
PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Innovation in the Game of Golf: Part 1

"Creativity is thinking up new things. Innovation is doing new things" - Theodore Levitt

We talk a lot about 'the traditions' of the game, yet arguably (and rather ironically) golf's greatest tradition is its ability to embrace innovation and, through design, adapt to changing conditions. Since the game's earliest days, and gaining momentum from 1902 when the Haskell Ball appeared on the scene, golf has remained in a constant state of evolution. This evolutionary process is especially defined by improvements in equipment, agronomy, golf instruction and, indeed, the athletic prowess of golfers themselves.

When the Haskell Golf Ball was first introduced it behaved very differently from its predecessor which was made of gutta-percha (the 'guttie' ball). It was generally easier to hit and, when it landed, it bounced and ran along the ground. Design had to make allowances for this type of play as the gutta-percha ball barely rolled once it landed.

The courses designed in the era of the gutty relied on cross-bunkering as their principal strategic defense. Most putting surfaces were fronted by a steep slope or a cavernous bunker. Driving the ball was challenging because the cross bunkers must be cleared with an aerial shot. The Haskell Ball was constructed with a rubber core and its revolutionary dimple design made it much easier to get airborne. This was a turning point in design: it was no longer deemed necessary to build fortress greens with their approaches always heavily defended, and it enabled a new way for golf to be played. More emphasis could now be placed on the positioning of the tee shot - good placement being rewarded by having a better angle for the approach into the green. The golfer was encouraged to plot his way around the course since where he wanted his ball to finish was not necessarily where he was required to land it. The new ball effectively added a new dimension to the game, and from a design perspective it meant that many more factors could - and should - be considered when individual holes were conceived and created. The direct consequence of all this was that golf became more fun and stimulating - and this resulted in a new interest in the game which in turn became the catalyst for its growth on a global scale.

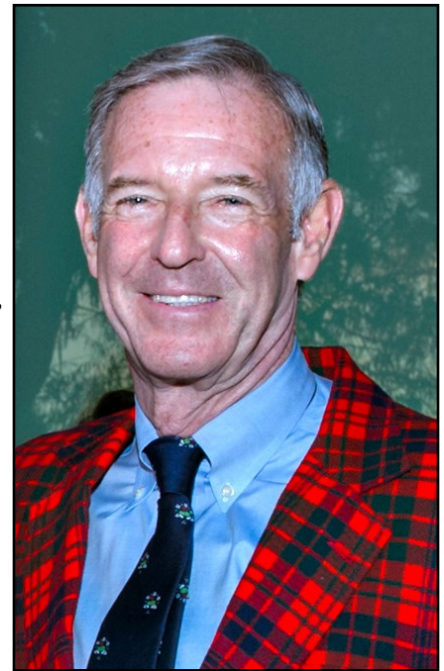
Since the introduction of the Haskell Ball, many additional technological advances have taken place, most of which have contributed to golf's worldwide popularity ... And certainly the ability and desire on the part of golf course architects to embrace and respond to these changes has played an important role in the game's successful development.

One of the first milestones following the launch of the Haskell Ball was the formation of the USGA Green Section and the introduction of much-improved greens mowers in 1920. The superior equipment could mow turf to a lower and more consistent height of cut. This, along with greater knowledge of how to grow grass, made for better playing surfaces and helped fuel the rapid growth of the game during the 1920s.

In 1929 steel shafts were introduced allowing golfers to hit longer, straighter and higher golf shots. In 1932 the sand wedge was developed and it encouraged players - or at least gave them the option - to take the aerial route when pitching to putting surfaces.

In response to these evolutionary and 'game-changing' factors, Donald Ross redesigned Pinehurst #2 and converted its putting surfaces from sand to grass while re-routing and stretching the course to almost 7,000 yards. A.W. Tillhingham's Bethpage Black is another good example of a golf course being designed (and then re-designed) to accommodate and reflect developments in the game. The popular Long Island course has hosted numerous events including two U.S. Opens.

The 1970s brought automatic irrigation, so enabling course architects and superintendents to expand the area of intensively maintained turf. This technological advance also changed the look and playability of areas beyond the fairway and played a prominent role in causing homes on golf courses to become an attractive proposition. When the residential development boom occurred, golf architects were required to extend their skills to interact with land planners, engineers and environmental groups. So again, our profession was responding to the trends of the era.



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When competition between golf facilities inevitably developed, innovative and enhanced maintenance practices were introduced: mowing heights throughout the golf course were lowered, putting surfaces were mowed and rolled more often, and the combined effect of this encouraged players to approach the game differently. The new maintenance techniques created better conditioned, 'prettier' golf courses, and this appealed to non-golfers and enthused many people to take up the sport, but it also asked golf architects to adjust their designs accordingly.

During the past 25 years much has been said and written about changes in golf equipment and advances in technology. These conversations have mainly focused on the golf ball and golf club. Relatively few people have commented on the advances and improvements relating to maintenance practices and golf instruction. Yet while there have been tremendous innovations in equipment functionality, the game's rule makers have effectively put a 'distance and size cap' on any further advances in ball and club design.

While this has been happening, the allied golf associations and golf industry have been busy directing very substantial resources toward the development of new turf grasses, maintenance products and equipment. Extensive research into maintenance practices has occurred with a view to identifying how best to maintain golf facilities to achieve optimum playing conditions throughout the golfing season. Similarly, there has been much studying of the golf swing and how to optimize the movements of the body during the golf stroke ... as with equipment, the approach to golf instruction is changing and evolving. Research in each of these areas commenced years ago and we are just now realizing the benefits.

All of these industry advances present opportunities and challenges for us as golf course architects. The opportunity lies in the desire of golf facilities to keep pace with modern trends and to provide a product that will attract golfers today and in the future. Our challenge as architects is to embrace this opportunity, and to design golf courses that not only reflect the modern game but make it more enjoyable and more interesting.

In the next President's Corner we will discuss how the introduction of new products and innovative concepts is transforming how the game is being played.

As always, I welcome your thoughts; feel free to reach me at steve@stevesmyers.com or 863-683-6100.

- Steve Smyers, ASGCA
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