

## PART ONE

# What Makes a Good Golf Course?

by DONALD STEEL

**I**T IS extraordinary how many golfers believe that, because they are golfers, they are quite capable of laying out a new hole or even, perhaps, a new course. They would never dream of trying to diagnose their ails without a doctor, or defend themselves in court without a lawyer, but, when it comes to changing the 3rd hole at their own club, or earmarking a piece of land for a possible extension, there is no shortage of apparent experts.

On the subject of greens, there is usually more criticism than advice. Without giving a thought to the fact that there might be some unavoidable cause for the condition of greens, and without offering any suggested cure, comments fly; and, when the greens are just about as good as they can be, golfers with little knowledge of the difference between a fescue and a ferret, still find fault, as though William Morris once wrote, "The woods have no voice but the voice of complaining."

Many years ago, Bernard Darwin, in confessing his almost total lack of knowledge about greenkeeping, went on to say, "There are a good many people not so profoundly conscious of their own ignorance, and they can often do a great deal of harm." But, whilst golf course design and greenkeeping are largely matters of judgment and experience, there is a third dimension—of technical knowledge—so essential to the successful practice of both. This is the factor most often forgotten.

The planning and construction of a golf course cannot be compared with the planning and construction of a railway or a road; in either of the two latter cases it would be dangerous for the contractor to indulge in too much artistic licence, but, in building a golf course, everything depends on the artistic interpretations of the plans by the architect and the contractor.

Whereas, in a player, a vivid imagination can prove fatal, a golf course architect **MUST** possess this quality, and combine with it the true understanding of how nature works in fashioning a hill, a hollow, or an innocent-looking slope.

Few realise the importance of a good contractor. Contractors unused to golf course work invariably show impatience when an architect is constantly making minor alterations during the progress of the work, but the more experienced man knows that it is

only in this way that the real artistic quality is obtained.

The golf course architect also has a great responsibility because there is, or should be, an air of finality about his work. Unless clients are to be involved in unnecessary finance, everything must be got right first time, and, the more one sees of golf courses, the more one realises that golf course construction must have a permanent character. There are many examples of courses being reconstructed over and over again and many more examples of those which perhaps need to be.

This brings us to the governing question of what makes a good course, a good hole, and a good architect, allowing that there may be several variations. None-the-less, the main essential of a great course is that it should provide an interesting, challenging, and fair test for every class of player; and it should make the best possible use of the land available.

From the answer to the first part, it is a fair assumption that the aim of a golf course architect is to design courses which will give the greatest possible pleasure to the greatest number of golfers. Going further, we can perhaps define an ideal hole in much the same way—but with the vital addition that it should never become monotonous to play.

Tom Simpson, an eloquent writer on golf course architecture, also believed that no golf course could be really great unless it required knowing, either on the part of the player or his caddie. Nowhere in the world, he maintained, is there a single example of a classic hole that is a straightforward hole. For a hole to be really great it must possess the element of decision, posing even something of a gamble, but rewarding the bold and correct shot.

A good golf course, no more than good music or good drink, does not necessarily appeal the first time it is played. The Old Course at St. Andrews, the most extolled, and criticised course in the world, offers the best proof of one that requires knowing, and long ago gave rise to the story of the caddie remarking with doubting scorn to the university professor for whom he was carrying, "It neids a heid to play gowf at St. Andrews."

In many ways, the Old Course has stood the test of time better than any other, and remains a classic