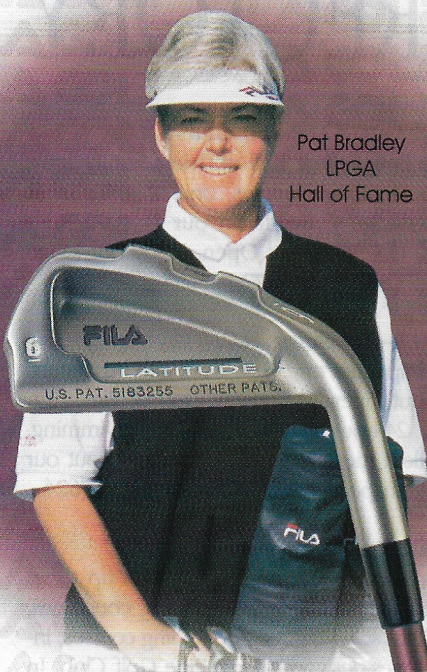


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INTERVIEW



Steve Smyers

Putting the Bounce Back in the Game

BY MARK BROWN

At just 41 years of age, Steve Smyers stands poised to make his mark on the field of golf course design. Surrounded by the game since youth, he is both an accomplished player and a well-traveled student of the legendary architects and the golf courses they created.

In addition, Smyers has nearly 20 years of hands-on experience along with a well-conceived design philosophy that may well propel him to the top of his craft. In the discussion that follows, Smyers expounds on his design philosophy and his career.

LINKS: Tell us about your background in golf.

SMYERS: I've been around golf all my

life. I worked at Sharpstown Country Club in Houston during my high school years. In the '60s, the Houston Open was played at Sharpstown, and in 1966 I watched Lee Trevino win the Texas State Open over Marty Fleckman. I've always remembered it because he hooked the ball all the way around the golf course. This was just before he broke out on the Tour and won the U.S. Open at Oak Hill in 1968. In 1969 the Open came to Champions, and I caddied for Miller Barber who was leading by three strokes after the third round, but lost out to Orville Moody.

I played a lot of competitive junior golf with Ben Crenshaw and Bruce Lietzke and accepted a golf scholarship at the University of Florida where I played with



MIKE KLEMM/GOLFOTO



MIKE KLEMM/GOLFOTO

Southern Dunes reflects Smyers' belief in the importance of strategic design.

Andy Bean, Gary Koch, Andy North, Woody Blackburn and Phil Hancock. We won the NCAA championship in 1973.

After college I went to work for Ron Garl in Tampa. That was a great learning experience because I learned how to put together a complete plan for golf course clients, including all the technical aspects. In most cases it's a four-year contract—two years of planning and two years of construction. Two of the courses I worked on with Garl were Grenelefe South [in Haines City, Fla.] and Fiddlesticks [in Fort Myers, Fla.].

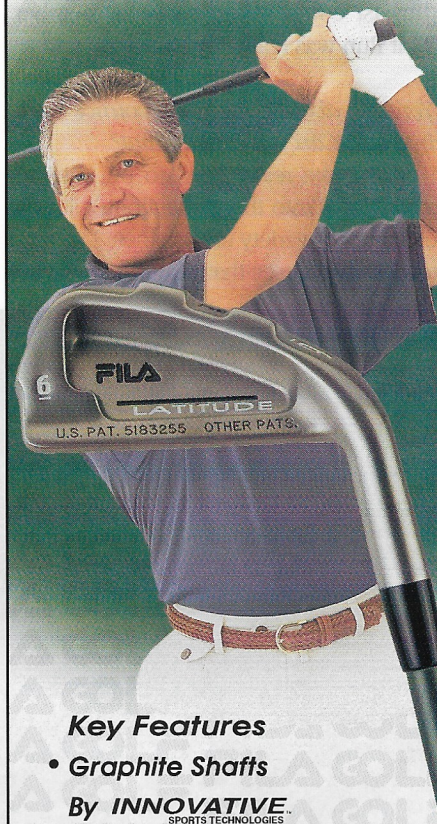
The opening of my first solo design came in 1987. It was really difficult to get the first couple design jobs on my own, and the developers had limited tracts of

land and limited budgets. But it was still a breakthrough for me.

The third course I built was Wolf Run Golf Club in Indianapolis in 1989. It was my first big break. In sharp contrast to my first two courses, Wolf Run was built for an individual, Jack Leer, who had a very keen knowledge of the game and of golf course design. He was a friend of Pete Dye and had spent a good deal of time with him early on in Pete's career.

Leer's dream was to build a demanding, world-class golf club for serious golfers. He felt that he could hire a relatively unknown architect who had a good feel for the game and together create that type of golf course. Also, it was our feeling that we could build a great course

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cost effectively—so the average golf enthusiast could afford to be a member. Wolf Run was really my launching pad.

You talk about putting the bounce back into golf. Can you explain that?

I believe we really need to put the creativity back into the game along with the elements of variety and chance. I've tried to design courses that play firmer so the

ball will bounce and roll. And I've worked with superintendents to maintain my courses so they play that way. The softer the course, the more it penalizes high-handicap golfers who need the extra roll to reach greens in regulation. With the low handicapper or professional, distance isn't that critical and soft courses enable them to hit the ball from point to point, like throwing darts at a

target. They can score better, but it takes creativity out of the game.

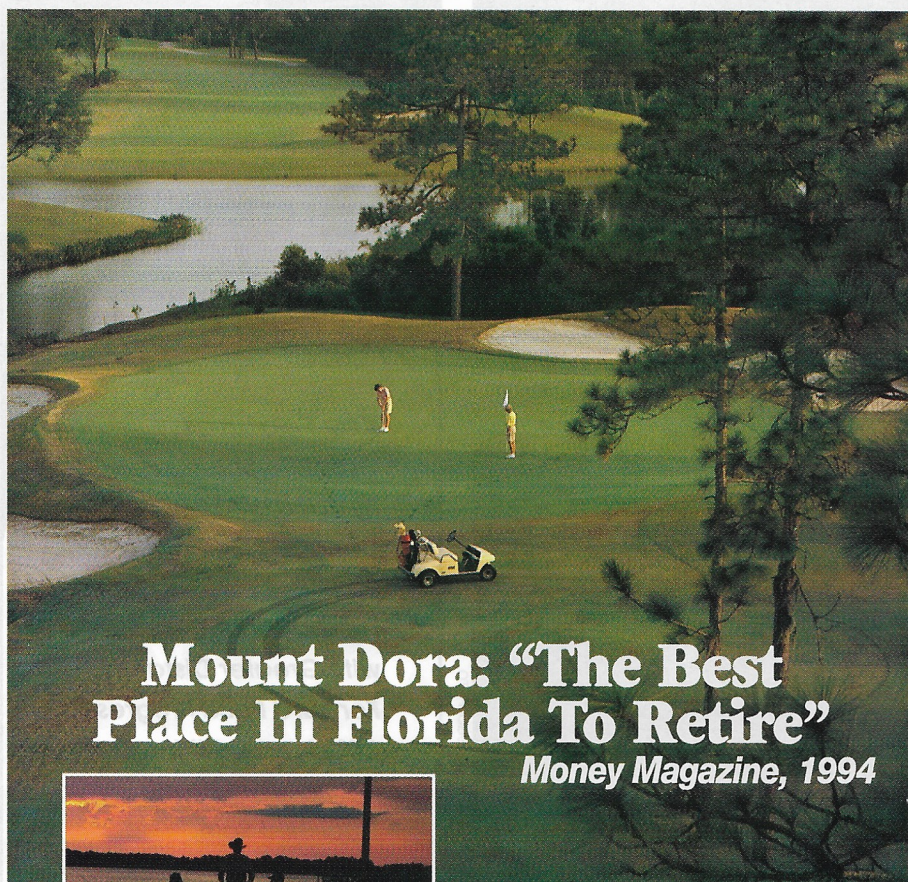
At Southern Dunes [a Smyers design near Orlando, Fla.] constant changes in the firmness of the turf and the nature of the wind make the course play drastically different from one day to the next. This forces the good golfer to manage his game more. In design, it allows the architect to create a greater variety of shots and different looks on the same course. In addition, wind will magnify the firmness of the turf and change the strategy of play as its velocity and direction shift. That's why the Old Course at St. Andrews is so great. It favors players like Nick Faldo who can manage their game.

A fast-playing golf course opens up all sorts of options, particularly around the greens. The combination of slope, speed and pin placement make the golfer use his imagination to create and execute a variety of shots to get close to the hole. He can use any number of clubs in his bag to play the same pitch or chip shot. The more ability he has to control his game and execute different shots, the better chance he has to score well. It also gives the high handicapper a wide selection of shots depending on the strengths of his game. He can even use his putter if he lacks confidence in his short game. I believe the great golf courses of the world, like the great players, incorporate the element of imagination.

How does the "firm and fast" concept of design affect speed of play?

Architects are always aware of the technical aspects of construction, but we have to move people around too. The five-hour round is just killing the game. A lot of people will spend a whole day on the course, but not just for 18 holes. We need to build golf courses that challenge the good player with creative and strategic shot-making rather than penal features. This way high handicappers can get around the golf course faster. High handicappers may not have creative shot-making in their repertoire, but on a strategic course they can hit their ball, find it, recover and play a fast, enjoyable round. Recovery is the key.

The other side of the issue is that developers, course operators and superin-

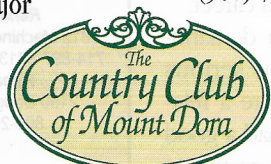


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tendents are looking for less expensive ways to maintain golf courses so they can offer more affordable green fees. Firm turf allows them to water less, fertilize less, mow less and overall maintenance requirements are less. It's also better for the environment. It's the domino effect.

What is the impact of golf carts on maintenance and costs?

Well, owners say they need the revenue from golf carts, but they don't consider what it costs to design and build a course to accommodate carts. First, you have cart paths—that costs a couple hundred thousand dollars. The irrigation system has to be more elaborate—particularly in northern climates because heartier grasses that require more water and maintenance have to be used to withstand the cart traffic. Golf carts are a revenue generator, but they are also a tremendous expense.

I know you espouse the "brown can be beautiful" philosophy. How did your design philosophy evolve?

It evolved from several years of traveling around the world studying various golf courses and reading the books of the late great architects such as Alister Mackenzie and George Thomas. I went to C.B. Macdonald's National Golf Links on Long Island, Ben Crenshaw's Plantation Course at Kapalua Resort on the island of Maui and Pine Valley, with its wide fairways that demand the use of strategy off the tee in order to have the optimum shot to the green.

In 1977, two weeks after the Australian Open, my wife and I went to Royal Melbourne and the other courses on the Australian sandbelt that she grew up on. I realized then that Royal Melbourne—which was designed by Mackenzie—was a great example of strategic design. The fairways were very firm and the grass was slightly starving which provided a very fast, smooth playing surface. The rough was not irrigated and had a variety of native grasses. The bunkers, which are considered among the best in the world, were maintained to a very low standard compared to those in the U.S. They were very playable but they weren't 100 percent manicured. After all, they are hazards. They are spectacular visually and

very strategically placed.

The greens were also very firm. They don't have golf carts, and they actually encourage the members to take their pull carts across the greens to keep them firm. The greens are also open in the front to accept shots along the ground which facilitates creative shot-making.

Most of the courses I visited only maintained their golf holes down the mid-

dle—fairways, tees and greens. The roughs are just that—rough. This greatly reduces maintenance costs. In the U.S., a lot of courses are built on 200 acres and all 200 acres are grassed and must be maintained. Royal Melbourne and others are spread over 200 acres, but only about 60 acres of grass have to be maintained. Aesthetically I think the contrast of color with the use of various grasses is great.



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Brown can be beautiful. Even Augusta National, which is highly maintained, has the contrast of the lush green fairways and the brown pine needles under the trees. When tied together, I believe these concepts represent the future of golf course design.

How would these philosophies impact the game?

It would allow it to expand through the creation of more affordable and accessible courses. Green fees ranging from \$20 to \$30 will attract more people, especially junior golfers who just want to play and don't need golf carts. They could play at non-peak hours. High-level maintenance puts a lot of restrictions on golf operations and what developers can do concerning green fees and member-

ship dues. I believe that maintenance costs can be dropped drastically resulting in affordable golf for more people.

How did the "green look" develop in America?

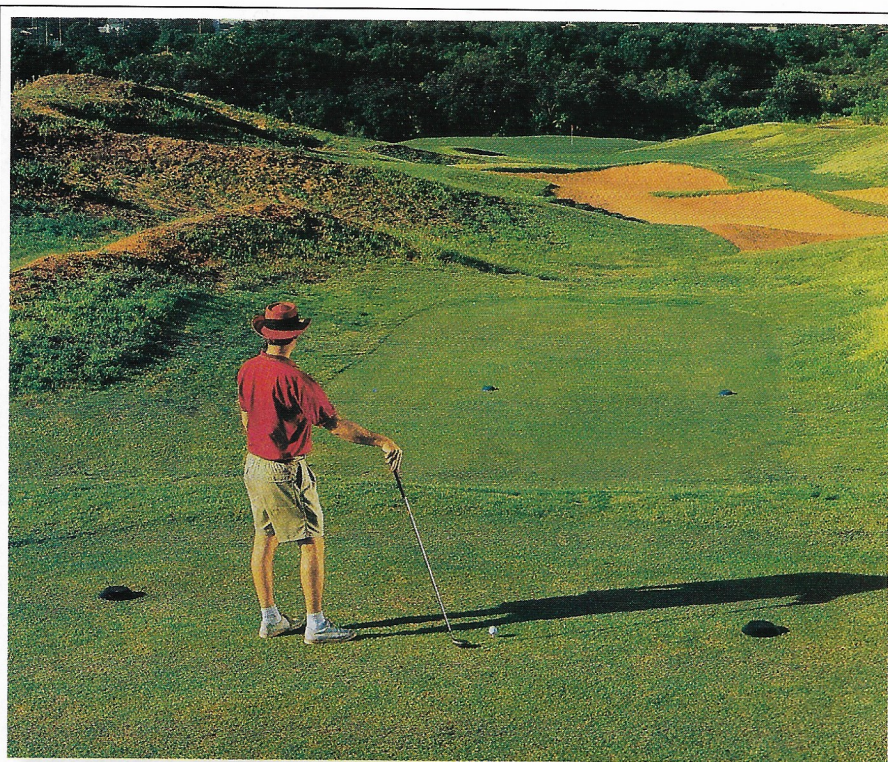
It's really a result of good old American ingenuity and the free enterprise system going back to the early 1970s. Augusta National is always used as an example, but the "green look" evolved across the U.S. over the past 20 years. First came automatic irrigation systems along with triplex mowers for greens and tees and finally fairways. Such technological advances eliminated jobs but the extra people were used to maintain other areas of the course, such as bunkers and roughs at a higher level.

Then came the real estate boom of the '80s. Developers had the perception that they had to have green grass everywhere to sell real estate. Superintendents have been told that that's what people are looking for. But in contrast, when Americans travel to Scotland or Ireland or Australia, they find fast and firm is a fun way to play golf.

New maintenance practices have changed golf tremendously over the last two decades. More irrigation has made golf courses play longer and lower mower heights have reduced the cushion under the ball—making it harder for high handicappers to pick the ball off the fairway. Tighter lies help good players control the ball and put more spin on it, however. Almost everything we've done has widened the gap between high and low handicappers.

Lower mowing heights on greens has done the same thing. When the Stimp-meter first came out in the early '60s, the average speed on championship golf courses was 6.8. At the 1993 U.S. Open at Baltusrol the Stimp-meter for the fairways was 6.6. Fast greens are a plus for good putters, but are harder to handle for the average golfer. Technology in golf equipment, particularly shafts and balls has had a similar effect in widening the gap among players. Generally speaking, good players are able to take advantage of new technology more than players of less ability.

Another key element in design and



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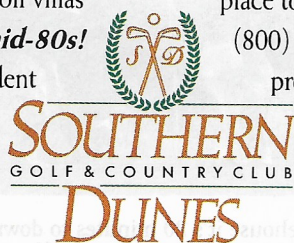
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INTERVIEW

maintenance today is the availability of water. It is one of our major problems. It's another reason we need to cut back on highly-maintained playing areas.

The other problem area is the environment. There is a strong perception among environmental groups that golf development and maintenance practices are bad for the environment. But in simple terms, there is no better water filter than healthy turfgrass which results from proper course management and maintenance.

You have talked about the importance of the routing of a golf course. Can you shed some light on this subject?

Routing is somewhat of a lost art. Over the last couple of decades, many golf course routings have been integrated with planning real estate developments. Many requirements other than golf had to be considered. These requirements include housing and infrastructure, storm water management and environmental limitations. Often the routing of the golf course has not been the primary concern.

In the '90s, golf is becoming more of a business and profit center of its own, so there's more emphasis on course routings. Architects will be able to utilize the topography of the site and create more natural design features. You'll see architects attempting to locate greens and tees closer to each other to facilitate walking and add to the flow and enjoyment of the game. More variety can be woven into the design such as varying the directions of the golf holes. Also, practice areas and teeing areas for the first and 10th holes will be closer to the clubhouse facilities, and there won't be as much emphasis on creating the standard 18-hole championship course.

With golf becoming more profitable, there will be more emphasis on the business of building superior golf courses for the least amount of money. If you have more variety within the routing you can build more exciting and cost effective golf courses. Sensible routings that aren't stretched all over the site will reduce maintained areas and save money.

How do maintenance practices affect green sites and putting surfaces?

Generally speaking, the "green look" has



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resulted in softer greens, while higher level maintenance has increased their speed. As green speeds have increased, architects have been forced to put less slope and contour in the putting surfaces to maintain their playability. Pete Dye, along with many others, is advocating maintaining greens at 7, 8 or 9 rather than 10, 11 or 12 on the Stimpmeter so greens can be designed with more contour, making shotmaking and putting more interesting. Greens should be maintained in accordance with their slope. At the '94 U.S. Open at Oakmont where the greens were running at 11 or more, the USGA was hard-pressed to find suitable pin locations.

What design projects will you be working on this year?

1995 is an exciting year for me. I have several projects in the eastern U.S. One is a 36-hole resort in Orlando, another in Tampa will be for avid golfers who really love the game. I believe that each golf course should be designed to make every golfer who plays it a better player. That doesn't necessarily mean that it's a difficult golf course however. It doesn't automatically mean a course with forced carries and aerial shots. I like to give the golfer options that require the use of strategy, and make players use their creativity and imagination.

I'm also building a course in Charlotte, N.C., called Jamison's Glen, one in Marion, Ill., a 36-hole complex in New Jersey called Royce Brook and a classical course in Rhode Island called Beaver Tail Golf Links. It will include the restoration of a nine-hole A.W. Tillinghast course and a new nine-hole course which will be designed with the Tillinghast philosophy. The entire course will overlook the Narragansett Bay and the Atlantic Ocean and will play firm. The wind blows pretty good there and several holes are located along the bluffs of the ocean.

I'm also designing a 27-hole course in England for Nick Faldo called Gadridge Farm. Another interesting project is a course for a gentleman in his backyard for himself and his friends. It will have 27 holes utilizing 13 greens and 26 tees and a combination of any of the three nines will measure over 7,000 yards. ■

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