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Greens that play on the wild side

by Mike DeVries

Many of the world's best golf courses possess a wild green or two. By "wild" I mean greens that possess bold contours, an eccentric configuration, unusual corresponding hazards or even a combination of these characteristics. Whatever it may be, there is a fine line between a wild green and a radical one that is plain gimmicky.

When constructing a wild green with bold interior contours, it is important to tie the natural surroundings seamlessly into the putting surface. This way the green's bold contouring is more in concert with the inherent landscape than otherwise. Such a harmonious arrangement carries an additional bonus: the green will be subject to far less potential criticism as a result.

Of course, this is not to say that an unnatural looking green with bold contours cannot work. Many wonderful examples of Charles Blair

Macdonald, Seth Raynor and Pete Dye greens throughout the United States are blatantly manmade in appearance, but they embody sound strategic principles that produce interesting golf. Still, some of Dr. Alister MacKenzie's wildest greens, for example, the 8th or 9th at Cypress Point and the 14th at Augusta National, are far more attractive because they blend into their natural surroundings.

In most cases, bigger greens allow for bolder contouring. On a larger green, distinct contours can separate the putting surface into smaller sections, each of which favors a particular type of shot or a specific angle from the fairway. A spine or slender ridge dividing two sections of a green is one simple form that significantly affects the tee shot, approach play and putting. This type of feature rewards a well struck shot played to the proper section of the green, while at the same time, rejects less than



The devilish plateau contours at Pinehurst No. 2

“The greens at Pinehurst present a mental and physical challenge, and promote intelligent play and inventive shotmaking by all levels of golfers.”

accurate approaches and leaves golfers with interesting chipping, pitching and putting conundrums to solve.

By no means, though, are bold contours confined to large greens. In fact there are many boldly contoured greens throughout the world that are quite small. Such greens, like MacKenzie's 13th at Crystal Downs in Frankfort, Michigan, add greatly to the diversity of the challenge.

Tiny greens with bold contours work particularly well when a closely mown “bail” zone is incorporated into the green complex. Short, tightly mown turf surrounding a green, as exemplified by Donald Ross's Pinehurst No. 2 course in North Carolina, provides golfers of all abilities with the option to use a variety of recovery shots. This in turn gives players a reasonable chance of getting up and down and makes a wild green appear tamer than if it were surrounded by long, thick grass. As a result, Ross's green complexes at Pinehurst present a mental and physical challenge and promote intelligent play and inventive shotmaking by all classes of golfers.

A “kicker” bank also works well with severely contoured greens by expanding the size of the target to include an area around the green or a portion of the green itself. The surface of a punchbowl-style green, for example, can be severely contoured because the surrounding terrain directs marginally wayward shots onto the putting surface. This type of green complex provides a greater margin of error for poorer golfers, while at the same time, the bold contours in the putting surface demand precision from low handicap players trying to get their ball close to the hole.

Boldly contoured and severely sloped greens should also be fashioned with counter slopes. A putt from above the hole on a green severely pitched from back to front, particularly with today's raceway green speeds, will in most cases run off the front of the putting surface. The same type of green fitted with some selective counter-slopes allows wise golfers to make a play for a two-putt by

using the contours to control both the speed of the golf ball and its direction.

The same theory applies to transitions between higher and lower levels on a stepped green. By varying the intensity of the dropoff slopes and providing certain portions of the putting surface with more counter-slope than others, golfers are able to play a safe putt with the intent of holing the one coming back.

Building in wilder portions of greens can allow players to putt from any portion of the green to another. Having a backstop to play an approach shot aggressively and know that the ball will roll up and back down to the cup gives golfers another playing option. Contoured slopes may simply reduce the number of straight flat putts during a round and increase the fun factor.

There are no guidelines for the design and construction of greens. In fact, golf course architecture that follows a formula has historically proven to be repetitive and boring. Still, a simple plan executed well is often far better than a complexity of elements poorly orchestrated. Severity in the design and construction of a green must be employed judiciously.

On any given golf course, the greens should vary in size, severity of slope and boldness of contour. Some greens should be defended by unusual and unforgettable hazards, while others, for the sake of variety, should be relatively nondescript or devoid of traditional hazards altogether. After all, 18 intense greens with moguls in and around them, defended by countless hazards, will prove overwhelming and tiresome.

A few tamer greens on a golf course are necessary to complement those wild ones that get our blood pumping. Creating a good rhythm and flow is paramount where the radically contoured greens and holes are highlights, while the more subdued elements and stretches throughout the round form the integrity of the design. Ultimately, such a combination will lead to extremely interesting and rewarding golf. Done properly, it will surely beckon a return visit. ●