The gold standard

Golf course architects from the 'Golden Age' of the early twentieth century created many of the world's most admired courses. As Richard Humphreys finds out, their work and philosophies continue to inspire designers today

The economic prosperity of the Roaring Twenties saw a sharp rise in the popularity of golf in the United States. People began to find the time and desire to participate in a sport that had emerged over the previous few decades.

To meet this demand, golf courses were built apace. The profession of 'golf course architect' surfaced as men – often from Scotland and England – toured the country helping newly formed clubs identify suitable sites for their golf courses, for which they would create a routing and plans for greens and hazards.

Without the bulldozers and heavy machinery that is available today, these early architects made the best of what the natural landscape offered.



Photo: ASGCA

ASGCA Founding Fathers at the first ASGCA Annual Meeting at Pinehurst CC, including Honorary President and one of the Golden Age's most prolific golf course architects Donald Ross (fourth from left)

Designs from this era dominate rankings. Only one course in the top ten of *Golf Digest's* latest list of America's 100 Greatest Golf Courses was built after the 1930s. The upper echelon reads as a who's who of the Golden Age, with work by the likes of Harry Colt, Alister MacKenzie, William Flynn, A.W. Tillinghast, Perry Maxwell, George Thomas, C.B. Macdonald, Seth Raynor and the ASGCA's own founding father, Donald Ross.

Golden Age design lives on not just through the courses these men left behind, but also the influence they have on today's golf course architects.

"Golden Age creations are the inspiration for almost all of my work," says Drew Rogers, ASGCA. "During these times where we're all trying to produce more with less, it's instructive to call on the works



Photo: Jon Cavalier @LinksGems

Alister MacKenzie's layout at Cypress Point in California, one of the game's most revered designs

from the early years of the twentieth century, when a course was truly arranged or routed for the best 'fit', and so little had to be done to build and maintain it."

Rogers says he is also inspired by the architectural philosophies of the time. "Holes were designed with simple means and purpose, with width in mind, where strategic angles could be employed, where hazards could be placed in a manner where the most direct lines of play were well guarded and optional routes had to be often considered. That is a game that can be enjoyed by everyone.

"I feel it is not only my desire, but also my responsibility, to grasp a firm understanding of the works and methods of this era as there is not a better time to put them back to work than now."

Thad Layton, ASGCA, of Arnold Palmer Design Company, says: "The past few generations of golf architects have been fortunate to inherit a treasure map from our predecessors practicing in golf course architecture's Golden Age. "While I draw inspiration from their courses and design features just like anyone else, the timeless concepts and ideas they laid down in their various books and missives describing the qualities of a great golf course are still relevant almost a century later.

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"When I'm wrestling for the right words to communicate a design idea or process, or just looking for moral support from guys who long ago traveled the road I'm trying to



Photo: Mike Klemme



At his Cutalong layout in Virginia, Tom Clark, ASGCA, has included interpretations of many holes from the Golden Age, including (above) a version of James Braid's famous 'Het Girdle' (hot griddle) par-three fifth at Gleneagles, Scotland. Following a successful golf career which included five Open Championship victories, Braid designed more than 200 courses in the UK

navigate, I find myself reaching for anything penned by Tom Simpson, Robert Hunter or MacKenzie.

"I don't think it's a coincidence that the writing and the courses of that time were so equally full of character. When one can so clearly articulate their thoughts on design, it implies a deep understanding of their subject. Ultimately the architect needs to communicate his ideas in two important ways: to paint a vision to the client and to convey this vision."

Layton highlights a quote from Hunter's 1926 book *The Links*. "Do not let certain standards become an obsession. Quality, not length; interest, not the number of holes; distinction, not the size in the greens – these things are worth striving for."

Allowing the site to dictate the design was second nature to the architects of the Golden Age, says Tom Clark, ASGCA. "They developed their own design style truly based on what nature gave them. Their routings required imagination as most often there were no topography maps and required good old-fashioned footwork to avoid drainage problems and take advantage of unique features.

"Abrupt slopes were often a byproduct of limited earthmoving, which made for some incredibly difficult recoveries, and green contours would often rely on Mother Nature for grow-in, which made for some very irregular humps and bumps."

Some of these humps could be substantial enough to obscure the golfer's target, leading to 'blind' holes – the likes of which most modern designers go to great lengths to avoid – where shots would be played over a hill or rise with little idea of their fate.

"Good visibility is indispensable if the holes are to present a problem which needs to be thought out with thoroughness in the matter of attack," wrote Simpson, in his 1931 book *The Game of Golf*. "But visibility should not be unduly stressed, and blindness of a kind can be a virtue."

Layton notes that Simpson leaves himself room to break one of the unwritten rules of golf



Thad Layton, ASGCA, employed 'strategic blindness' on the drivable par-four fifteenth at Royal Golf Club near Minneapolis, where the base of the pin can be obscured if tee shots are out of position

Photo: David A Parker Photography

course architecture: "To me this reference to blindness as a virtue implies the concept of what I'd call strategic blindness.

"I think there's a more subtle implementation of this concept by varying the degree of blindness. A small mound or roll that blocks the bottom half of the flagstick from a suboptimal position off the tee is a great example of this kind of nuanced blindness."

Layton and the Palmer team implemented this concept on the fifteenth hole at the Royal Golf Club near Minneapolis, where they built a drivable par four with a pond fronting the small green. The hole provides an unobstructed view of the target from the tee, "only to conceal it should you find your ball out of position," says Layton. "It's fun to try to take a crack at the green but not always the most prudent play."

Not all Golden Age architects are known for their naturalistic designs, however.

"A hallmark of Macdonald and Raynor's designs, which is likely a reflection of Raynor's engineering background, is the 'engineered' character of their courses which incorporates simple straight lines and square shapes and forms," said Shawn Smith, ASGCA, of Hills Forrest Smith. "This is most pronounced in the bunker style, which often has a trench-like feel with flat floors and steep straight grass faces, but it is also apparent in the square green shapes and straight fairway lines.

The duo's layout at Chicago Golf Club and Macdonald's National Golf Links of America on Long Island are known for their use of 'ideal' holes, templates that were often inspired by an original hole on the links of the United Kingdom and can be seen in some form or other on courses throughout the United States.

"It is quite easy to distinguish a Macdonald and Raynor course as they continued to utilize certain green designs like the Biarritz, Redan and Punchbowl," says Clark, who is currently working on an 18-hole project in Virginia, where he is

integrating architectural elements from famous holes and designers.

"I've always found it intriguing how Macdonald and Raynor were able to take the basic strategic principles of Macdonald's ideal holes and adapt them to a specific site," says Smith. "Rather than exact replicas, they are unique adaptations. In a way, this is what every architect does. They take ideas and experiences from the different courses they've visited and store them in a memory bank to be applied in their own unique way to a design somewhere down the line. Sometimes, that is the incorporation of a template hole, but it can be something as simple as how a swale or ridge drags into a green surface.

"I've gained an appreciation for the engineered or squared-up character of Macdonald and Raynor's designs, finding that it provides a certain simplicity that has a timeless character about it."

Smith's recent restoration work at Westmoreland CC in Illinois takes its cue from Macdonald and Raynor's Chicago Golf Club and nearby Shoreacres.

"By emulating their trench-like bunker style, we were able to create a dramatic transformation at Westmoreland where the bunkers now complement the other Golden Age characteristics of the layout," said Smith. "The result is a course that gives players a feeling of stepping back in time."

Macdonald's quest for the ideal course culminated with his layout for The Lido Golf Club on Long Island, constructed at a huge cost and described after its 1917 opening by golf writer Bernard Darwin as "the finest course in the world." But the Great Depression brought about an early demise and the land was sold for development, consigning the course to the status of golf's most famous lost design.



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The now almost mythical Lido has inspired many, including Gil Hanse, ASGCA, who has completed a recreation of the layout for the Ban Rakat Club in Thailand.

"Normally we feel strongly that a golf course should be the product of its surrounds," said Hanse. "But in the back of our minds, my partner Jim Wagner and I have often wondered what we would do with a completely flat site – what can you do to distinguish it? The most famous example of a manufactured golf course from the Golden Age was The Lido. Jim and I had always wanted to do a Macdonald/Raynor, angular grass-faced bunker design. We pitched the idea to the owner at



Photo: Dimpled Rock



Photo: Ty Butler, ASGCA

Ty Butler, ASGCA drew on his love for Maxwell's designs when laying out the Kaluhyat course at Turning Stone Casino Resort in New York. Left, Westmoreland CC in Illinois, where Shawn Smith, ASGCA, drew on Macdonald and Raynor's trench bunkering for inspiration

Ballyshear and he loved it."

Perry Maxwell incorporated template holes into his designs too, but with a more natural style.

"Maxwell's use of template concepts was always employed within the context of the natural environment," says Ty Butler, ASGCA, who grew up playing on a nine-hole Maxwell layout in Kansas. "I don't think you'll find an instance where Maxwell unnaturally manufactured these concepts outside the lines of what the site had to offer. And when natural features were lacking, Maxwell was an expert at embellishing a site, so it looked and felt natural.

"He adhered to a natural approach to design and used the environment to its fullest. This creates tremendous strategic value in each hole and maximizes the beauty of his courses. He was a master of using the terrain to form each hole and it is this approach that gives all his courses a distinctive appearance, as well as a high degree of strategic values.

"Maxwell's incorporation of the natural systems into design and letting site characteristics dictate all aspects of the design is what most appeals to me. I strive to follow this design tenet with all my designs."

Whether natural or man-made, Rogers says that the courses of these Golden Age architects respected the ground. "Their designs were always well thought out and they had a very good understanding of strategic elements, of balance, and the greater impact of certain accent holes throughout the intended experience sequence," he says. "Those architects had an absolutely superior use of subtlety along the way. They were not shy about a few bold strokes here and there, but the magic of their work was subtle features and their impacts to golfers, especially the mental side.

"I focus much more now on the ground game because there is no value in designing to keep up with the DeChambeaus. My clients are keen to enjoy a much smaller scale version of the game, length has little matter to most, or is at least countered by more subtle treatments and elements, and a big part of that impact occurs on the ground, not in the air."