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“A.W. Tillinghast and the Art of the Golf Course”

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In 1910, Bernard Darwin, the well-known essayist for the London Times, published “Golf Courses of the British Isles” – a travel-log of the most revered golf courses in the United Kingdom that quickly became the seminal book in the field of golf course architecture. The descriptions crafted by Darwin established the form, standards and terminology that came to define golf course criticism. In fact, many of the terms and turns-of-phrase that Darwin employed first in “Golf Courses of the British Isles” have become the terms and turns-of-phrase that golf writers ever since have used when describing golf courses.

As eloquent as Darwin’s prose may be, I would suggest to you that “Golf Courses of the British Isles” falls short in one critical respect – it fails to adequately describe and capture the aesthetic qualities of the golf courses it profiles. This evening, as we celebrate the reopening of A.W. Tillinghast’s resplendent design for the Cricket Club, I’d like to focus on an element of golf course design that is often overlooked– the aesthetics of the golf course, and in particular the element of style.

For our purposes, we may define style as an artist’s distinctive manner of producing an object; with the understanding that as we can speak of an artist’s style, we can also generalize about the style of a period or geographic region. Just as with the work of a celebrated painter, the works of a specific golf course architect often display a unique personal style. This seemingly simple observation is the jumping off point for a new dialog about golf course design.

Let’s start with some foundational observations. First, let’s pause to consider what the Rules of Golf have to say about the course on which the game is played. Despite the fact that the 2012-2015 edition of the Rules book comprises 208 pages, and is very dense and technical, the answer is surprisingly little… at least in comparison to sports like football and baseball, where the dimensions of every element of the field are spelled out in considerable detail. By contrast, the Rules of Golf define a course simply as “the whole area within which play is permitted.”

Curiously, the Rules of Golf are silent on elements of the golf course that many golfers consider essential. Thus, while the Rules reference the need for a teeing area and a hole, the Rules make no reference to the concept of rough or even fairway. According to the Rules, the game can even be played without a green, so long as there is a hole. Bunkers and hazards are referenced within the Rules, but with no specifics as to size, shape, or placement. Indeed, much is left unspecified, allowing maximum creativity for the golf course architect.

Why then is a golf course immediately recognizable? Why do the features of a golf course in Scotland resemble the features on a golf course in suburban Philadelphia built in 1922? Absent clear definition in the Rules, we turn to tradition. The answer, quite simply, is that the forms of the golf course mimic the forms that were present on the landscapes where the game was first played – the linksland of Scotland. Indeed, just as there is a vocabulary of building architecture, there is a vocabulary of golf course architecture. Tees, bunkers, greens and hazards are the columns, entablatures and pediments of classical Greek and Roman architecture. In the way that an architect makes choices about the scale, spatial relationships, and materials that comprise a building, the golf course architect makes choices about the scale, spatial relationships and materials that define the golf course. These choices may be informed by the site, but more frequently they reflect deliberate choices that are informed by the architect’s personal style.

In the decades around the turn of the century, much intellectual and artistic energy was expended in the pursuit of national styles… the notion that geographic regions were capable of producing artistic traditions imbued with the spirit and character of the place itself. The Prairie School was one such attempt to develop a style of architecture that was uniquely modern and authentically American. The most famous proponent of the style, [Frank Lloyd Wright](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Lloyd_Wright), promoted an idea of "[organic architecture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organic_architecture)" that looked as if it naturally grew from the site.

As in architecture, so in golf course architecture, the early 20th century saw deliberate attempts to define a new American style of golf course design – this, too, rooted in the belief that the aesthetics of the American golf course should echo the character of the American landscape. One visionary in this movement was a Philadelphian named Albert Warren Tillinghast. Tillinghast was born in 1874 in North Philadelphia, the only son of a wealthy family that owned a rubber and tire company. His upbringing in Philadelphia, the cradle of our country, had profound effects on him, as he grew to have great passion for history. During his lifetime, he assembled one of the finest collections of early American documents, including a near comprehensive collection of autographs of the signers of the Declaration of independence. He was also a prolific collector of antiques, who specialized in 18th-century American furniture. He assembled one of the first known collections of golf art and was one of the earliest known golf photographers, from which he learned the value and importance of composition. Perhaps most importantly, he himself was an artist, whose watercolor sketches of green complexes appeared alongside many of the stories he wrote for Golf Illustrated, as well as in the official programs for several major championships.

Tillinghast was a leader in a new movement in golf course design that embraced an aesthetic that was solidly grounded in nature. The time that Tillinghast spent in Scotland, and in particular at St. Andrews, had a profound impact on him – for it was here that he observed and learned both the form and appearance of features that had been created by natural processes. “One vital feature was neglected by most old-time builders of American links,” Tillinghast wrote in 1927, “They persistently ignored Nature, and when introducing artificial creations little effort was exerted towards making them appear natural. Such relics of antiquity are not pleasing to golfers of the present; indeed, they are not tolerated, and for this reason it is folly to go to the expense of building along any but the most modern lines. It costs no more to follow Nature than to ignore her.”

This emphasis on natural forms was evident as early as Tillinghast’s design for Shawnee Country Club, the very first commission he accepted as a golf course designer. Begun in 1908, on a truly stunning property just north of the Delaware Water Gap, several holes at Shawnee featured dramatic mounding that provided a lush visual texture to the landscape. Tillinghast called this style of work Alpinization, and such clusters of artificial Alps would become a frequent inclusion in many of his designs.

Such Alpinization also appeared in Tillinghast’s work at Somerset Hills Country Club in Bernardsville, NJ, located just up the road from the USGA’s headquarters. The greens of the 4th and 6th holes are nestled within a large cluster of these miniaturized Alps, whose height, mass, and slope are suggestive of a billowing sea. The connection between land and sea was in fact a theme that recurred in Tillinghast’s work. The 11th hole at Winged Foot West – the famed U.S. Open venue in Mamaroneck, N.Y. – was named “Billows,” for the dramatic heaves and rolls that span the fairway. It is likely that this sense of visual patterning, of rich visual textures, drew its inspiration from the architecture of Philadelphia, which had a profound influence on Tillinghast’s personal development as an artist. Many late 19th-century buildings in the city, most notably by the architect Frank Furness, show dramatic interplays of light and shadow, of visual surface patterning and rich color. For those of you who might be familiar with it, think of Furness’s Fisher Fine Arts Library for the University of Pennsylvania.

Another feature common to many Tillinghast design are the unique combinations of naturalistic mounding and bunkers that Tillinghast used to split the fairways on many of his long par 5s. He called these complexes variously “The Sahara” or “The Great Bunker” and they are found at many Tillinghast courses, including Baltusrol and San Francisco Golf Club, and importantly the wonderfully restored complex of 13 bunkers that bisects that the 7th fairway here at Philadelphia Cricket Club. It is surely the complexes like this that Tillinghast had in mind when he penned his 1935 article for Golf Illustrated, “The Ideal Course, Rugged and Natural.” “Naturally my eye is peeled,” he wrote, “for impressively outstanding natural features. These are many, but, of them all, I am sure that none moves me to greater enthusiasm than do sand dunes, big dunes contoured through the years by sweeping winds and set off by wild grasses and drifted sands.”

Tillinghast’s intent was not the abolition of artificial forms, but rather to abolish those forms that appeared artificial. He hoped to perfect the artifice of camouflage, to be able to disguise his artificial creations under shapes and contours that appeared natural to the eye. From tee to green, Tillinghast believed the every element of the golf course could be constructed to harmonize perfectly with its surroundings. The natural shapes and contours that he used for tees, greens, and bunkers were not merely isolated elements scattered across a landscape, but were components of an aesthetic system that relied on a principle of organic harmony.

“Even the arrangement of sand in the hazards may be used to good advantage to beautify the course,” he wrote in his column for Golf Illustrated in 1920. “If the pits are designed well, the sand has the appearance of having been blown in rather than dumped.” And so in his architecture, he evolved a style of bunkering that featured complex, irregular lines, with the surface of the sand flowing up to and into the edges of his bunkers. And Keith has captured precisely this spirit in the restoration of the bunkers that sit just shy of the 14th green.

Indeed, Tillinghast believed that, as an artist, the golf course architect should posses an advanced understanding of aesthetic principles and practices. As he wrote in 1934, “The creator of golf holes must not only possess imagination, but a keen appreciation of the offerings of nature and the art of landscaping must be allied closely with that of the architect.”

Let me wrap up my comments with one final quote, to help us understand best the rationale behind Tillinghast’s philosophy that is seen so beautifully in his design for the Philadelphia Cricket Club. It is a quote that captures the beauty of the landscape, but also the beauty of Tillinghast’s vision for golf – and I believe it is courses just like this one at the Criclet Club that he had in mind when he wrote: “I believe that there are a goodly number of player who find their golf a mighty good excuse to get close to nature. There are thousands of business men closing their office desks every day and turning expectantly to the links. Expecting what? The breaking of a hundred? Not much! That rare feat might happen to their extreme satisfaction. It *might,* but the one thing which everyone is *sure* of is a glorious afternoon in the open with the songs of birds in his ears rather than the constantly tinkling bells and jangling noises; with four walls of a room replaced by a delightful, ever-changing sight of meadow and trees and brooks, or broad stretches of ocean sands and water.”