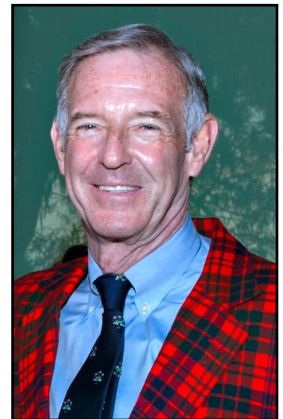

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Occasionally Unfamiliar - Yet Essentially the Same

I had the privilege of traveling to St. Andrews last month to watch the 144th Open Championship. Given the ever-changing conditions and the Monday afternoon finish with its dramatic four-hole play-off, it was an eventful few days – but then I suspect golf and life is never dull at St. Andrews! It is often claimed that the ghost of Old Tom Morris frequents the Old Course, and as I wandered amid those fabled humps and hillocks – one moment admiring a spectacular display of shot-making and the next dashing to find shelter from some extreme Scottish weather -- I reckon I wasn't the only spectator wondering what Old Tom and his friends would have made of it all. Indeed, I wondered what a Bobby Jones circa 1930, or a Jack Nicklaus circa 1970 would have made of it ... How much of what they saw and experienced would they have recognized?



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Playing-wise, Jones once famously described Nicklaus's golf (at the '65 Masters) as being of such a quality that it was 'unfamiliar' to him. But since Jones himself often played the game at a far higher level than his contemporaries and set a few records that remain to this day, was Nicklaus's golf truly 'unfamiliar?' Half a century later, did Zach Johnson – and do Messrs Spieth and McIlroy for that matter -- really play such a different game? Has golf ever changed dramatically; or has it simply (as I would contend) evolved gradually over the decades and centuries?

At St. Andrews a very powerful, almost tangible, sense of history hangs in the air; it's as if someone is constantly whispering in your ear, 'So this is where it all began.' I remember reading the opening sentence to an essay about the Old Course which declared, "One hundred years before Columbus sailed to America, and two centuries before Shakespeare wrote Hamlet and Macbeth, golf was being played at St. Andrews. It is that ancient." In 1457 golf was temporarily banned in Scotland on the basis that it was interfering with the nation's archery practice (presumably those sharp-shooters shouted 'fore!' before they let fly); but it was restored and encouraged by a famous proclamation in 1552, and by 1691 St Andrews was being heralded as 'the Metropolis of Golfing.' So a remarkably ancient game played over a remarkably ancient links ... And yet, the Old Course is not quite so 'ancient' that it cannot successfully host the Open Championship every five years!

The Rules of Golf illustrate how the game has evolved. The first formal rules that we are aware of date from 1744; there were just 13 of them, produced by 'The Gentlemen Golfers of Edinburgh' and they were adopted 10 years later by the R&A at St. Andrews. While today's regulations are necessarily a lot more detailed, those 13 rules provided a foundation and still form the basis of our present-day rule book, and of course the R&A (together with the USGA) still makes and interprets those rules. Perhaps most significantly of all, the 18th century guiding principle of 'wherever possible, play the ball as it lies' remains at the core of today's game.

As an architect, whenever I'm asked to summarize the factors that I feel separate an 'ordinary' golf course from a 'special' one, I often like to recite the following:

"The finest courses always require you to study the lie, feel the wind, read the ground you are hitting to, and use your imagination. They then ask you to trust your instincts and execute the shot."

It occurs to me that such a description would have been just as appropriate a hundred or more years ago. Or to put it another way, the basic challenges of the game - and the fundamental skills required in mastering it - have remained constant, and surely it is this, as much as anything, that gives golf its enduring appeal.

I thought the 'Spirit of the Game' was much in evidence this summer as the game's two greatest championships were staged more than 5,000 miles apart on the west coast of the US and the east coast of Scotland. Chambers Bay in Washington State and St Andrews in the Kingdom of Fife: on the face of it, two very contrasting venues given their locations and the fact that while one course is less 10 years old the other has existed for more than half a millennium. In my view, however, there were a lot more similarities than differences ... and didn't Jordan Spieth come within an Old Tom Morris whisker of proving my point?

As always, let me know what you think: steve@stevesmyers.com or (863) 683-5888.

- Steve Smyers, 2015 - 2016 President