

in play

BY TOM FERRELL AND MARK FINE · PHOTO BY TONY ROBERTS/CORBIS

ON COURSE



A bunker in the middle of a green, like that featured on Desert Mountain's Chiricahua course in Scottsdale may not seem fair, but it invites the game's core demands: skill and patience.

“Men that hazard all do it in hopes of fair advantages.”

—William Shakespeare

BLIND SHOTS AND BAD BOUNCES:

it's just not fair

Among the first lessons we learn as children is the painful reality that life isn't fair. It's filled with blind shots, tough choices, anxious moments and random bounces. Sound familiar? The old Scots embraced the fickle nature of golf and its metaphor for the journey of life. Their original links were anything but fair. Laid into the natural hillocks and spaces between the dunes, they sometimes made little sense, yet the sheer unpredictability of the game played under constantly changing wind and weather was at the heart of its attraction. Golf wasn't meant to be a precise physical endeavor, but rather a metaphorical journey that rewarded higher virtues—strategy, patience, discipline—in addition to skill.

Some two centuries later, golf is a different game. Engineering advances allow golf course architects to “create” landscapes and dictate the style of play. Equipment and maintenance practices have allowed golfers to develop a predictable aerial approach to shotmaking rather than one influenced by the natural contours and undulations of the ground. Most modern players expect a course that clearly defines the challenge before them—hit it between the fairway bunkers, loft an iron to the green and try for birdie. Too bad. Golf is and can be so much more than that.

Let's face it—this isn't bowling, even though some of today's house-lined fairways might almost qualify. There's no regulation length, no regulation

width and no climate control. A hole that's unpredictable becomes “unfair” because it doesn't include instructions. Architects spend enormous amounts of money to create a “fair” golf course, where every lie is perfect, every target is visible and every hole is framed. Hazards exist only to punish a bad shot, rarely to tempt the golfer toward them with an award in return.

Is there even such a thing as “unfair” in golf course design? Assuming that a hole doesn't demand a forced carry that no reasonable player could muster while playing from appropriate tee boxes, golfers should hesitate to label any hole or challenge unfair. By passing judgment, rather than relishing the quirky or unique elements of a golf course, you introduce tension, negativity and, most important, eliminate the pleasure of the experience and challenge. That test may come in the form of a blind shot, a hazard located directly in the line of play, slopes and contours on fairways and greens, obstructions deemed integral to the course or a do-or-die shot.

The greens at Augusta National feature bold contours and tiers. A shot to one side of the green may, in fact, be much worse off than a missed green on the opposite side of the flagstick. Is this fair? Consider the green at the famous par-3 16th. A three-foot ridge-line separates the left and right sides of the putting surface. When the flag is tucked to the left, near the bottom of the slope—the traditional Sunday

placement—a shot that finds the right side of the green leaves an almost impossible two-putt. But the ridge engages the shotmaking skills of the field, making the 16th one of the most popular spectator vantage points and one of the most pivotal holes in the tournament. The golfer who challenges the right side can work the ball off the slope toward the hole. If he gets too bold, he can find sand, water or the “impossible” situation that Tiger Woods found last year. Of course, Tiger made the impossible possible, and he’d be the first to admit that his mistake—not the green design—was what put him in such precarious circumstances.

In the quest for fairness, many architects and developers unwittingly deprive golfers of experiences that can turn an ordinary round into a personal legend. The old links at Lahinch, Ireland, was originally laid out by Old Tom Morris. In the 1920s, Alister MacKenzie renovated the course. Like most architects, MacKenzie wasn’t overly fond of blind shots. But at Lahinch he faced a decision over what to do with the short par-3 5th, the infamous “Dell” hole. From the tee, the golfer sees nothing but a towering dune, beyond which lies the green. Each morning, the greenskeeper places a white rock on the side of the dune to identify the line to the flagstick. Forced to factor in yardage, wind and internal uncertainty, the golfer must play a shot of faith toward the green. The walk over the hillock to discover the result of the shot is one of the most anxious—and exquisite—moments in golf. How fortunate that MacKenzie left the hole as it was and didn’t succumb to the temptation to make it more “fair.” It remains today a game of hide-and-seek between course and golfer, and if the ball ends up close, it’s a memory that will never fade.

How would you feel if you played a nice, high wedge shot that landed just 10 feet short of the flagstick, right against a wall? Surely that’s not fair! But that’s exactly what could happen on the 13th hole, Pit, at the seminal West Links at North Berwick in Scot-

land. The West Links, while not as famous as the Old Course at St. Andrews, is one of the most influential golf courses in the world. It gave us the Redan par-3 and many other design elements that architects continue to employ today. But the feature that stands out most is the small rock wall that runs throughout the course. Several times during the round, you must play over the wall, but on no shot does it come as much into play as at the par-4 13th. There, the green lies directly behind the wall, pinched between the stones and dunes. An approach that falls short or comes in too low might require a recovery shot over the wall. In today’s world, where pros routinely receive line-of-sight relief, such an obstruction would cause an uproar.

Finally, there’s the do-or-die shot, the most dreaded in the game. The par-3 17th at the Tournament Players Club at Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., measures only 130 yards, little more than a short iron or pitch shot for most, and the green is disproportionately large for such a small shot. No problem. That is, until you look up and see that large green surrounded entirely by water. The psychological intimidation factor—not the difficulty of the shot—transforms the 17th into one of the most treacherous and memorable holes in the world.

The pursuit of fairness carries an economic cost as well. The expense of over-the-top maintenance and landscaping practices, earthmoving and stretched-out routings find their way to the golfer in the form of higher green fees.

By dismissing your ideas of “fairness” and embracing the occasional quirk, challenge, bad break and chance for a spectacular recovery, you’ll better connect with the royal and ancient game and more thoroughly enjoy its best and most lasting gifts.

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