

ONCOURSE

TREE TIMES: architects and arborists

When contestants gather at Baltusrol Golf Club's Lower Course for this month's PGA Championship, they'll notice a few new changes. Architect Rees Jones has made use of A.W. Tillinghast's brilliant, "flexible" design at Baltusrol to add some length, redefine fairways and reposition bunkers. But the most significant change may also be one of the most inconspicuous—the removal of approximately 500 trees. On a visceral level, it's tough not to wince at the sound of a chain saw biting into a stately tree trunk bordering a favorite hole, and many of Baltusrol's members did just that when the tree management program began in the late 1990s. After all, they know those trees. They've watched them grow.

To golf course architects and superintendents, however, trees represent something far different. First and foremost, a burgeoning tree population wreaks havoc on course conditioning. Grass thrives in sunlight. When those leafy giants begin to block the sun from high-traffic areas such as green sites and tee boxes, bare spots begin to appear. The incidence of turf disease rises. Architecturally, uncontrolled tree growth restricts playing corridors, impedes shot-making, devalues strategic options and interferes with the aesthetics of the course.

"You can really stir up a hornet's nest—literally and figuratively—when you start taking down trees," says John Chassard, superintendent at Lehigh Country Club in Allentown, Pa., designed in 1928 by Golden Age architect William S. Flynn. "I think part of it is the gradual growth. People don't notice it day in and day out, but soon enough, you end up with agronomic and playability issues."

The early courses of Scotland and Ireland ran over the linksland dunes adjacent to the sea. The sandy soil proved to be perfect for growing turf, but most linksland sites contained few, if any, trees at all. In their efforts to replicate the look and feel of those links on American shores, early architects sought open shoreline and meadows for their courses.

C.B. Macdonald, the father of golf course architecture in America, wrote that "trees in the course are a serious defect...no course can be ideal which is laid out through trees."

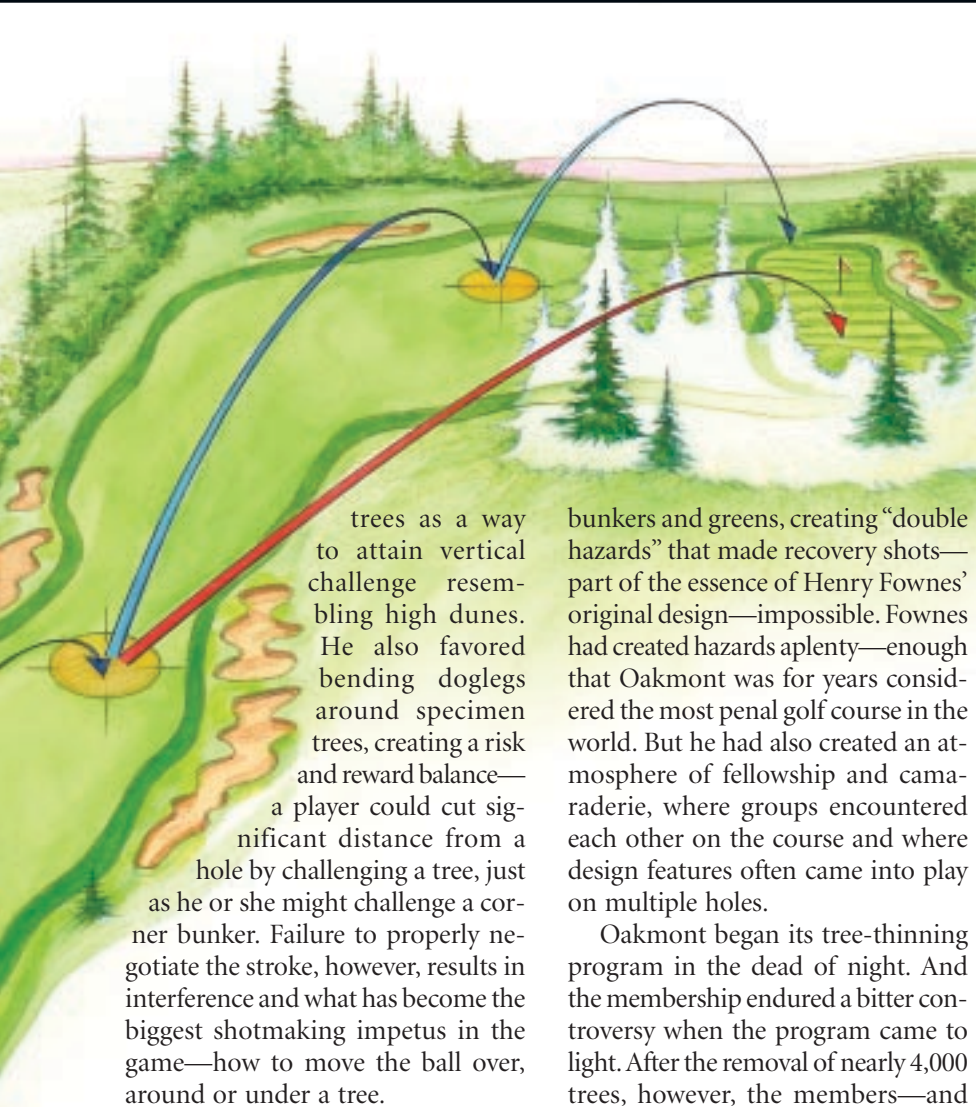
Macdonald's thinking was rooted in the belief that ground hazards, topography and wind provided the strategic test and course defenses. But as the game grew in popularity, both in Great Britain and the U.S., trees became an inevitable part of the golf course.

Donald Ross, who designed more than 400 courses, foresaw the dilemma when he noted that "as beautiful as trees are, and as fond as you and I are of them, we must not allow our sentiments to crowd out the real intent of a golf course."

The great architects of the Golden Age soon came to view trees as strategic elements in their own right. Alister Mackenzie in particular viewed the height of

A large stand of trees can negatively affect golfer safety and green health, as well as limit risk-reward golf, while a single tree in its place opens up a wealth of options. Truly, less is more.





trees as a way to attain vertical challenge resembling high dunes. He also favored bending doglegs around specimen trees, creating a risk and reward balance—a player could cut significant distance from a hole by challenging a tree, just as he or she might challenge a corner bunker. Failure to properly negotiate the stroke, however, results in interference and what has become the biggest shotmaking impetus in the game—how to move the ball over, around or under a tree.

So, why cut 'em down?

• **Restore Design Intent.** Fabled Oakmont Country Club outside of Pittsburgh didn't intend to become the poster child for tree removal in American golf. The club has hosted seven U.S. Open championships and is revered as one of the most influential designs in the history of golf course architecture. But by the mid-1990s, the encroachment of thousands of trees had robbed Oakmont of some of its most prominent features. Head professional Bob Ford knew that something had to give. Trees had sprung up between fairway

bunkers and greens, creating “double hazards” that made recovery shots—part of the essence of Henry Fownes' original design—impossible. Fownes had created hazards aplenty—enough that Oakmont was for years considered the most penal golf course in the world. But he had also created an atmosphere of fellowship and camaraderie, where groups encountered each other on the course and where design features often came into play on multiple holes.

Oakmont began its tree-thinning program in the dead of night. And the membership endured a bitter controversy when the program came to light. After the removal of nearly 4,000 trees, however, the members—and the elite golfers who compete in championships on one of America's greatest stages—can experience for themselves the challenge and vision of Henry Fownes.

• **Safety.** “There's this quirk about trees,” Lehigh superintendent Chas-sard notes with a smile, “they grow.” Often, trees create blind areas on golf courses which, in turn, create safety hazards by obscuring groups ahead or on adjacent holes. Furthermore, groves of mature trees introduce a ricochet factor that, while humorous to imagine, is far from funny in a real world of injuries and liability.

• **Agronomics.** Unfortunately, trees compete directly with turf. They steal moisture and shade areas that need sunlight. Good architects make sure that any trees specified in design plans are located far enough from high-traffic areas to provide adequate sunlight for turf growth.

Mark Kuhns, director of grounds at Baltusrol Golf Club, prefers to refer to tree “management” rather than removal. Having come to Baltusrol from Oakmont, he knew that some of the members were concerned about the trees on the property.

“Oh, yeah,” he laughs, “I actually heard myself referred to as ‘the butcher

Club in Hilton Head, S.C., where Pete Dye and Jack Nicklaus carved a golf course out of the scrub oaks that thrive on the barrier island’s sandy soils. With lagoons, thick woods and tidal basins factoring into the course layout, Dye understood that length wouldn’t be part of Harbor Town’s test—it measures just over 6,800 yards from the tips. Yet year after year, the winning score at the MCI Heritage Classic is among the highest on the PGA Tour. That’s because Dye worked those trees into the actual design of the course, using them as “bunkers in the sky.” A misplaced tee shot means that the golfer has to alter the trajec-

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—Donald Ross

of Oakmont’ on some occasions. But what we did here was prioritize tree management on a scientific level. We eliminated only those trees that were affecting the turf or had come to grossly affect playability. On the 12th hole at the Upper Course, for instance, we had to remove 30 trees. Some of them had grown all the way over the putting surface, and we had chronic problems with the green. When we started taking them out, a lot of members got upset. Today, those same members come up and say, ‘You were right. This is the best this green has ever been.’”

To the extent that a property’s tree population is part of its character, trees certainly have a place on the golf course. Consider Harbor Town Golf

tory or shape of his approach, making Harbor Town stands an excellent example of well-planned tree usage.

So the next time you see a grounds crew firing up the chain saws and rolling the chipper down the fairway—or when you hear a grounds committee member arguing to keep a certain tree—consider the project from a golf point of view. Most architects and superintendents love trees as much as any kid who ever climbed one, but when it comes to trees and golf, less really can be more.

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