

Finish with a Flourish

In the process of designing and building a golf course, there are many activities that contribute to the realisation of a high quality product. The routing, placement of hazards, use of materials, and the selection and supervision of Contractors are some key decisions. But in the physical act of golf course construction, one activity that has a major input on the outcome of the final product is the finishing works. Failure to successfully finish the subtleties of the landforms, execute the final preparation of the seedbed, and fertilise and seed appropriately will either ensure a new design never reaches its best, or at least lengthen the time it takes.

Of course it takes the sequencing of a number of activities such as bulk earthworks, shaping, installation of drainage and irrigation before we get to the finishing works of the design, but during these processes I am always working hard to maintain the vision in my mind of how the feature, hole or course will look after completion. Doing this is somewhat of a learnt skill. What a feature looks like in subsoil or sand is different to how it will look once topsoiled and later seeded. Features soften when being finished for seeding, and it is important to keep shapes strong and angles more sharp than dull if they are to retain some character once completed. Grasses add a fourth dimension of texture to a 3-D design of a golf course. And visualising this during construction is just as important as the height, width and length of features.

The people responsible for finishing the golf course construction must understand the vision of the golf course architect. Tom Doak (Cape Kidnappers) has been a high profile architect in recent years who has again proven this. By staffing his jobs with a talented Project Manager and several able constructional personnel, and then visiting for 10 days at a time, he can set the design direction for his crew and then be confident it will be followed – if not improved.

Like Tom Doak, I am yet to find a better method of achieving the highest quality product than by staffing the job appropriately and then providing significant periods of on-site supervision. But to reinforce the design concept during construction, my methodology is to regularly share it with the construction team so all the team members feel empowered to make smaller instant decisions as they proceed with the works.

In being on site, the Architect can also rally the troops and ensure the project is meeting the vision prior to the commencement of the finishing works. Important decisions that need to be made may relate to the location of irrigation heads, the final approval of greens, tees and fairways prior to seeding, and seeding lines. The rallying call can often be 'use your eyes'. After a long summer in the field, it is natural that people can be getting tired. But

when the last seeding windows are approaching, the construction crew must be focused and alert. Time is at a premium, and the little decisions must be made by each member of the team. The decision may be to pull out a tree root, pick out some loose stones, remove or replace a drain or erosion fence, or rake around a sprinkler head or a bunker face prior to seeding. These are small things can be easily stepped over, but should be done.

In some ways, this is the making or breaking of the course. The routing may be excellent, but if the stones have not been removed from the topsoil, then golfers will go away only talking about the 'dink' they got in the bottom of their 6-iron from the fairway. All this is where people are better than machine. We generally use considerable amounts of heavy machinery to build a golf course (from box-scrapers to move the earth, to large bulldozers (D8-D4) for the shaping, to tractors for the removal of stones (if present) and seeding). However, it is ultimately the hand-work that 'makes' the final finish. Every time I am involved with the final preparation of a green, tee, fairway etc, it is strongly reinforced that no machine is better than a gang of people on rakes or spades. Smoothing out the small ruts, softening the edges of greens so the mower does scalp the ground, and picking out clumps of grass on slopes that the machine can't reach are some of the finishing touches that separate a good finish from a great finish.

The construction of a golf course is a dynamic operation, and can and occasionally be hectic. But while the main hurdle is often weather, changing personnel, shortages of materials, and breaking machinery can cause varying degrees of consternation. So organisation is fundamental to delivering a high quality product on time and on budget. An organised Project Manager will have jobs assigned to the various crews and enough equipment for them to complete the task. Depending on the task, two or three people can successfully finish a green efficiently, but a team of 10 people are far more productive when it comes to finishing a fairway.



A golf course that has been finished well looks better sooner and longer. There are very few sunken trenches, the separate areas are all tied in nicely, and the greenkeepers can mow all the areas smoothly and efficiently. Corners must not be cut. If the architect has a strong vision and it is understood by the construction team, the finishing works are the icing on a cake capable of giving pleasure to thousands of people over many years.