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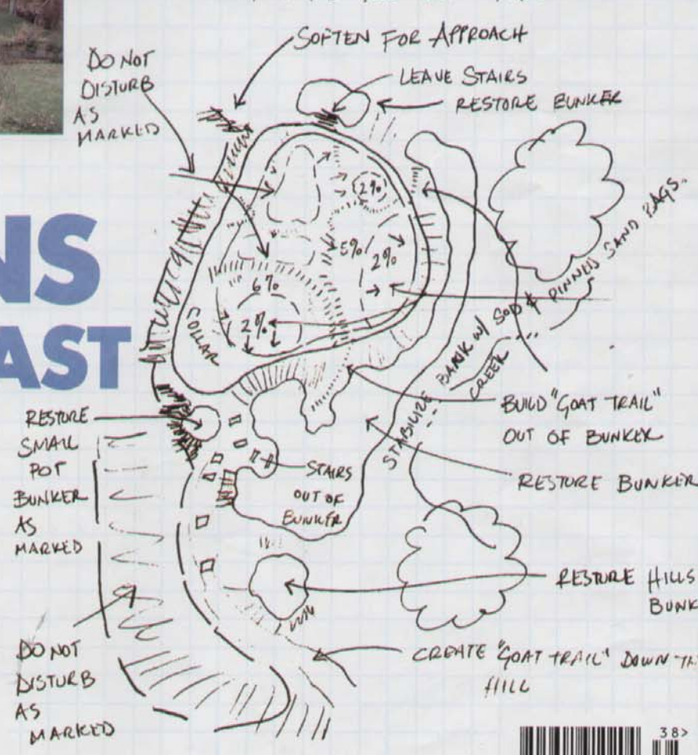

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Taking a MULLIGAN

Restoration movement helps clubs regain their heritage, correct past mistakes made in the name of modernization

By Bradley S. Klein

The greens are once again oversized at Engineers Country Club on Long Island. San Francisco Golf Club features a three-hole loop that had been missing for a half-century. Chattanooga Golf and Country Club has more Donald Ross character on display than it had in nearly a quarter-century. Next, with any luck, West Bend (Wis.) Country Club will reclaim the lost heritage on its back nine and match it with its classic front nine.

Throughout the country, there's a restoration movement afoot, with clubs getting a second chance at history. Since 2000, more than a quarter of the top 100 courses on *Golfweek's* America's Best Classic list have undergone or are in the midst of restorations. Clumsy modernizations that undermined classic designs are now being plowed under, with architects this time aiming to go back to an earlier design heritage.

Names such as Ross, Charles Blair Macdonald, Seth Raynor, Alistair MacKenzie and A.W. Tillinghast are much in vogue these days as visionaries worthy of respect, admiration and meticulous restoration. A spate of detailed design biographies recently has been devoted to these designers. So-called "dead architect societies" determined to honor and help preserve their work have been formed and now carry the argument to board rooms across the U.S. that the handiwork of these masters deserves kid glove treatment.

The works of lesser-known designers also are getting attention – with artisans such as Herbert Strong, William Flynn, and the design team of William B. Langford and Theodore J. Moreau among those finding newfound respect.

Case in point: Engineers, a 1918 design by Strong in Roslyn, N.Y., immediately heralded for its vast, fascinating greens complexes and home to the 1919 PGA Championship and the 1920 U.S. Amateur. Gradually, tree clutter overtook the grounds, the greens shrank, bunkers were taken out and a clumsy partial redesign by Frank Duane led to a new hole that was out of character. The hole was intended to replace Engineers' quirky but maddeningly difficult 90-yard par-3 14th, known as the "2 or 20 hole" because of the scores that were rung up there.

Lately, however, Engineers has enjoyed a restoration, a return to its original boldness, largely through the commitment of a series of recent green chairmen, the commitment of superintendent Donnie Szymkowicz and the research and design efforts of architect Tripp Davis.

Davis, who played the Ben Hogan Tour (now the Nationwide Tour) in 1989-90, is a reinstated amateur and a full-time course designer. He did detailed research on Engineers' design history, examined old photographs and conducted soil tests and probes of bunker lines and putting surfaces. He says the ongoing work at Engineers "still has a few holes to go," but so far, the club has taken out 600 trees, rebuilt bunkers to their former depth and character, and recaptured greens, some of which had shrunk by more than 30 percent. And the **Mulligan >>>**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TRIPP DAVIS & ASSOCIATES

The redesigned 16th green at Engineers Country Club on Long Island again fills the peninsula on which it sits. The inset photo shows how the green had been reduced over the decades before the redesign, leaving chipping areas on the peninsula.

<<< Architecture "complete remodels" toward the five.

In an effort to support the burgeoning renovation market, the ASGCA established a national series of workshops in 2000 that brought architects into daylong contact with superintendents, club managers, green chairmen and facility decision makers.

Dubbed "Remodeling University," the pilot program of four workshops, held in Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta and New York, has led to 40 such seminars, with more than 2,000 attendees getting training in basic aspects of master planning. Starting in 2007, Ritterbusch reports, the ASGCA "will be significantly strengthening the background we provide on financial and business aspects."

Treating a golf club like a business rather than a toy might be anathema to avid golfers intent on forgetting their work life when they arrive at the first tee. But there's a newfound sensibility of golf course management out there, one that sees courses as an asset. Some of these assets perform better than others, and almost all need recurring care and upgrading if they expect to remain viable.

That's why the ASGCA is asking course operators to consider how long a course's working parts are likely to last before they need replacement. Endurance obviously depends upon maintenance, but there's also ongoing wear and tear on the component parts of a course, depending upon rounds played, cart traffic, weather, soil type and the quality of original construction.

Sand-based greens built with a subgrade and perched water table according to USGA standards can be expected to last 15-30 years before performance deteriorates, according to the ASGCA. Bunker sand is likely to last five to seven years, irrigation systems anywhere from one to three decades. Asphalt cart paths have a shelf life of about a decade, while concrete cart paths should last two or three times longer.

Of course, greens performance is not simply a function of subsurface drainage. Sometimes, there's desire for faster speeds or smoother putting surfaces, or the club decides to replace the greens every few years in order to fend off the incursion of undesirable Poa annua. Or Bermudagrass greens mutate, developing undesirable hybrids that are hard to manage.

The advent of new, higher performance turf types also makes renovation tempting. That's the case with The River Course on Kiawah Island, S.C., which was closed from late May through September this year as it regrassed its fairways and greens. The 419 Bermudagrass fairways have been replaced with a smoother, firmer Emerald Dwarfbermuda cultivar, and the greens, formerly Tifdwarf, now are a Champions Bermuda that will allow for lower mowing heights and faster greens.

Veteran architect Jay Morrish, based in the Dallas suburb of Flower Mound, is at work renovating Cottonwood Valley Course, part of the Four Season Resort in Irving, Texas.

Cottonwood, along with its sister course, the TPC at Las Colinas, is home to the PGA Tour's EDS Byron Nelson Championship, and Morrish was chief designer of both layouts two decades ago. The Cottonwood layout was shut down July 7 after this year's Byron Nelson, and 15 greens were stripped, gassed and rebuilt with fresh new bentgrass. (Three greens had been done last year.) "The greens were just worn out," Morrish says.

The course also is getting **Architecture >>>**

<<< Mulligan "2 or 20" hole is back, fully restored.

At the 365-yard, par-4 16th, all that remained of the original 8,000-square-foot green was the back left sector, the front right and front left having been converted to fringe. By taking out some of the steep slope in the green, Davis was able to reintegrate the entire fill pad as putting surface, thereby reclaiming marginal hole locations that now make the 16th much more compelling.

In an effort to make some fairway bunkers more relevant, Davis said "I prefer to push tees back instead of moving bunkers," though he does admit to occasionally pinching them closer to fairways so that they are more in play. Like many restorationists, Davis says he doesn't believe length is what makes a course. Besides, he adds, "there's too much emphasis on challenge, and I'd prefer to focus on interest." That's the approach he's taking with his other restoration work at Meadow Brook Club in Jericho, N.Y. (Dick Wilson, 1955), Whippoorwill Club in Armonk, N.Y. (Donald Ross, 1925/Charles Banks, 1929) and Northwood Club in Dallas (William Diddle, 1948).