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THE GREENING OF THE GREENS
Golf is finally letting
nature take its course (p. 56)

By Jay Stuller

Golf gets back to nature, inviting everyone to play

Using natural landforms and native grasses and plants, golf course designers are creating links that are environmentally up to par



At Cloverdale Golf Club, native alders frame what could become strokes of genius on the fifth green.

Opposite: A barn and a natural lake grace the ninth hole of the former Washington dairy farm.

Standing at the tee of Cloverdale Golf Club's ninth hole on a summer evening, one can't help but absorb the surroundings. On the verdant floor of the Stillaguamish Valley, you're enveloped by the foothills of Washington's Cascades, off which reflect twilight hues of sage and purple. To the left, screened by cottonwoods and maples, is the valley's namesake river. Ahead, on a rise behind the ninth green, is a classic red barn. The pastoral quiet is broken only by the screech of a nearby eagle.

Such reverie must pass, for the 390-yard, par-4 hole demands a golfer's full attention—if only because about 80 yards shy of the green and to the right lurks a hazard that might take the “Tiger” out of Eldrick Woods, the

wunderkind of the professional tour. “It's the lagoon,” says Cloverdale co-owner Cynthia Witscher. “Although it's dry now, at times we've had to tell city folk they shouldn't go in there looking for lost balls. You see, on a dairy farm, a lagoon is where you store the barn's washed-down manure.”

It's unlikely Cloverdale will ever host a pro tournament, because it bears little resemblance to meticulously manicured courses such as Augusta National, Pebble Beach and Pinehurst. Its fairways are bumpy and rugged. Tufts of thick canary grass dot the rough. Skunk cabbage sprouts from wallows near several holes. Its clubhouse is a shed adjacent to the barn.

The “Green Acres” look is authentic, because until

Photographs by Michael Melford



In the off-season, joggers follow boardwalks over the marshes and meadows of Squaw Creek. The golf

course opened in 1992 and became a case study of low-impact design in an environmentally sensitive area.

three years ago, Rick and Cynthia Witscher did indeed keep a herd of holsteins on this 150-acre spread, just outside the town of Arlington, 60 miles north of Seattle. “In 1988, we were the Snohomish County Dairy Family of the Year,” explains Rick. “But milk prices were the pits; we were losing our shirts. So we decided to grow bent-grass turf for the golf and landscape industries.”

While farmers understand grass, the Witschers knew little about golf—except that turf buyers kept wanting to hit balls at the greens they’d grown. Thus inspired, Rick read what he could on course design and eventually created an 18-hole layout. He placed most greens on existing rises on the river’s floodplain. His fairways follow contours shaped by ancient riverbeds, sandbars and the hooves of cattle. Thickets of brush and boulders and patches of exposed sand were left in place as hazards to challenge golfers. Because the hardy turf comprises six types of native grasses, the course requires neither pesticides nor an irrigation system.

In 1996, Cloverdale hosted 25,000 rounds of golf, up from 20,000 the year before. With its low-key atmosphere (the clubhouse has an “honor box,” into which players drop their modest fees when the Witschers put up their “Out Mowing” sign), the course beckons golfers of all levels of ability—and from all social strata.

A country-club showcase Cloverdale is not. But the Witschers created a course with attributes that architects often struggle mightily to duplicate. What’s more, their modest operation is a refreshing counterpoint to criticisms of a sport that once seemed beyond reproach.

Even as golf’s popularity soared in the late 1980s—growing from fewer than 20 million U.S. participants to more than 25 million today—the game and its fields of play have come under withering fire. “What was once accepted as a benign form of open space is under attack for its impacts on water quality, wildlife habitat and land use,” explains Paul Parker, a vice president with the Center for Resource Management, a nonprofit organization based in Salt Lake City and Denver that tries to find common ground between business and environmental interests.

There are already more than 15,000 golf courses in the United States, which together take up more area than Delaware and Rhode Island combined. Since 1990, an average of more than 350 new or expanded courses have opened annually, each 18-hole course covering about 150 acres. Another 1,600 courses are planned or are under construction.

This is welcome news for hackers who must hustle to cadge scarce tee times. But the lust for new courses rais-

es serious questions. For one thing, is carving fairways out of a forest, moving a million cubic yards of seaside sand dunes or planting thirsty Bermuda grass in desert settings—where a course can quaff up to a million gallons of water a day—an intelligent use of land? For another, is keeping courses green and free of weeds, brown spots and bugs worth the liberal use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides?

Much of this is done in the interest of the perceived perfection that's come to be known as the "Augusta National Syndrome," named for the fabled Georgia course that hosts the Masters tournament each spring. "People see this highly manicured layout on television, with wall-to-wall green fairways and blooming flowers wherever you look," says Parker. "It *is* beautiful. But the conditions are completely unnatural."

Still, this televised perfection—standards that are also nurtured by features in golf magazines and resort ads—generates expectations that oh-so picky golfers demand of designers and course superintendents. In addition, architects began designing incredibly difficult, championship-style courses, mainly to please developers out to attract professional events, or to lure guests to resorts where it can cost \$100 to play a round.

"Because of these trends we've fashioned ourselves a real image problem," says Michael Hurdzan, one of the world's top golf architects. "Golf is often viewed as a sport for rich white guys who despoil the environment. That elitist image makes us a fat and easy target."

With a doctorate in plant physiology, the outgoing and thoughtful Hurdzan designs both upscale private

courses and low-cost public facilities. "What isn't widely known is that the industry has put an incredible amount of money and effort into research on turf grasses that require little or no pesticides, and which need less water," he says. "We have scientific studies that prove well-designed courses don't pollute the environment. We can even make them beneficial to wildlife by reclaiming wasteland or converting old landfills into healthy spaces that are useful to a community. And courses don't have to be expensive to build or play."

A student of his professional forebears, Hurdzan also recognizes that some answers to the questions menacing golf's future rest in history, and that today's criticisms are supremely ironic given the game's origins. That's why there's a certain rightness to the Witschers' rough-and-ready golf club. Cloverdale is a course for the next century, if only because nearly everything about it suggests that it's a course straight out of the past.

"The architect of the land . . . is God"

On the fourth hole of the Old Course in St. Andrews, Scotland, Mike Mordan has just smacked a long-iron shot that's been snagged and slowed by the branch of a bush. As the Chicago pension consultant walks past the prickly brown-and-green shrub, he lightly brushes it with his hand and, with the bemused resignation so common to golfers, asks aloud: "Who put this here?"

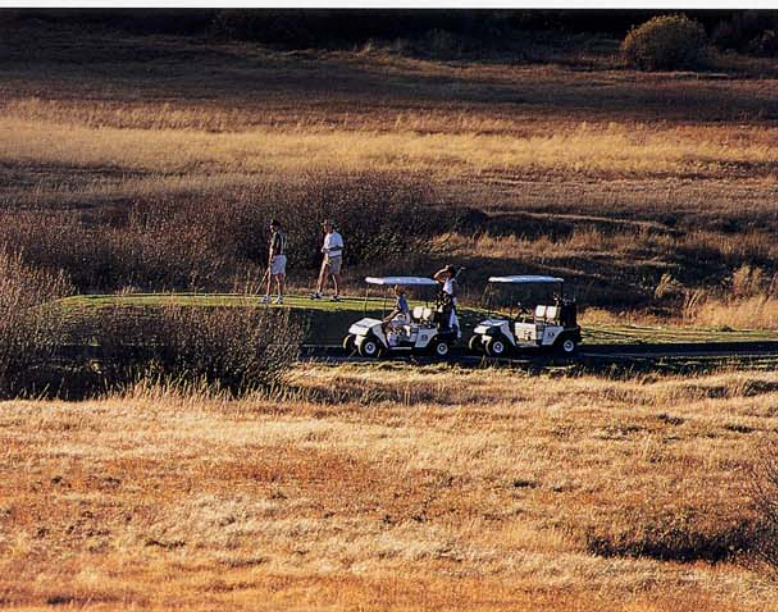
Caddy Dave Hutchison, who for 22 years has looped bags around St. Andrews, cocks his head, looks quizzically at Mordan and pauses for several seconds.

"God," he answers. "There's nothing on this course that was made by man. Golfers play on it. But the architect of the land . . . is God."

Religion aside, there's no argument that for golfers, no piece of ground is more sacred than these 18 holes wedged between eastern Scotland farmland and coastal sand dunes along the North Sea. The Old Course site has allegedly been trod by golfers since the 1500s. And yet, no one knows who designed the current layout on this narrow strip of salt-tolerant marram grass and finer fescues cropped by sheep and cattle.

Says George Grant, who has lived all of his 62 years in St. Andrews, "Local lore has it that the bunkers were created by sheep nestling in hollows to seek shelter from storms. The sand and bunker walls have, of course, been tidied up for golf. But the story of the sheep is one I've heard my whole life."

If it's true, says Hurdzan, Scotland has the world's smartest sheep, "since the bunkers are lined up precisely to points of play." When legendary course architect Alister Mackenzie analyzed St. Andrews, he came to the conclusion that people kept hitting shots to the same spots, and by repeated play scratched the turf down to sand. "Sheep might then have nestled in the low spots,"



Golfers tee off at Squaw Creek; the Squaw Valley, California, course uses no chemical pesticides.