



“The Golf Fore-um”

By

Edward M. Beidel, Jr., RLA

Golf Architect, ASGCA

Registered Landscape Architect, ASLA

Of

Beidel Design Associates, Inc.



Our golf course originally was designed in 1926 and it is in need of some invigoration. Some members of the greens committee are calling for remodeling of the present course, others want a program of reconstruction, and still others want to engage in a process of restoration. What are the differences?

The terms, remodeling, reconstruction, and restoration often are used interchangeably when describing program improvements for a golf course. However, the terms have different meanings and sometimes the particular descriptor used by the membership does not always accurately reflect their wishes or ideas. The terms, remodeling and renovation, for example, commonly refer to changes made on a golf course for the purpose of updating it to match modern technology and accommodating the playing abilities of today's golfers. With the exception of new course construction, remodeling and renovation projects are the most common golf construction activities that occur today. I consider the term reconstruction to describe a somewhat different practice, that is, reconstruction is the process of rebuilding the physical structure of the components of the golf course (bunkers, tee boxes, greens) to reduce maintenance problems and help the course accommodate the ever increasing number of rounds as the game's popularity continues to grow.

Restoration usually is defined as the process of returning a course to its original state. However, today, the term sometimes is used inaccurately. True restoration of a golf course would require returning the course to its original design, which might have been lost as a result of renovation or remodeling projects completed during the interim period. To effect a true restoration, copies of the original drawings / sketches, still or aerial photographs of the original golf course, or perhaps even the recollections of older players or members may help the golf architect replicate the original course. Today, there are numerous sources that could provide the information necessary for a restoration. Although a true restoration sounds glamorous and exciting, it is a major commitment of time and resources. Once members understand the process and how playing conditions and strategy may be altered, enthusiasm for the process may be diminished. In actuality, very few “true” restorations are implemented today. One reason for the limited number is the way that modern technology has altered the game. Through vastly improved equipment, today's golfer hits the ball farther than did those in the first half of twentieth century. For example, improvements in equipment have increased the average shot length such that bunkers placed 200 – 240 yards from the tee box (earlier designs) are now misplaced to challenge today's seasoned player. Therefore, restoring a course to its original design likely would not challenge and interest a large proportion of today's golfers.

Other questions to ask when considering a true restoration.

First, are the players willing to give up the lush, green look expected and achieved by today's modern irrigation systems? Golf courses were maintained differently in the 1920s than they are

today. Most golfers do not understand that the manicured look that they see on television is not only unrealistic, but virtually unheard of when many courses were originally designed. Turf maintenance has advanced along with golf equipment. Players often do not understand the relationship between maintenance practices and a golf course's strategic design. Simply put, the lack of irrigation systems meant that many more areas of a golf course were "natural" terrain, and thus, mother-nature called the shots on course condition. These dry areas were often incorporated into the course design and became an important part of how the golf course was played. Philosophically, returning to the original design would mean returning areas of the course to their original conditioning, whether dry or wet.

Second, as most superintendents know, trees on a golf course present more than aesthetic value. Some can be positive while others can be negative features. Trees play an important role in shot strategy. Often after a golf course is designed, clubs engage in a tree planting program to improve the aesthetic quality (color, framing and backdrops). However, as trees mature, they can become a screen rather than a frame, which in turn influences shot selection and dictate the playing line of the golf hole. A complete restoration would require the removal of many mature trees in order to return the course to the playing strategy that was conceived by the original golf architect. Removing all mature trees as part of the restoration project would not likely be a popular recommendation.

Of course, there are many other questions that guide the facility through the restoration decision process, but overall, it could be summarized as follows. Would not a true restoration of a classic course, for example, mean returning the course to all of the playing conditions that existed at the time of the original design? The bottom line is how far are facilities and members willing to go to regain their 1920's classic? Luckily, if it is not as far as tearing up the sprinkler system, removing the trees and letting the turf grow, there are more palatable options. This is where the involvement of a golf architect working in close collaboration with the superintendent and facility personnel can provide appropriate and far more exciting alternatives.

Restoration or Rejuvenation?

In summary, when discussing the idea of golf course reinvigoration, an important consideration for superintendents, membership / players and facility personnel is whether they want to undertake a complete and true golf course restoration. Preserving history in the form of classic golf courses is an admirable goal. However, that must be balanced by acknowledgment of today's advances in technology and the desire of superintendents, players and the golf architect to have a course that is challenging, interesting and enjoyable. In short, perhaps what we really mean when we talk about the latest boom in golf course restoration is really golf course rejuvenation. Rejuvenation for a classic course, for example, could be conceptualized as the restoration of greens to their original sizes but alteration of the placement of sand bunkers to accommodate current golf shot lengths. By rejuvenation, the original character of the course and its components can be retained yet the course provides a challenging game for the modern golfer.

For further information on golf architecture and the planning process, contact Ed Beidel of Beidel Design Associates, Inc. at 410-707-5623 or email Ed at ed.beideldesign@att.net. Beidel Design Associates are golf architects, land planners and landscape architects.

An earlier version of this article may have appeared in industry publications.