

## Greatness vs Gimmick

### **gim·mick (n)**

1. a piece of trickery or manipulation intended to achieve a result dishonestly
2. something such as a new device, mechanism, or ploy that attracts attention or publicity.

The golf course design industry is very competitive. On one level, Architects compete with each other for contracts to design courses in all climates, conditions and corners of the world. On another, course owners compete with each other for green fee players and new members. Publicity and profile are often perceived as the keys to achieving success. In this pursuit, one tactic has become unfortunately popular; the design of the golfing gimmick.

Times must change. With the golf industry experiencing a tightening of the belt, and America set to have more courses close in 2006 than open, never before has it been more important for golf course architects to practice their profession with integrity, intelligence and inspiration. Gone should be the gimmicks. To prevent a long-term decline in golf, great design and construction must prevail to produce robust courses on lean budgets. But will this happen? And when does a golf design or feature become a gimmick?

Differentiating between inspired designs and design gimmicks is not always easy. Some design features that were very good have been made gimmicky by time and the development of golf equipment. E.g., when the speed of greens was closer to 5 on the stimp meter, greater slopes were incorporated into putting surfaces to provide challenge and intrigue. However as maintenance equipment has improved and the speed of most greens moves closer to 10, these slopes are now too steep, and a ball will no longer come to rest. So what was a legitimate and interesting feature has is now become farcical.

It is often the presence, or absence, of strategy that determines if a feature is purposeful or not. The design, placement, shape and size of features determine the strategy. A good strategy will engage all golfers. Thoughtless designs or design strategies can easily engage only a select group of golfers, or in extreme cases, none.

Gimmicks come on different scales. Green designs with contour configurations that are too steep are one form, but bunkers in the middle of greens, excessive numbers of bunkers, extremely deep bunkers, holes with dog-legs greater than 90 degrees, crocodile enclosures, waterfalls and fountains are a few others. An 'interesting feature' becomes a gimmick when its scale impacts the playability or appearance of the hole so little else of the hole can be recalled. In other words, strategy is sacrificed for the sake of the feature.

Some good, and well intentioned features, can unwittingly become gimmicks. Bunkers, greens, mounds, landforms and lakes can easily get 'supersized' or deformed during the construction phase and what would have been notable become notorious. Avoiding this pitfall only comes by working with skilled architects or contractors who know how something built, and shaped in soil, will appear after it is grassed or filled with water.



**12<sup>th</sup> green at Doonbeg in Ireland, designed by G. Norman**

A great dilemma for the skilled architect is when to alter a routing, of the position of a tee, fairway or green for the sake of a view. There are frequent occasions where an architect will be looking to maximise the experience of the golf by providing the golfer with a look at the sea, down a valley, or at particularly glorious mountain vista. Often, however, the optimum position from which the view is experienced is not the same place that offers the best golfing strategy. Decisions must be made.

One of the great virtues of the industry is that there are few rules, and a design can take one of a thousand forms, so long as the golfer can get from point A to point B. Two courses that pushed the 'art' of golf design perhaps to its limits were Aberdeen Golf & Country Club in Florida and Stone Harbour Country Club in New Jersey, USA. Both designed by Desmond Muirhead in 1987 and 1988 respectively, these courses featured bunkers shaped like various animals, holes shaped like mermaids and tomahawks, and design

strategies based on bits of Gestalt psychology, Oriental religion and art interpretation. Are these courses great or are they gimmicks?

In a landscape setting, golfers particularly, have an innate feeling of what is natural and what is not. Golf design is about balance, and good designs intricately balance the natural environment with the elements and features of course design that make the game fun and challenging. The fake stream, imposed lake, 'mellow puff' shaped mounding, or forced green design etc, are all impostors that are immediately identified. There is great scope for ingenuity in golf design, and so rather than creating artificial features that would be more at home in Disneyland, it is exponentially more preferable for architects to research a site's history and incorporate features that may have had a part in the development of the site – such as railway lines, old buildings foundations, water wheels, mining shafts, burial grounds, etc.

Trends and fads have come and gone and golf has not just survived, but increased in popularity. It is the increasing value of land that is forcing some golf courses to be converted into real estate, but good golf courses that are free of gimmicky designs have almost always survived this threat. Simply, gimmicks devalue golf. They look unnatural, are a poor substitute for strategy and can compromise the value of the land and the shot values of the game. The best long-term marketing approach for golf architects and course owners is great design. There is no substitute for setting games of golf in the embrace of the natural environment complimented by designs strategies that honour those tested by time.

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