

The Arena

While it is true that golf is, in the main, a solitary endeavour played out in relative isolation, there comes a time in every golfer's life when they find themselves 'on-show'. For some it may be unwittingly, for instance when the friendly Sunday morning match has arrived at a situation where a missed putt is check-mate. For others it is totally to be expected, such as on the final holes of the Club Championships, or New Zealand Open. To best capture and amplify the spectacle of these golfing crescendos – for both players and viewers alike – requires the careful design of what are 'golfing arenas'.

It is almost certain the first great arena in golf was the 18th green on the Home Hole at St Andrews. Down on the edge of the historic town, and adjacent to the clubhouse of the Royal & Ancient Golf Club, golfers and townsfolk would gather, and Old Tom Morris would come out from his shop and hold the flag for big matches between the likes of Willie Park, Kirkaldy or the new Captain of the R&A.

While this is still a great arena, others can be easily recalled. The drama of the par 3, 17th hole at TPC Sawgrass, where thousands annually watch the best players nervously hit 8 irons to the island green in the Players Championship. Or the Par 3 12th over Rae's creek at Augusta National where again wind, water and pressure combine to intimidate those vying for the green jacket. Or even the Par 4, 460 yard Road Hole on the Old Course at St Andrews where players hit over the old railway shed before dicing with the tiny greenside bunker and the road behind the green in search of often illusive pars and birdies. These holes harness the drama of critical golfing moments.

So what makes an arena? The important characteristics of the great arenas are visibility, challenge, opportunity and placement. A green should be able to be seen from the landing area and from the spectator vantage points (e.g. the Clubhouse). It should have hazards to be avoided and challenges to be overcome. And it should reward good play and good decisions with the opportunity for good scores.

The positioning of the golfing arenas is important. In a good finishing sequence, the last four should include a par 3, 4 and 5. Perhaps ideally 2 par 4's; one long and the other short – almost drivable. This will provide an opportunity to test all a player's skills, while providing them strategic decisions and birdie chances.

Within the finishing sequence, the positioning of the golfing arena depends somewhat on the terrain of the land. It is almost always ideal however that the last hole, and final green, be the ultimate focal point. Due to its common positioning outside the clubhouse, places to view the happenings on green should be designed. Strategically, the 18th green needs to be either tempting or testing. If say it is a shortish Par 5, it may tempt players to hit the green in two, but the punishment for missing must be severe. Par fours should be almost drivable, or require two good shots, and a Par 3 should be dramatic.

Great finishing holes have an important but less measurable impact also. Players on a good score, or in a tight match will be aware of the threat a great finishing hole presents. Not only can they provoke fear, a tough finishing arena can cause players to push too hard on preceding holes and result in undesirable scoring. This mental pressure further elevates the desire of a strong finishing arena.

A golfing arena Greg Turner and I have been privileged to design in 2006 was the recently opened 18th hole at Russley Golf Club in Christchurch. The brief was to design and build a new green that engaged with their wonderful clubhouse. To achieve their brief, we designed a push-up style green with a subtly sloping putting surface that was low enough to be seen from the Clubhouse, but high enough that it shed offline shots away. And with two bunkers protecting the green, the hole is designed to reward accuracy. It was our intention to make the green interesting and aesthetic, and importantly, make the green complex the focal point of the finishing experience. With no water surrounding the green, it's a space efficient, low maintenance, access friendly turf stage, and something of which we are proud.



There are hazards in designing good golfing tests around a clubhouse – and safety is the greatest. In order to feel connected, a green or tee must be close enough that the action can be seen, but not so close that people are in constant danger. There are no strict rules to the width of these safety buffers, so decisions are made depending of the angle of approach, elevations, prevailing wind directions etc. Additionally, to prevent the bouncing or running ball hitting the clubhouse, slopes or bunkers that slow or stop particularly the aerial ball are incorporated into the design.

Golf requires great arenas. It needs top quality turf stages where the playing out of dramatic golfing showdowns is heightened for players and spectators. The best place for these arenas is most often on the last hole where the finality of a golfing challenge is commonly decided and, as a result, can be witnessed. As Shakespeare wrote, 'All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players...'