

Encouraging width

Renown golf architect Alister MacKenzie believed that good golf holes had many wide routes to destruction, but only one narrow route to salvation. The key to implementing such a design strategy is fairway width. So, what is the value of width in modern design, and why have architects strayed off line?

Advocates of the strategic design principles agree with MacKenzie- 'playing width' is fundamental to good designs. Latitude gives the opportunity for incorporating degrees of punishment in correlation with the degree of the error. Equally it rewards well placed shots and provides alternative routes for golfers of all abilities and in all wind directions. Width allows golf to be played in shades of grey, the harshest of penalties replaced by half or quarter shot infringements and the opportunity for recovery ever present. No design is as uninspiring, repetitive and against the spirit of golf as the one plagued by straight, narrow and parallel holes, lined with thick rough.



1st & 18th fairways at St Andrews

Without exception, all the best two or three shot holes in the world are dog-legs. Even those that appear straight, like the 14th on the Old Course in St Andrews, are best played as a dogleg for all classes of golfer. The subtle kinks and twists a dog-leg provides optimises ball placement and reward accuracy of length and line by gaining a level lie, avoiding a hazard or achieving a better angle into the green. The great virtue of good dog-legs however is that when

done properly, the wayward power player can be beaten on these holes by the more controlled, shorter hitter.

Dog-legs have further benefits. Where courses which have mostly linear holes are required to be of great length to test the scratch golfers, courses comprised of clever dog-legs may be slightly shorter in actual length but play as long if not longer and, almost always, provide a superior challenge, experience and fun. Almost always, dog-legged holes are visually superior and suited better to maximising undulating terrain.

Greater width allows for greater design strategy, and provides greater opportunities to design alternative routes. With less forced carries, and less rough, the 'wider' golfing experience will be, critically if golf is going to continue to grow, more fun for the majority.

A major factor working against establishing desirable width comes from residential golf courses. As the primary source of funding for many new courses, the worst property developments put the creation of the maximum number of lots with 'golf frontage' ahead of the course design. Golf corridors are shrunk, squeezed and sandwiched until a course architect screams or the viability and safety of a new course is totally compromised. The solution for this scenario is in the hands of developers...and experienced architects. The formulation of a comprehensive master plan that allows for a quality routing and respects both golf and residential design. Sadly some developers with views only to the short term profit, care little for balance that ensures long-term appreciation in the value of both the course and property.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the establishment and retention of width however is cost. With club and ball technology already increasing the acreage required to build a golf course, many developers are less than enthusiastic about buying further land, even if they understand the strategic merits. As for maintenance costs, apart from extra land rates, having fairways of 40y-80y wide at landing areas may increase the maintained area by 50%. This has a significant impact on the maintenance budget of a course, as especially activities such as mowing, fertilisation and irrigation – possibly in the region of 20–30%.

When the temptation for most golf courses is to narrow fairways and line them with rough, trees or houses under the notion of making money, saving money, or the misconceived aim of making a course harder, the importance of width cannot be overstated. Greater width allows a course to be set-up to cater for all classes of golfers whilst encouraging strategic, mind engaging golf and removing the frustration's that come from searching for lost balls. Greater width within a clever strategic design will challenge the best, and encourage all and be the salvation of golf's traditional spirit of fun and adventure.