BY TOM FERRELL AND MARK FINE · PHOTO BY AIDAN BRADLEY

ON COURSE

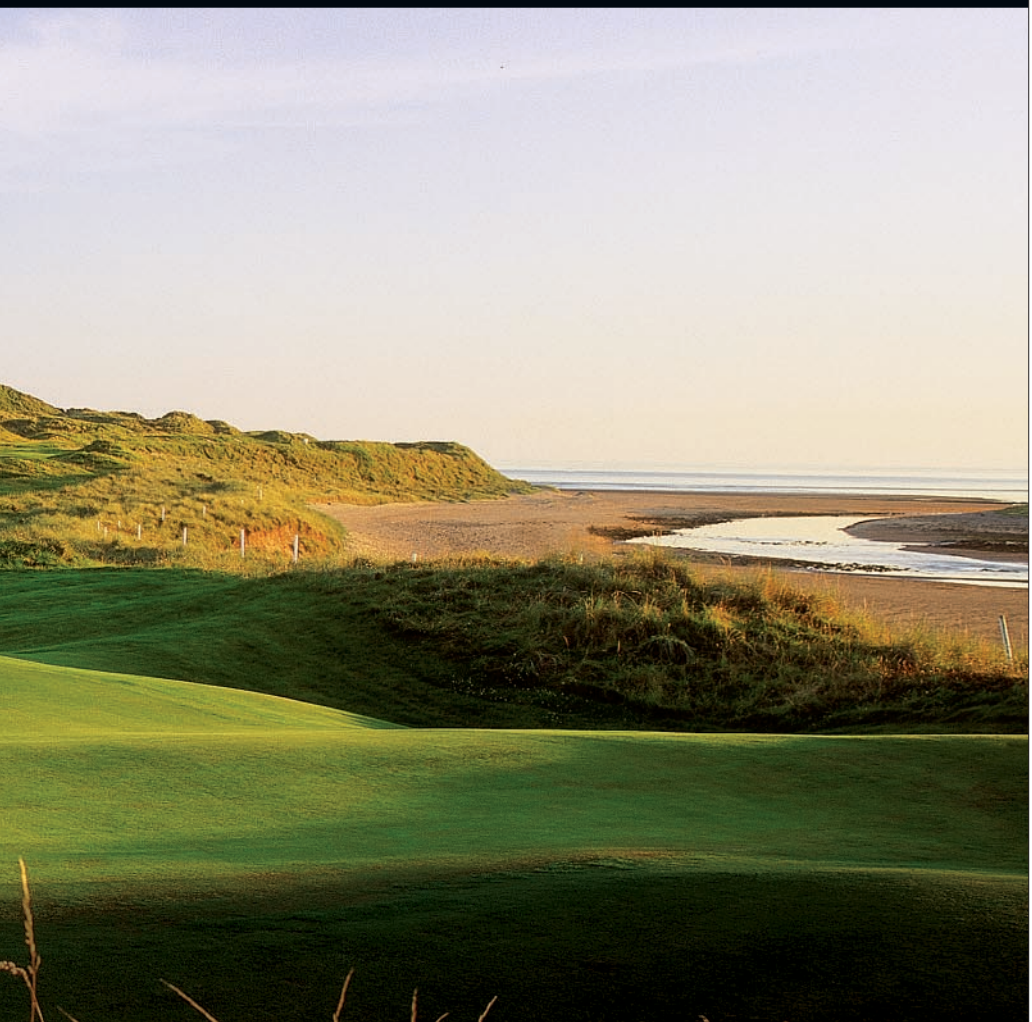
the simple truth ABOUT GREEN COMPLEXES

Your swing has finally come alive. You've bombed another drive down the pipe and are standing there with a 9-iron in your hand, licking your chops. You take a mighty lash, and your ball lands next to the hole, takes a quick hop and then spins as if on a string. As you admire your own skill, the ball keeps drawing back, past the hole and on, until your admiration turns to disgust as you watch it trickle backward over a tier in the green, picking up speed until it comes to rest 30 feet or more from the flagstick. How could such a perfect shot have gone so awry?

The fact is it wasn't a perfect shot at all. While basking in the glow of your power and the action of your approach, you neglected to consider the subtleties of the green complex. In this case, you believed that carrying the ball all the way to the top tier was the best way to get it close. Unfortunately, you neglected to think about the slope behind the hole that would send a well-struck short-iron shot rocketing backward. Don't feel bad. Nature and golf course architects have for centuries conspired to use green contours and surrounds to baffle golfers who fail to pay close enough attention—and to reward those who take the time to learn a little about their targets.

This is where a little knowledge of golf course architecture can go a long way. Most architects don't design a hole with the intent of making it as hard as possible. The very best ones provide a number of approach shot options, along with a few hints. Nowhere is it more important to be able to read those architectural road signs than at the green. The green contours and surrounds often hold keys that, if read properly, let the golfer use the land itself to help get the ball close to the hole. The design-conscious golfer recognizes the false fronts, the fall-offs, the multiple tiers and the feeding contours and uses them to great advantage. The clueless swinger ends up wondering how a shot that felt so good off the clubface turned out this way.

Watching the PGA Tour week after week, it's easy to be lulled into believing that golf is all about those high-flying aerial approaches, and certainly they have



After powering through nearly 600 yards of fairway on the par-5 12th at Lahinch in Ireland, the real excitement begins, where steep green contours dictate either birdie or bogey.

their place. But when major championship time comes around, when the venues go from soft and inviting to fast and firm, the top players inevitably rise to the top of the leaderboard. That's because they understand how to read the golf course, taking advantage of opportunity and avoiding the sucker pins where the dreams of lesser players feed off into impossible collection areas and hazards.

If you want to elevate your game you should begin to study green complexes and their influence on the strategy of the golf hole. Most golfers look at a hole and immediately begin taking inventory of hazards and other obstacles between the tee and green. If this is your usual plan, you've already rung the bell that makes golf course architects salivate. Instead, you need to think like an architect—start your strategy at the green complex and work backward.

Designers incorporate green contours and surrounding features to create problems, introduce deception and reward shot placement—in short, to make golf more interesting. Imagine playing every shot to a flat putting surface with nothing but a collar of fringe surrounding it! Design into the ground some roll and slope, and all of sudden you've added a new dimension of strategic complexity. Integrate a well-placed bunker, hillocks or hazards around the surface, and you have a true shotmaking challenge. Since the early days of golf, course architects expressed themselves through their putting surfaces and surrounds.

The most basic strategy architects can use is to offset the angle of the green. In the 2003 Nissan Open at the Riviera Country Club in Pacific Palisades, Calif., Mike Weir illustrated how position can ultimately defeat power by taking advantage of golf course architecture. Weir faced long-hitting Charles Howell III in a playoff that began at the short par-4 10th. When famed Golden Age architect George C. Thomas built the 10th, he designed a wide fairway, tempting aggressive players to blast it off the tee. To mitigate their power, however, he angled the green so that it runs from front left to back right. A power drive leaves a ticklish pitch to a shallow target that falls away from the golfer. Howell took the bait. Weir, however, played a composed 5-iron to the left side of the fairway, leaving himself an easy wedge shot with the entire length of the green to work with. He then executed perfectly, made birdie and won the tournament. The moral of the story? Pay attention to the fairway position that provides the most favorable angle of approach. Sometimes that angle eliminates a front bunker or other danger.

Slope is another feature that architects often integrate into greensites. There's more to slope than the common back-to-front sloping green. Have you ever seen a Tour pro hit an iron shot toward a green and command it to spin in a certain direction? "Spin left, now!" Before you throw your hands up in disgust at the precise ball control such an order suggests, you should realize that he's most likely playing the slope of the putting surface, landing the ball above the hole so that it will spin into position below it. The 10th at Cherry Hills Country Club, the venerable William Flynn layout in Denver that hosted the 2005 U.S. Women's Open, is a perfect example. The entire length of the hole runs along a hillside that slopes from right to left. The green falls off sharply to the left. In order to leave an uphill putt, the approach must land on the right side of the green—avoiding a menacing bunker short and right—and feed down to the left. Flynn was a master of integrating slopes into his greensites. At Lehigh Country Club in Allentown, Penn., Flynn created one of golf's greatest "fall-away" greens at the par-4 10th. The approach shot plays downhill to a shallow green that actually runs away from the golfer. Attempting the "fly-and-stick" strategy is a sure way to bogey or worse.

Swales and humps are some of the oldest challenges in golf, and variations of them remain in use today, though often in more subtle forms. C.B. Macdonald and his partner Seth Raynor borrowed the "Biarritz" design from France. Such a green features a deep swale dividing the green into front and back portions. The swale is often five to six feet deep. You may find such a feature frustrating, but you won't find it boring. Then there's the famous but little-understood "Redan" design, which incorporates green angle, surrounds and slope. In a classic Redan, the green is set at a front-right to back-left angle, with a deep bunker fronting the left side. The green runs up to a spine and then falls away so that the desired shot is a draw that runs to the top of the spine and then feeds to the hole. There are literally thousands of Redan par-3s in golf simply because it's so exciting to pull off the shot.

Architects will use the size of the green to affect the psychology of the golfer. Sometimes they will place a small green where the golfer would expect a larger one. Study the surrounds and see if they have left an out, where an easy recovery is possible. Likewise, view a seemingly large green with caution. What are the features that might lead to three-putts if you hit the "wrong" side of the green? In the end, there's a lot more to a good approach than simply finding the putting surface.

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