

YALE UNIVERSITY GOLF COURSE RENOVATION

We have been given the raw material of greatness at Yale and refining them is the task at hand.

By Roger Rulewich

How do you decide what changes to make to a classic and famous golf course that will enhance but not diminish it? If we honestly believe that the original design is the best possible golf course for today's play, then we are talking about restoration. Sometimes it is difficult or impossible to know what the architect's original plan was and exactly what golfers faced on opening day long ago. Furthermore, to responsibly evaluate what should be done, we need to know something about the inevitable changes that have affected the course over the years and why they occurred.

No golf course is static and the evolutionary process has touched them all. This is a process that is both natural and man-made. Weather erodes, soils compact, drains clog, diseases attack, floods and droughts damage, frost heaves and trees grow and trees blown down. Combine all this with heavier play, improved clubs and balls, carts, changing maintenance practices and player demands and you have some idea of why course changes are unavoidable on one hand and necessary on the other.

The Yale Golf Course has been no exception to this process. Our research has attempted to uncover the original design and everything that has changed it over the last seventy years or so. Thankfully, we have discovered that very little has been done to diminish its character and its strengths. Years of light play and limited budgets are partially responsible. There have been no changes to the routing or location of any of the holes. They play over the same terrain and to the same green sites that were originally chosen. While trees have been planted and existing ones have grown to define the hole corridors, the playing areas are still generously wide in most cases. Old photos show how open the site was during construction and certainly follows the architect, C.B. Macdonald's admonition that "trees in the course are also a serious defect and even when in close proximity prove a detriment."

Recommendations for improvements and the development of a master plan for everything under consideration is ongoing at this time. The most obvious and visible feature of the course that needs immediate attention, is the sand bunkers. In fact, the University has established this as the highest priority.

An unusual feature of the Yale Golf Course, however, is the almost total absence of fairway bunkering. Today, there is only one sand trap that can be reached by a tee shot and that is on the very first hole. We have discovered that a number of fairway and greenside bunkers have been removed over the years. Fairway traps existed on holes 1, 2, 3, 10 and 17 originally. These were abandoned, quite properly I think, because they penalized very short hitters and provided no hazard to the

average or better player. Clearly, the Yale Golf Course needs very little fairway bunkering to define its target areas and this was apparently understood years ago when these bunkers were removed. At Yale, defining the target areas is better left to the hazards of terrain, visibility, carries, slopes and lies.

Therefore, the 42 bunkers that challenge play on the course are virtually all greenside. Not a big number by most standards but when you see how big and deep some of these bunkers are, numbers don't count! Therefore, with the greenside bunkering our first point of focus, the poor condition and deterioration of most of these bunkers quickly became obvious.

As we look at each green site and compare what was there with what now exists, we have to make choices. Do we put back those that were removed, remove those that were added or rebuild those that have changed? Do we enlarge those that have shrunk, shrink those that have expanded and do we even consider adding new bunkers to protect or challenge play? The answer is probably "all of the above".

In fact, some of these choices have already been made on two of the greens. A critical problem existed on the deep frontal bunker on the fourth green. The face of this sand trap had eroded badly and was in danger of undermining the green itself. This needed immediate attention and it was decided to make some repairs this Spring. Since we would be disturbing a sizable area around the trap and interrupting play, we also decided to improve the three other sand traps around the 4th green at the same time. This appeared to make good sense since the access for equipment, materials and labor was already established and a temporary green put in place to divert play. Accordingly, the work at the 4th greensite has become our model for all future bunker repair: Complete all the bunker reconstruction on any one green at one time; we will disturb the area and the play just once and be done with it. Not to mention the cost economies of scale that results from a single mobilization of forces.

These economies and the willingness of Yale to expand the scope of work, allowed our firm to undertake the bunker renovation on hole 5, a short par 3 nearby. The need for improvements here were very different from hole 4. The low, flat sand traps, almost totally surrounding this pedestal green, were well below the surrounding area. This area is subject to poor drainage and occasional flooding and the traps became bathtubs, holding water with no way to pull the plug. A small ditch running alongside hole 6 was the only outfall for any drainage and the floor of the traps needed to be raised above it. That "water only flows downhill" was our guiding principle here and some pitch from traps to

ditch had to be created.

The need for permanent drainage to positive outfall for all bunkers, expanded the original scope of work because the discharge was located some distance from the bunkers themselves. On hole 5 it was only a short distance from trap to ditch. On hole 4, drainage was piped to a low point 30 yards from the green and then extended 200 yards to the lake in the landing area.

The work on the seven traps around these two greens, No. 4 and No. 5, was begun on June 2nd. Taking into consideration down time for two Sundays and a Monday outing, the work was completed and the greens put back in play (with roping of the newly sodded areas) in exactly two weeks. This is good speed but not unusual for work of this magnitude.

What you see, now that The Group has finished its work on these two holes, is bright new sand in the traps and healthy new turf around the edges and slopes. What you don't see is the new topsoil under the turf to sustain it, the network of porous underdrain piping under the sand, the long runs of pipe from the traps to a distant discharge, and the rearrangement of underground irrigation lines and sprinklers to water and maintain these new areas of turf.

Clearly, there is more than meets the eye to any golf course in its construction and the skill and care needed to maintain it. A golf course's design is more obvious as it translates into playability. But even here all of the subtle details may take some time to discover. When tee markers and pins change, when wind and weather vary, a course can show a new face and present unexpected challenges. The changes and ravages of time can impact not only a course's condition but its playability and design. All of these elements are being considered as we look to restore, repair and reconstruct the many features of the Yale golf course.

My firm, The Roger Rulewich Group, and I have taken only the first step in this program. The reception has been enthusiastic and exactly what I hoped for. We have the support to continue our review and expand our recommendations for improvements. We will follow this process in future articles. Our goal is to make the Yale Golf Course at least as good as it once was and as much better as humanly possible. Change is part of the natural order of all things and there is no reason to fear it if it is properly directed. I believe we have been given the raw materials of greatness at Yale and refining them is the task at hand.

The Roger Rulewich Group, has begun the long-awaited improvement, remodeling & restoration of Yale University Golf Course. The second article in a series by Roger Rulewich.