

ONCOURSE

beware the short par-4

MERION GC (ARDMORE, PENN.)—NO. 10, 310-YARD PAR-4

Despite equipment advances, many of golf's grand stages still present a hefty challenge. Sure, some of them have had so many nips, tucks and reconstructive surgeries that they hardly resemble their former selves. But others, like Merion Golf Club's East Course, where Bobby Jones completed his Grand Slam in 1930, have resisted the urge to reinvent in this technological age. The course that will host the U.S. Amateur this August looks much the same as it did 75 years ago when Jones set a standard for amateur achievement that likely will never be challenged.

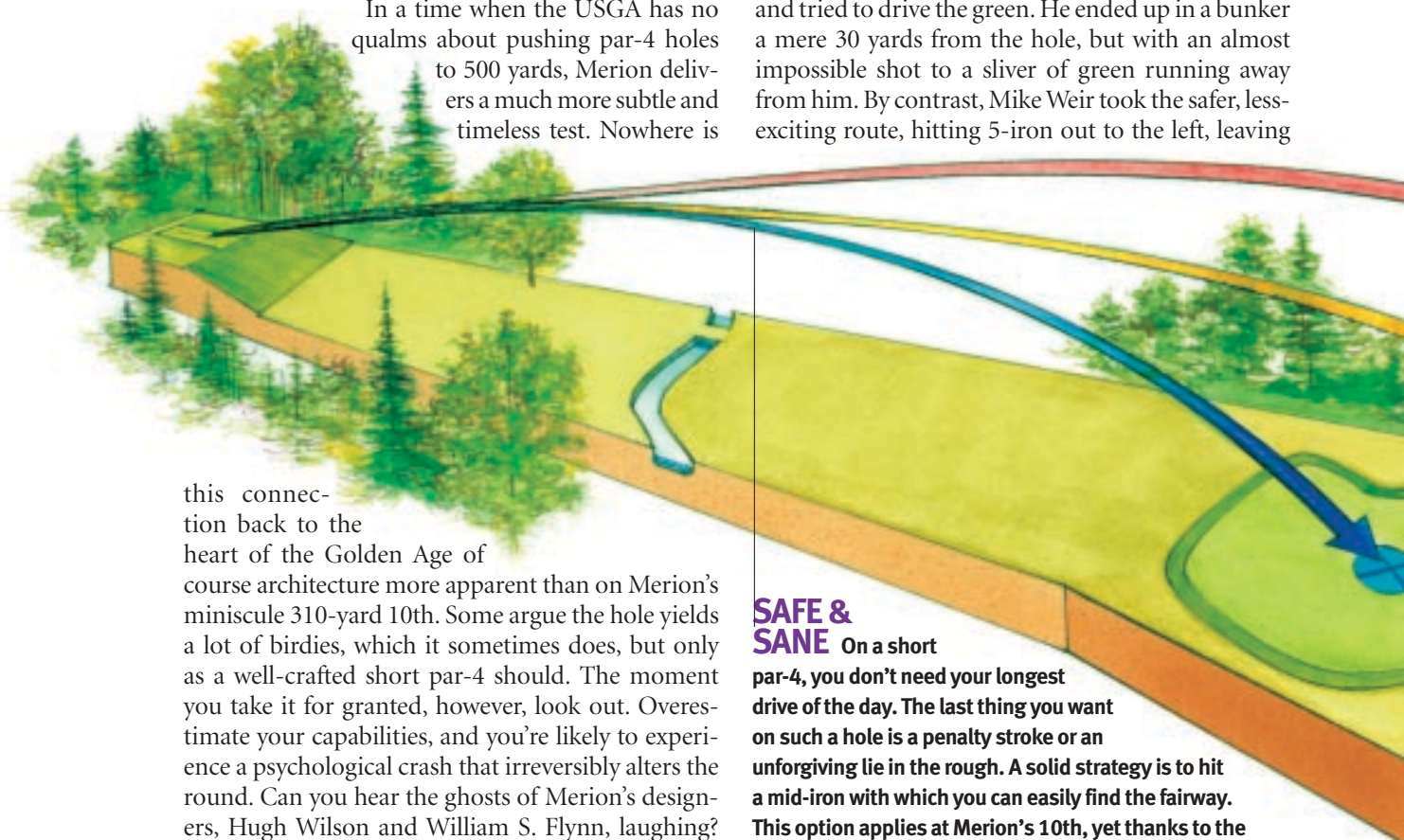
In a time when the USGA has no qualms about pushing par-4 holes to 500 yards, Merion delivers a much more subtle and timeless test. Nowhere is

from exacting strategic characteristics, more so than heroic driving distance demands. In fact, the 10th at Merion plays shorter today than it originally did, thanks to a redesign by Flynn in 1922.

George C. Thomas, a Philadelphia native and architect of the famed Riviera CC in Los Angeles, no doubt remembered the 10th at Merion when he designed the 10th at Riviera, a short par-4 that continues to vex the best players in the world. In a playoff for the '03 Nissan Open title, Charles Howell III succumbed to the temptation of Riviera's lack of length and tried to drive the green. He ended up in a bunker a mere 30 yards from the hole, but with an almost impossible shot to a sliver of green running away from him. By contrast, Mike Weir took the safer, less-exciting route, hitting 5-iron out to the left, leaving

this connection back to the heart of the Golden Age of course architecture more apparent than on Merion's minuscule 310-yard 10th. Some argue the hole yields a lot of birdies, which it sometimes does, but only as a well-crafted short par-4 should. The moment you take it for granted, however, look out. Overestimate your capabilities, and you're likely to experience a psychological crash that irreversibly alters the round. Can you hear the ghosts of Merion's designers, Hugh Wilson and William S. Flynn, laughing?

Ironically, it's par-4s like this one that have required the least amount of "Tiger-proofing" over the years. That's because their challenge always has come



SAFE & SANE On a short par-4, you don't need your longest drive of the day. The last thing you want on such a hole is a penalty stroke or an unforgiving lie in the rough. A solid strategy is to hit a mid-iron with which you can easily find the fairway. This option applies at Merion's 10th, yet thanks to the genius of its design, the safest play off the tee also leaves the most difficult shot into the green, due to an obstructed view and menacing front bunker.

As a design enthusiast who loved the strategic nuances of golf course architecture, it was appropriate that Bobby Jones completed his Grand Slam of 1930 at Merion's East Course, a venue rife with subtle, yet sophisticated, challenges. The short, par-4 10th epitomizes Merion's unique defense, mandating the correct shot selection rather than sheer distance. Jones double-bogeyed 10 before closing out the Slam on the next hole. Photo by Bettman/CORBIS

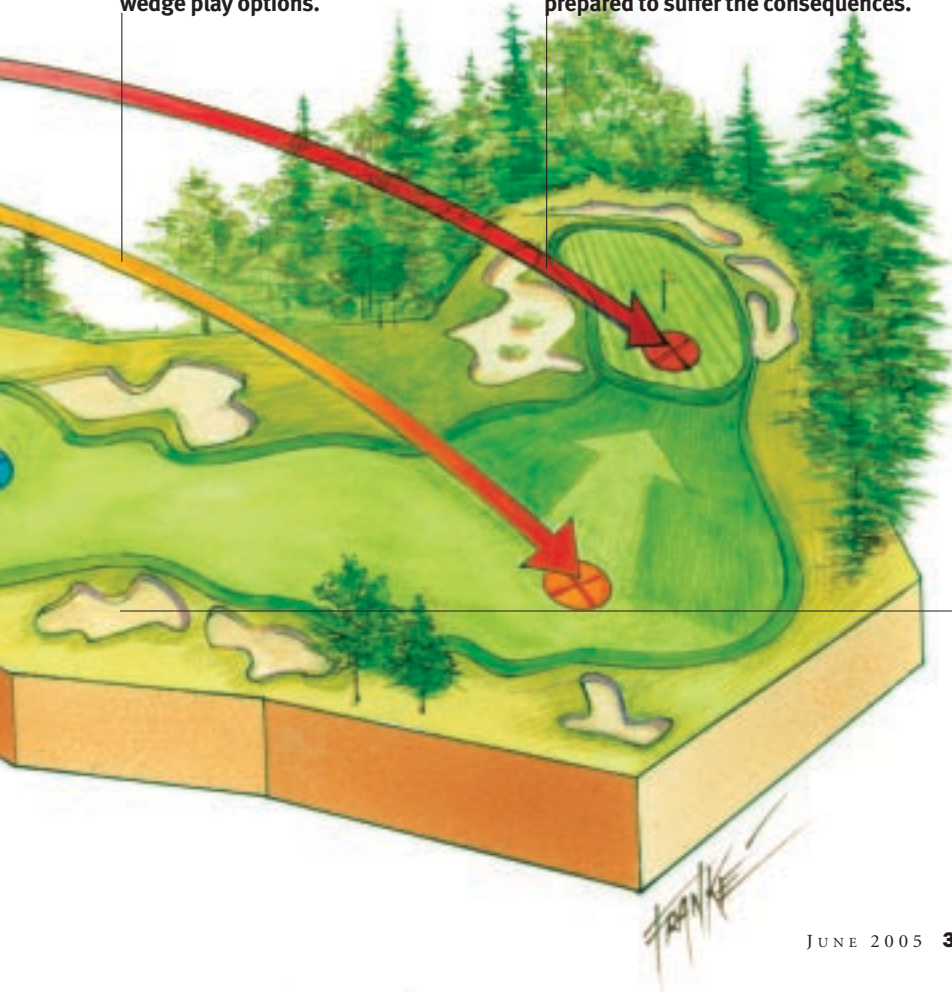


POSITION "A"

Combining distance and accuracy in the form of long iron, hybrid club or fairway wood is the ideal strategy for playing a short par-4. These clubs are easier to control than the driver and, obviously, provide more distance than mid-irons without significantly more risk. At this year's U.S. Amateur, this likely will be the shot du jour at Merion's 10th since it provides an unencumbered shot into the green (unless the tee shot is hooked or sliced). The green runs on a diagonal, opening up to tee shots hit into position "A" and accepting a variety of wedge play options.

GO FOR IT!

Like many short par-4s, notably the 10th at Riviera Country Club in Los Angeles, the 10th at Merion is a pure ego-teaser, beckoning players to try and drive the green and have a chance at eagle. The 310-yard distance isn't out of range for better players, but unfortunately, what is in range is treacherous fescue if the drive errs left or right and—gasp!—out of bounds behind the green if the shot comes in too hot. Deep bunkers front and back of the green also present a very real danger, so those who go for it must be prepared to suffer the consequences.



him a clear second shot into the full depth of green. Weir calmly birdied the hole and won the tournament.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

The 10th at Merion sweeps off to the left to a green running diagonally from front right to back left. A slightly elevated tee gives the big hitter a feeling of power and dominance over this little hole. The urge to take a chance at driving the green, particularly if the hole is cut in the front right, is hard to overcome. But if the ball comes in too hot, it will find one of the back bunkers or, worse, run between them and out of bounds. “If you’ve ever wondered about the difference between a tee shot and a drive,” says Graham Dendler, assistant professional at Merion Golf Club, “this hole will make you understand it.”

Most golfers will opt for a safer play off the tee, and herein another decision looms. The angle of the green means that a tee shot played to the deep right side of the fairway leaves a much easier second. From there, the depth of the green opens up to a variety of approaches—a lob, pitch or run-up. Let the drive drift too far right, however, and it could find one of the bunkers that guard the right side, leaving an awkward sand shot. Attempting to shape a draw to match the line of the fairway is a good idea, but an overdone hook will find deep fescue short of the front left bunker. From that long grass, controlling a pitch is nearly impossible to the narrow green, meaning that front and rear bunkers come into play.

The temptation and risk-reward equation of this simple yet complex little hole should be coming clearer now. A good, aggressive drive leaves a clear look at the green and an open approach. The safest route from the tee is a mid- to long iron into the widest part of the fairway, but it leaves a tough angle of approach that demands both perfect distance control and spin. Only the best of wedge players can afford to take this option.

If you still need convincing that the 10th at Merion is a world-class golf hole despite its lack of brawn, consider that Jack Nicklaus, in his prime at the U.S. Open in 1971, would have won the tournament outright but for two bogeys at the short 10th.

CHECK YOUR EGO

The trick to playing a wily short 4—whether at Merion in a national championship or at your home course—is to study the hole from the green back to the tee. The hole location and weather conditions dictate strategy on a day-by-day basis. Start by assessing the hole location and identifying the best two target areas from which to access the pin. Then factor in the wind and weather conditions and make your decision.

Above all, don’t fall for the architect’s most subtle trap—a large ego. There’s a reason that Flynn set it up the way he did: He wanted the golfer to believe he or she could take a breather. Short hole, no problem. But Flynn, like all great golf course designers, knew that the most dangerous attitude a golfer can adopt is complacency or a false sense of security. By tempting the better player with the possibility of an easy birdie, Flynn subtly tightens the screws and adds some pressure to the mix. His design forces the player to hit shots that pressure can make very difficult.

“The 10th is a great hole anytime,” says Dendler, “but it’s a fantastic match-play hole. That’s what will be so fun to watch this summer during the Amateur. You’ve got to expect that your opponent is going to make a birdie and maybe even an outside chance at a two. So you press a little bit. If you make a bad decision or a bad swing, you’ve got trouble, and the hole can be lost in a heartbeat.”

■ **Tom Ferrell** is an award-winning golf writer based in Denver, Colo. **Mark Fine** is president of Fine Golf Design in Allentown, Penn., and is a recognized speaker and scholar of classic golf course architecture.