingdom. The planning of the four-day affair is left to Fullmer and the officers of ASGCA; that includes site selection—which, for this group, is undoubtedly the most important element.

When picking a destination, Fullmer says, "we are basically driven by areas that have great golf courses." The list of ASGCA's past convention sites clearly supports that assessment—Hilton Head Island, Palm Springs, the Monterey Peninsula. In recent years, though, the group has gotten away from Sun Belt destinations and ventured north, where older, marquis courses lie in abundance.

"San Francisco [the 1994 site] has some of the great traditional golf courses in America," Fullmer says. ASGCA has also met in Southampton, Long Island, and Philadelphia in the past three years. "It enables our membership to see areas with one-hundred-year-old golf courses that shaped the business in this country," he adds. "These are courses we feel our members should visit if they're going to know the history of U.S. golf architecture."

The Happenings

If one were to think that a four-day jaunt to a premier golf destination is all play and no work for ASGCA members, the perception would be as misguided as a duffer's tee shot. "A large part of our mission is to make this a very educational experience, to see how great architects of the past designed courses," Fullmer says. "The golf courses we play are really laboratories that our people are learning in every year."

While the members—most of whom range in playing ability from pretty good to great—get out each afternoon to compete in the group's tournament, even that is tied to the educational purpose. Before they

Why Is This Course So Tough?

Surely you've asked that question before. But while there are probably some resort courses that are deemed too tough or too simple by many players, the hospitality industry leans heavily toward courses that please the clientele, says Paul Fullmer, executive secretary of ASCGA. "The architect will create the type of course a facility wants," he says. "If they know their clientele's ability fairly well, they will instruct us to make the course proportionately difficult." Keep in mind, though, that some properties pride themselves on having very difficult courses, and many groups go there precisely for that reason.

Features that make a round more difficult for the average player are "hazards," such as water and sand traps (also called bunkers). The more there are, the better your chance of finding one with your ball. On the other hand, just because a course has water and sand, that doesn't mean it's placed in spots where it will be a factor.

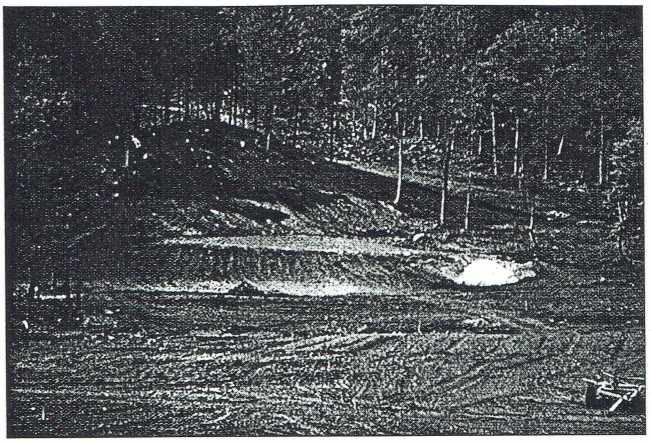
"Water is necessary for drainage and irrigation," Fullmer says. "It's not just there to mess up the player. Many courses that use water and sand extensively are not too difficult." Such layouts have landing areas players can safely hit the ball to. "It makes the course aesthetically pleasing and attractive," Fullmer adds. Architects are very conscious of balancing real hazards with "show" hazards, such as waterfalls, and most resorts aim for a good mix.

Different levels of course difficulty have certain attractions. "Most resorts want to have courses that allow people to come off with smiles on their faces, so they'll come back again," Fullmer says. On the other hand, resorts that host professional tournaments are simply not designed for the average guest to play the same ball for more than two consecutive holes. But Fullmer concludes that "as Pete Dye always says, 'They keep lining up to play my courses, don't they?' People want that once-in-a-lifetime experience. Then you have a story to tell when you get home."

—R.C.



Future site of a picturesque golf hole.



The hole begins to take shape.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY CORNISH AND ROBINSON ARCHITECTS

attack the course, members meet with the course superintendent and the club pros, who provide design background, and discuss specific holes that have been remodeled or ones under consideration for remodeling. "There is extensive dialogue between our members and the hosts both before and after play," Fullmer says, "so members can understand what was trying to be done when the course was built, and if it worked."

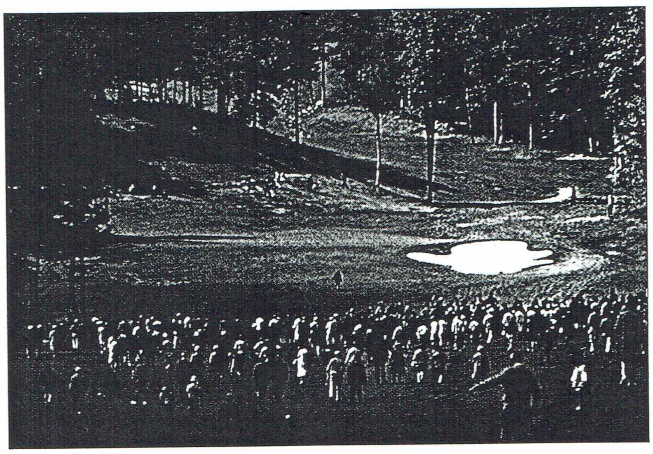
The mornings are spent in professional development seminars, where members review and discuss both design methods and tactics, as well as environmental regulations, with outside officials, consultants, and each other. In fact, it is not uncommon to have the likes of golf legend Jack Nicklaus and current PGA Tour player Mark McCumber participate in panel discussions—both ASGCA members are interested not only in playing golf, but in course design as well. However, "they aren't looked on at the event any differently than any other member," says Fullmer. "Just because they are touring pros doesn't make them better architects than anybody else. Pete Dye and Tom Fazio [both of whom attend practically every ASGCA convention] are much more looked upon as deans of the industry, from our perspective." Despite the absence of preferential treatment in the meetings, Nicklaus and McCumber are nonetheless forbidden from entering their scores during the tournament. "That probably wouldn't be fair," Fullmer says.

The Five-Year Itch

Anyone who claims to know even a smidgen about golf acknowledges that the United Kingdom, particularly Scotland, is the mecca of the sport. And to establish a firm connection with the vast tradition that lies on the other side of the Atlantic, the ASGCA packs up and ventures every fifth year to the seemingly unkempt rolling hills and grassy dunes of Scotland's hallowed links.

Fullmer points out that the

Scotland trip's purpose is not only for members to witness the birthplace of golf, but also to learn how to construct similar courses in the New World. "Many newer resorts and clubs have the links design," he says. "We're starting to see it more often in every part of our country; it has shaped a lot of the architecture in the United States with its less formal approach."



The final product: equally scenic and challenging.

The essence of the links course is its fully natural appearance, where the original contours of the land, as opposed to bulldozers and shovels, shape the course layout. If the fairways weren't cut quite so short, and the flagstick not visible in the distance, one could easily mistake a links course for undisturbed rolling fields in a large meadow. For golfers, a difficult uphill or downhill lie is quite simply a fact of life on a links course.

Beyond the unique look and playability of links layouts, environmental and cost factors often drive resorts and clubs to copy the Scottish style on this side of the pond. "Since they hardly disturb the natural surroundings," Fullmer says, "environmental concerns are few, and are usually resolved quicker. Maintenance costs are smaller too."

So the next time you step onto a golf course, take a minute to look around and appreciate the effort of the people who made that course challenging, scenic, and environmentally compatible. And when your ball sails off the picturesque fairway and into a deep sand trap, or, better yet, the woods, bear this in mind before wishing bodily harm upon the course's architect: You really weren't supposed to hit the ball there. ■