



Long Grass as a hazard.

Why is it that we have developed what seems to be an obsession with long grass? Now don't get me wrong, long grass can come in quite handy, but only if you're either in the business of growing cattle or encouraging insects and birds. As far as golf is concerned, it is the bane of the so-called modern game.

Today it goes under the name of "the long rough" and is generally accepted as a legitimate hazard. Of course this was never really intended to be the case, indeed with most courses developing either by the sea or on the acidic soils of the heathland, the dwarf grasses that proliferated were unable to grow either long or lush. Course designers in those days were forced into that long forgotten tradition of using guile to create difficulty on the course. The idea was to lure the either unskilful or tactically naïve player out of position thereby creating increasingly difficult circumstances for recovery. This requires real tactical appreciation and subtlety, neither of which qualities seem to be present in abundance on many of today's courses. The long grass flanking the fairway approach, on the other hand, is golf for dunces.

There have been a couple of reasons for the increasing incorporation of rough as a playing hazard. With many of our newer courses being built on farm land, on those soils most proficient in growing nice lush juicy pasture, the type of grasses that proliferate are of the broader leafed variety. These grasses, if just left alone, quickly develop into the kind you dare not lay your bag down in for fear of never finding it again.

The other main culprit has been our western cousins, those from the land of the free and the home of the brave. The American psyche seems particularly suited to the type of punitive punishment that long rough would, on the surface at least, appear to provide. The idea that if thou should err off the straight and narrow thou shalt be punished is like caviar to the American

palate. Perhaps it's their puritan ancestry that is at the root of it, but any society that still thinks state sanctioned murder an appropriate deterrent and believes the right to carry a gun makes you safer just loves the idea that if you hit your golf ball somewhere you shouldn't it ought to be buried knee deep in impregnable foliage. Nothing terribly subtle about this approach, but then again subtlety is another most un-American trait.

The other good reason for growing long grass is that, if you happen to have a course with little character or definition, by cutting grass at different levels you create some of that missing definition. And it sure looks real pretty to the eye all those Wembleyesk stripes and different shades of green!

The problem is there are a number of glaring flaws with this flow of logic. Firstly, the game is actually supposed to be fun! Now I don't know about you but for my money the only thing I can think of that's less enjoyable than searching for someone else's ball in the long hay is searching for your own! Then if you do find it, the sidewise hack is about as much fun as a jellyfish in your wet suit. Secondly, if there is one single greatest leveler in the game, it is the same long grass. I've found, through much personal experience, that I am just as proficient as Colin Montgomerie is at the 20-yard slash with a lob wedge back to the fairway. Ah, but Monty doesn't get into the stuff as often as you, I hear you say. True, but when he does he usually suffers the added difficulty of being close to the fairway and that is where the rough is generally at it's worst. This quirk occurs due to the combination of the proximity of the watering system, spill over of fairway fertilizers and that the gallery ropes (for those watching Monty rather than me of course) tend to be well into the rough. Let's face it. If you took the philosophy behind long grass to it's conclusion, we would end up with 30-yard wide fairways flanked by lines. Having strayed outside these lines a mandatory drop within them, equidistant to the hole, for a one shot penalty would result. Totally equitable and every bit as ludicrously un-golf like as long grass is! The ability to escape from trouble is intrinsic to the game.

Now here lies the real gist of the problem. The idea should be that the better the shot, the greater the reward, rather than the

worse the shot the greater the penalty. The catch with implementing this philosophy is that you require a course that has been thoughtfully designed. Dr Alister McKenzie was one designer who was a master at defining this strategy in his work. His basic philosophy involved placing various hazards, usually bunkers and sandy wasteland, on the direct line to the green and then angling the green in such a way so that the further your tee shot finished from the ideal position, the more difficult your approach shot would be. By doing this he insured that the test would be as cerebral as it was physical and that there would be plenty of room for those of all skill levels to enjoy the game. Essentially this meant that any hazard placed well away from the desired line of play was creating a double penalty. Put simply, anyone who had executed their shot so poorly was deserving of sympathy rather than further ignominy.

The bottom line is that if a course needs to be flanked by great swathes of long grass for it to be sufficiently testing, it's probably not much of a course at all. The game will ultimately become more enjoyable due to improvements in design rather than agronomy.