

Hallowed Ground

By: Nathan Crace Date: March 3, 2006

Growing up in Indiana, this was the time of year when I, as a young golfer, began to look forward to another golf season. Not coincidentally, it was also the time when I began looking forward to the Masters. For most of us, the Masters signals the unofficial start of the golf cabin fever season. Forget the West Coast swing and the Tour's stint in Florida. Seeing a never-ending sea of green dotted with dogwoods and azaleas will jump start any golfer with a pulse and you can be sure that watching the Masters on TV gets people to their course—if only to bed down their appetite for golf with a bag of range balls. But in recent years, the Masters just isn't the same to me and I had been unable to put my finger on it until I saw a quote from long time golf writer/editor George Peper in a recent issue of *Links Magazine* in an article about the world's greatest unknown golf courses and most overrated courses. In his list of overrated courses, he included Augusta National with the quote, "If it's so great, why do they change it every year?" It was an epiphany.

It was painfully true. Was the course I had admired from afar for my entire life overrated? Had the constant tinkering over the past decade so changed the course from Alister Mackenzie and Bobby Jones' original masterpiece that it was forever ruined? Could that be possible? Then, as I was researching material for this column, I picked up the new 2006 Masters Issue of *Golf Digest* and thumbed my way to an excellent article by Ron Whitten about that very topic. Nice timing, Ron. Apparently, past champions such as Nicklaus and Palmer have finally (though reluctantly) come out against the constant changes (most recently by Tom Fazio) that seem to occur within days of the final putt on Sunday afternoon every year. Nicklaus would even go so far as to say that "whoever" was making the changes must not even play the game because the changes he saw made no sense. Ouch.

Looking back, the vast amount of the changes have occurred in the "Tiger-Proofing" years since young Mr. Woods lapped the field and ran away with the 1997 title. Some of the changes seem to be almost knee-jerk reactions to toughen the course. Enlarging and deepening bunkers, growing rough where none used to be, and adding new back tees. And new back tees. And new back tees. Sadly, according to the *Golf Digest* article, the original tees from where past Masters had been played were eliminated in the process with no designation of their location and you can no longer play the course as it was played by Snead, Sarazen, Hogan, and others.

But as easy as it is to point to the finger of blame toward the National and Chairman Hootie Johnson for "running their course," I place the blame squarely on the shoulders of the USGA. I have been accused of blaming the governing body for my biases toward the technology that is changing the game and I've been called a "traditionalist" and even "regressive." Those are some of the nicer names. However, it is not my job to protect the game of golf. That is the job of the USGA and the R & A. A job that has been woefully performed seemingly for one reason: money. Club and ball manufacturers have been allowed to run amuck of the regulations for years, pushing the envelope by selling the promise of "growing the game" to the powers that be. Instead, uncontrolled growth in the distance a ball carries not only changes the way the game is played, it also changes the very essence of the game: the course upon which it is played. I don't blame the manufacturers either. They have a fiduciary duty to stockholders to create new technology and garner more market share and they do so within the guidelines established by the USGA. So we're back to the USGA.

As for my critics, it would be in my financial interest for courses to become obsolete at the hands of technology. It would directly correlate to an increase in renovation opportunities. And I'm not opposed to game improvement clubs that make mis-hits more forgiving for the average golfer. That makes the game more enjoyable. However, I do have a problem with 400-yard drives. Sure there will be a handful of athletic golfers like Sean Fister who will crush the ball to the delight of their fans. But when everyone is hitting 300+ drives and flip wedges into every par 4, where's the fun in it?

Long term, the bigger picture is that the USGA's dropping the ball on governing the past 15+ years is making great courses obsolete, making new courses more expensive due to additional land needed and increased maintenance costs, and the courses caught in the middle forced to continuously "upgrade" to keep up. Nearly five years ago, I wrote a column entitled "8,000 Yards with a Bullet" about the new magic number on the horizon. It used to be that 7,000 yards was considered long. Now that's the members' tees on some new courses. At the time, I was told that I was being melodramatic. Maybe not.

And so, Augusta National, for all its history and glory, maybe—just maybe—isn't as different from every other course in the country. They are all trying to keep up with what the USGA has wrought and there's no going back now. You cannot realistically roll back the golf ball. And there's not enough persimmon on the planet to replace all of the titanium and graphite drivers in the bags and closets of the world's golfers. And so, we watch Augusta tinker—not as a proactive approach to improvement, but as a reactive defense mechanism from the constant onslaught. By 2009, the first tee will be a practice mat on the roof of the golf shop and the 18th green may be behind the grandstand. And the saddest fact lost in all of the attention given to the course changes? The fact that this will be the 12th year of Gary McCord's banishment for his "bikini wax" comments. And sadly, that's now CBS's policy—not Augusta National's.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Association of America whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2006.