

ON COURSE

WIDE OPEN: a new angle on width

This month, the world's most ancient golf event, The Open Championship, returns to the world's most ancient venue, The Old Course at St. Andrews. No golf course has been so thoroughly tested by golf's elite over the years as The Old Course. But in an era when most courses routinely go under the knife in preparation for major championships—sometimes for changes so drastic that they hardly resemble their original designs—the stewards at the Royal and Ancient Golf Club have never felt compelled to “Tiger-proof” St. Andrews. Championship officials have never concerned themselves with reducing the fairways to slivers of safety in order to protect par on golf's most hallowed ground. Yes, some of the holes have been lengthened, and many still play shorter, thanks to modern technology, but they haven't necessarily become easier.

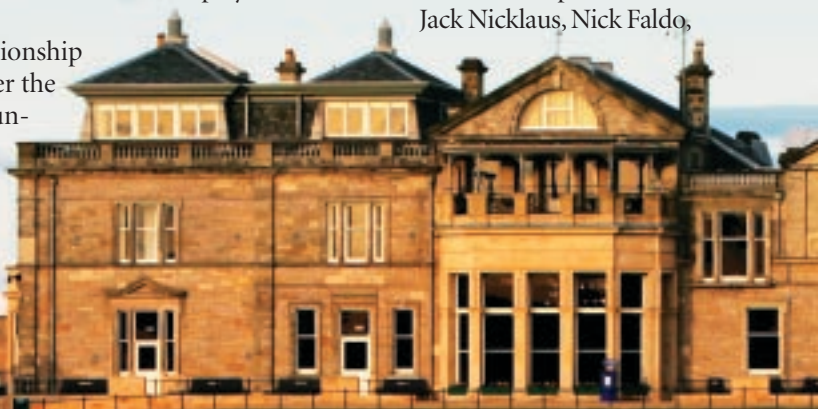
It's almost a rite of passage for a championship golfer to arrive at St. Andrews, look out over the fabled fairways and pronounce himself underwhelmed. After all, there are no dramatic elevation changes, no picturesque seaside holes, no towering dunes flanking the fairways. And, of course, it's wide open, with little obvious trouble. As generations

of golfers have discovered, however, there's much more to The Old Course than meets the eye.

On the first tee at The Old Course, the golfer looks out at the widest fairway in the world. Rather than feeling comforted, however, the golfer is unsure. In such a sea of possibilities, what's the best line of play to choose? This tee shot foreshadows all the decisions—and indecision—to come during the round. The width of St. Andrews is a key to its mystery and lasting interest. Width creates an infinite number of playing angles based on hazard position, hole locations, weather and turf conditions. The preferred angle of play changes daily according to those physical factors and, perhaps most important of all, the golfer's confidence level. There is no “right” way to play the course, as its list of champions attests.

Jack Nicklaus, Nick Faldo,

Sitting side by side, the 1st and 18th fairways of The Old Course at St. Andrews are as wide as the grounds are hallowed. As an astute golfer, never make the assumption that width equates ease. Rather, it elicits creativity and selection as well as plenty of room for misguided judgment. Compare that to the razor-thin fairways associated with U.S. Open setups, which mandate but a single option from the tee, completely negating expression and shotmaking skill.



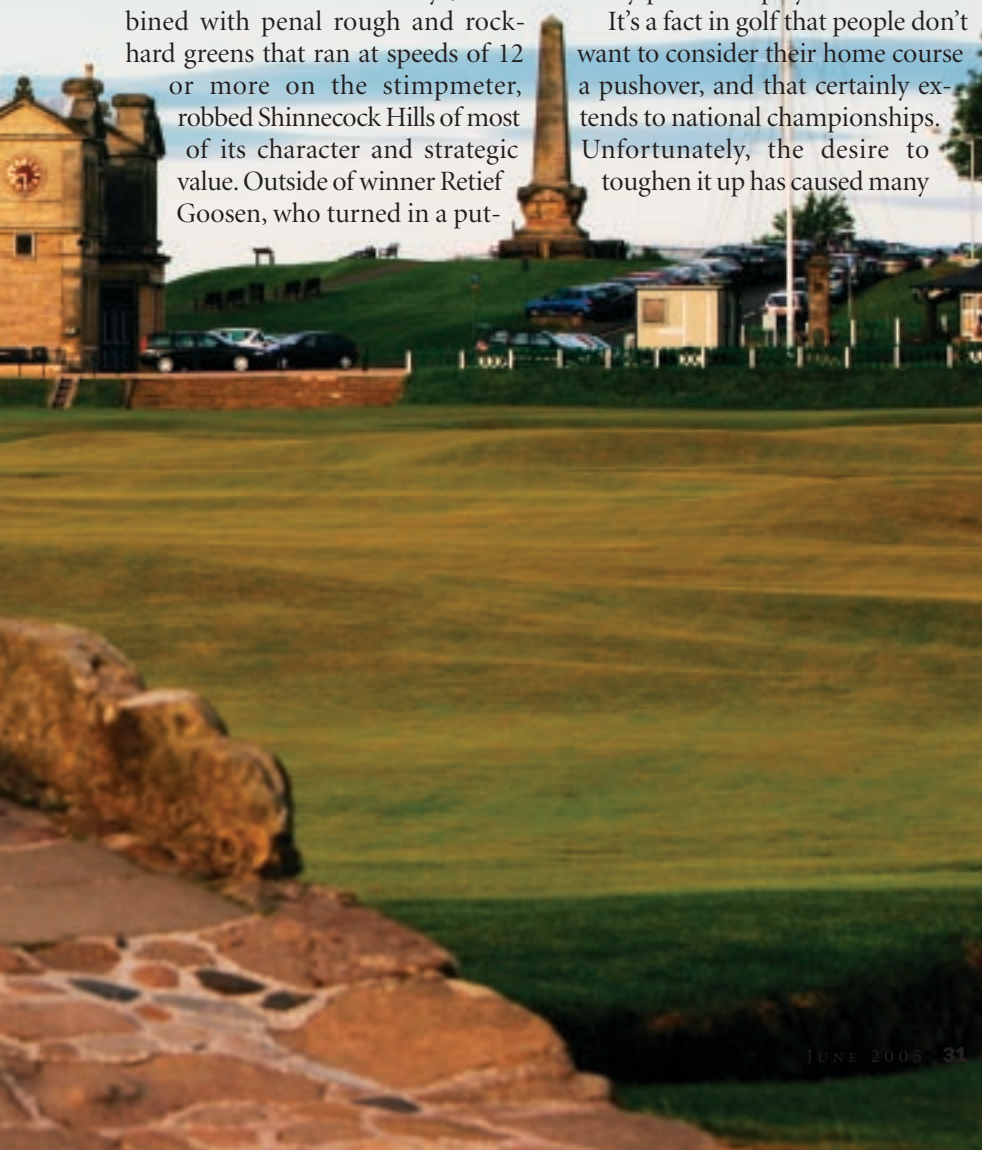
Tiger Woods, Seve Ballesteros and John Daly have little in common physically or in their approach to the game, yet all have triumphed at St. Andrews.

In stark contrast to this free-for-all spirit of creativity is the “penal” school of golf course design and setup. In our own national championship, the USGA sometimes takes penal course setup to extremes in its efforts to protect par from the onslaught of souped-up golf balls and clubs. The first thing to go is fairway width. Last year at Shinnecock Hills, the USGA narrowed fairways from an average width of 45 to 60 yards to as little as 24 yards. In firm, fast conditions, some fairways were virtually impossible to hold. Those narrow fairways, combined with penal rough and rock-hard greens that ran at speeds of 12 or more on the stimpmeter, robbed Shinnecock Hills of most of its character and strategic value. Outside of winner Retief Goosen, who turned in a put-

ting performance for the ages, hardly a player in the field had kind words for one of America’s most revered and timeless tests.

The USGA argues that such setups are necessary in order to identify the most complete player. But, really, how complete does a golfer have to be to simply club down to an iron in order to hit a sliver of fairway, keep the ball below the hole on the approach and refrain from taking any risks or attempting any kind of alternative shot? Over-emphasizing the penal factors of the game inhibits creativity and produces a less-exciting championship, often won not by the best, but simply the most cautious and technically proficient player.

It’s a fact in golf that people don’t want to consider their home course a pushover, and that certainly extends to national championships. Unfortunately, the desire to toughen it up has caused many



courses to lose much of their original character. Fairway width plays a big part of that character.

Skilled golf course architects try not to dictate the method of play. Pete Dye, well known for creating courses that have withstood the onslaught from the very best golfers in the game, has said that the best way to torment good players is to “get them thinking.” That means relying on strategic, risk-reward hazards and angles that tempt golfers into playing toward the edges of the golf course. The same golfer who will consciously avoid thick rough down the right side on a narrow fairway by dropping down to an iron easily can be tempted to play close to the rough or another strategic hazard with a driver if it provides an obvious strategic reward—a much shorter shot or a better sight line or preferred angle of attack. Narrow fairways place a premium on “down the middle,” but that’s not always the best place to be.

One of the most strategic holes in golf is the par-5 14th at The Old Course. At this year’s Open Championship, golf fans will see for themselves the beauty of adequate width. The hole supports multiple strategies and routes, rewarding good choices and serving up plenty of trouble to golfers who misjudge the wind, the lay of the land or their own capabilities. Here, the concept of risk and reward is clear, starting with the tee shot. In order to reach the flat plateau of the “Elysian Fields,” which provides a great chance of getting home in two, golfers have to risk a severe penalty—out of bounds down the right side. The safer left side brings into play an ancient series of bunkers known as “The Beardies.” Choosing that safe route also means that golfers will have to negotiate the notorious “Hell Bunker” on their second shot.

The great golf course architect Alister MacKenzie once observed a foursome playing the 14th at St. Andrews and noted to himself that each of the four had chosen a different strategy

for playing the hole and, furthermore, that “each was likely correct in selecting the route he chose.” Is there a better case for the value of fairway width than that?

When a fairway is sufficiently wide, it maximizes the number of playing angles available on approach shots, raising the value of well-positioned greenside hazards. The 17th at The Old Course—the famous “Road Hole”—again tempts the golfer to drive as far right as possible. The aggressive route is a blind shot over the corner of The Old Course Hotel. A ball positioned far to the right, close to the out-of-bounds line, offers the best angle of approach and minimizes the chances of finding the legendary “Road Bunker.” A more conservative drive down the left side of the fairway means that golfers will have to deal with the Road Bunker on their second shot if they intend to reach the green safely in two. The width and strategic nature of the hole provides a third option for the lesser player—a drive to the left, a lay-up to the right and a straightforward pitch. These options exemplify what MacKenzie called the “spirit of St. Andrews.”

It’s true that not every golf course embodies the strategic ideal. But golfers who see a wide fairway and fail to study the hole to determine the various risks, rewards and temptations presented by the course designer are depriving themselves of one of the game’s true joys. Interested golfers will sample the various routes and alter strategies as conditions change—and they’ll keep coming back. In the end, it’s easy to make a golf course difficult. But as St. Andrews and many of golf’s greatest venues continue to illustrate, a design that at first glance appears wide open often is right on target.

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