



The “Other” Spy Plane Incident

By: Nathan Crace Date: August 8, 2001

If you haven't heard by now, Augusta National is again making changes to the course in an effort to make it longer and more challenging for the world's best players when they return for the Masters in April next year. This has been an on-going theme at the hallowed venue since first opening in 1933, although no doubt accelerated by Tiger Woods' dominance in the 1997 Masters. For example, there hasn't always been a pond on the par 3 sixteenth hole, and the club didn't convert from bermudagrass to bentgrass greens until 1981. But for some reason, these recent changes have a number of people up in arms. Since the Masters earlier this year, there has been a great deal of speculation and debate regarding what changes will be made this time and the extent of those changes. Various earlier, although vague, reports had mentioned planting trees along fairways to make landing areas tighter, adding and enlarging a number of bunkers to place a premium on placement of tee shots on par 4's and par 5's, and of course building new tee boxes to make holes longer.

None of this is new. All courses—the great and the not-so-great—undergo some degree of renovation in their lifetimes to “keep up with the Joneses” as it were. For Augusta National, it's a matter of keeping up with the Callaways, the Taylor Mades, the Titleists, and the Pings to name a few. We all know that technology—in an effort to draw more players to the game—has shortened the older courses. This too is no great revelation. The poor players became decent players, the decent became good, and the good became downright scary at times with 350 yard drives and flip wedges into 460 yard par 4's. Not to discount the better players you also see on Tour these days, but thank Goodness Augusta National had room to stretch it out a little with the helping hand of Tom Fazio.

What strikes me as so bizarre about this situation, however, is the revelation that both *The Augusta Chronicle* and *Golfweek* have flown “aerial surveys” (or as I call them reconnaissance missions) of the course in an effort to verify that earlier claims by club president Hootie Johnson regarding the scope of the renovation work were too conservative. Spy planes? Why did they both feel the need to resort to spy planes to assess the work at Augusta? Was it their journalistic duty to get to the bottom of this renovation cover-up? They thought Hootie was holding something back—and they were right! *Golfweek*'s flight (the earlier of the two recon missions) estimated an additional 115 yards had been added to the existing 6,985 yards the course measured for the 2001 Masters. Upon further review, *The Augusta Chronicle* reported that those estimates were too conservative and they felt that the added yardage was more like 140 to 185 yards following their mission! Fazio could not be reached for comment. Not surprisingly, under such immense pressure from the media to ‘fess up, Hootie Johnson came forward on August 7th to say that the actual new length of the course would be....7,270 yards—or 285 additional yards for those of you keeping score at home.

It seems like some people outside the club wonder why Augusta National would do such a thing to the hallowed grounds of American golf? Don't they enjoy seeing players blow drives over antiquated fairway bunkers and hitting 9-iron second shots into par 5's? Don't get me wrong. I wish I could do that, but I hate to see Augusta National (and other great old courses) reduced to a pitch and putt because technology has golfers as a whole hitting the ball further and straighter than ever before. However, the thought of media spy plane missions seems like a bit of overkill. After all, it is Augusta National's golf course...right?

But this story doesn't end there. I have the inside scoop from an unnamed source (whom I'm sure is reputable) on some changes that Hootie didn't mention and the spy planes didn't pick up. A number of new tees were actually added behind the tees spotted by the spy planes. Apparently the club keeps potted azaleas placed on top of these new tees to fool any nosy spy planes (never mind azaleas aren't in bloom this time of year). In reality, the new yardage when the course is unveiled for the 2002 Masters will be 8,457 yards! Now that's more like it! Plans are already in the works to cut all of the green sizes in half and add 47 more bunkers immediately following Joe Durant's thirty-two-under-par thrashing of the course in the 2002 Masters.

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