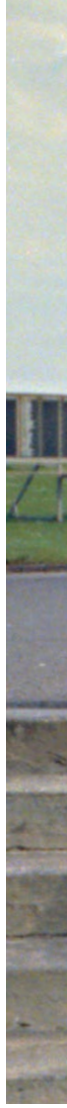
Lessons of the links



When Pete and Alice Dye first experienced the links courses of Scotland in 1963, it shaped their philosophy and the direction of golf design in America. But how are today's architects inspired by links golf?

"The true links course is the supreme test of golf," ASGCA Founding Father Donald Ross once wrote. "It is not only a physical challenge but a mental one. Each hole is a puzzle to be solved, and the changing winds make it so that no round is ever the same."

British and Irish links are revered by golfers, architects and TV viewers alike, providing a glimpse into golf's past and often described as the purest form of the game. The venues of the Open Championship, like Royal Troon this year, stand apart from almost any others on tour, and place unique demands on the golfer. "Literally, everything we do here is completely different than what we do in the States," said Xander Schauffele, shortly after winning the Claret Jug.

In 1963, Pete and Alice Dye took a trip to Scotland, to experience links golf for the first time. It shaped their own design philosophy and influenced much of their subsequent work, and the work of their protégés, in the United States.

Today's architects are typically well travelled, and many have seen and designed courses across the globe. So how do links courses influence their work?

Upon joining the Society in 1995, Raymond Hearn, ASGCA, was encouraged to set out for the British Isles. The advice from Dye? "Be a sponge, ask lots of questions, meet the club historians and take in as much as you can."

Hearn took those words to heart and went on to make numerous trips to the UK and Ireland. Between 1997 and 2003 he co-taught a seminar on golf course architecture through Michigan State University (MSU), which saw him visit courses such as Turnberry, Muirfield and Royal County Down. "I learned as much as I taught. These trips were the best thing that could have ever happened to me as a young designer." During a visit to Royal Portrush, Hearn vividly recalls the historian saying that the 1970s and 80s of American golf course architecture veered away from playability and the ground



Pete and Alice Dye, in the foreground, on the steps behind the first tee of the Old course at St Andrews

game. "That speech resonated in my career," says Hearn. "The relationship between the green, surrounds and the approach is a key consideration for me on every project. I give the approach just as much thought as I do the green complexes – it equates to a much better playing experience."

The notorious links gales changed his thinking on design, too. "The strength of the wind required a four-club shift on certain holes," he says. "The bump and run was essential, and I have endeavored to design holes that allow golfers to feed this shot into greens."

Bill Bergin, ASGCA, first experienced links golf in qualification for the 1984 Open at St Andrews. His qualifying site was Lundin Links. "The wind was significantly different each day, giving me an education on links golf and the tremendous variation one might encounter," says Bergin.

"These trips were the best thing that could have ever happened to me as a young designer"

"The course record was 65 and I intentionally played for a bogey on the last hole, to avoid out-of-bounds left, and secure my spot at The Open." He qualified in second place, with rounds of 71 and 65.

He recalls his practice round at St Andrews: "Lee Trevino said the Old course was ruined by installing irrigation. But it was brick hard! I had never played on ground that firm and fast. Chipping was faster than putting! I ended up making the cut on the nose, and then shot 66 and 71 at the weekend to finish tied for 14th. The 66 on Saturday equaled the best round of the week, and I was paired with Nick Faldo on Sunday. Quite the introduction to links golf!





Photo: Raymond Hearn, ASGCA

Raymond Hearn, ASGCA, has made over a dozen trips to the UK and Ireland and says experiencing the likes of Royal Dornoch (above) and Royal County Down (right) was crucial to his career as a designer

"Although the course was totally flat, it was well camouflaged. It was difficult to see a variety of features, and while not a student of architecture at the time, I mapped the course from right to left, because you could always see the right edge – which was mostly trouble!"

Bergin would also play in the 1984 Irish Open at Royal Dublin and the 1985 Open at Royal St George's, which he describes as "the hardest test" he had played at that point in his career, highlighting "the constant crosswinds to narrow, fast fairways."

Bergin compares the costal winds of Britain and Ireland to those atop Lookout Mountain in Georgia – the setting of his latest design, The Keep at McLemore, which he has created alongside ASGCA Past President Rees Jones. "The 200-acre windswept property is on the edge of a mountain," says Bergin. "While it may be hard to imagine the links influence, there is no doubt that wind will be a factor, impacting the length and difficulty of holes, reminiscent of my experiences at the Irish Open."

Bergin may not have been a student of golf course design at the time, but those trips were the foundation for his golf course education. "More than any other period of my golf career, I learned how golf is played on the ground and how design around greens impacts the way the game is played," he says. "The impact of wind and how much different a course can play is never more apparent than on links golf. During the Irish Open, I recall playing a short iron into a par five for my second shot, while the adjacent par four was unreachable in two shots. Par can become completely irrelevant based on conditions. There is a joy in that aspect of the game, forcing a player to only consider executing a proper shot without regard for the imposed parameters of par.

"A few years later, as a teaching professional it became even clearer to me how the ground game, approach and chipping areas impact the way the game is played on links courses and on traditional American courses."

Tim Liddy, ASGCA, spent much of his career working with the Dyes, and has also worked and lived in St Andrews when remodeling the



Photo: Raymond Hearn, ASGCA



Photo: Kevin Murray

Everything we do as golf course architects can be found in the Old course," says Tim Liddy, ASGCA

Dukes course, which overlooks the town, in 2006. "Yardage means nothing as the variable wind and firm conditions provide a test that differs every day," he says. "Five sets of tees are not needed because yardage differences are not as important without the forced carries and target golf so prevalent in the modern US-led version of the game. For example, the Old course at St Andrews, set up for the dry conditions of the 2000 Open, included fairways that in some cases rolled faster than the greens. These conditions defended the golf course against the power hitters. Tee shots traveled to the edges of the fairways where serious hazards await and approach shots to firm greens had to be played from the right place. Course management was crucial.

At its best, links golf is a chess game with different pieces and a different board every day. It requires as much, and perhaps more, skill and strategy than power. In America, by contrast, we fly the ball to the green, making golf a one-dimensional game."

For Liddy, St Andrews showcases the strategic pillars of golf course design perfectly. "Everything we do as golf course architects can be found in the Old course," he says. "Risk/reward, strategy, angles, blindness, alternate routes, long views, the joy of firm turf and many more. The basic tenants of strategic design travel well; the endless variety of taking more risk on a shot for reward on the next. Golf on the ground was an integral part of the design strategy of the early links layouts and adds greatly to the enjoyment of the game for the average player. It also offers more options for the better player to shape the shot in both directions. This concept of alternate routes for different levels of golfers is a timeless lesson."

> "At its best, links golf is a chess game with different pieces and a different board every day"

Links golf can provide insight into



At Mistwood in Chicago, Raymond Hearn created a links aesthetic by incorporating fescue throughout the course and building some vertical-faced pot bunkers

Photo: Raymond Hearn, ASGCA

the role of vegetation in golf design, too. "I was blown away as a young designer by the natural vegetation, the beauty of the heather, gorse and fescue. It's magical," says Hearn. "The relationship between that gnarly-ness, the different vegetation and the contrast of the fairways, approaches, runoffs and greens, it really is a world that is in logical order. You'll be looking at your shot angle and options and then glance to the side and see an untamed paradise."

Hearn has sought to achieve similar in the US. "I have pushed that envelope with my clients," he says. "I have contrasted that unruliness with manicured fairways and greens at White Lake and the Donald Ross Memorial course in Michigan and at New Jersey's Metedeconk National."

Hearn was able to push a links aesthetic even further at Mistwood in Chicago. He and the late owner Jim McWethy decided to build some vertical-faced pot bunkers and introduce fescue throughout the course. "Some people don't have the chance to go to Scotland or Ireland, so I gave them a little bit of a taste and they love it," says Hearn. "Since the renovation in 2013, the club has become one of the most financially successful public golf facility in the Midwest, and I give thanks to that little touch of Scotland and Ireland."

At Florida's Santa Rosa Golf & Beach Club, sandy terrain made links features a natural choice for Bergin. "We made excellent use of the site's sandy dunes and natural vegetation," he says. "We also incorporated closely mown areas with gentle slopes on firm ground, allowing balls to feed to interesting chipping areas – from those positions, a wide variety of recovery shots can be hit."

"To remain relevant, golf in America must take on its competition," says Liddy. "Golf can offer solitude and natural elegance against the crass modern society, a private experience instead of mass media. But we need to stop building artificial golf courses, with cart paths, range finders and yardage markers. If we drive our golf cart and play to yardages all day, why not just play to targets on a range? What is the difference? To compete in today's society, golf needs to offer the antithesis of today's society, not a reflection of it. Links golf courses provide the natural, sustainable model for a healthy outdoor exercise." ●