THE REDOUTABLE STANLEY THOMPSON

LONG SHOTS
THE CHALLENGE OF HERITAGE GOLF COURSE CONSERVATION

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THE WORLD OF golf has changed dramatically since the Golden Age of golf course design. At the St. George’s Golf and Country Club, the 210-yard, 6th hole is a case in point. During the 2010 Canadian Open, PGA Tour professionals were hitting long irons on the par 3, a hole considered by one SCORE Golf contributor to be “a wonderful short hole” (SCOREGolf.com Canada’s top 100, pg. 34). Compared with its original length, 140 yards, as designed by renowned golf course architect Stanley Thompson in 1929, this hole now provides a noticeably different shot value than the original. Prior to alterations, golf pro George Knudson recorded a hole-in-one on this hole using just a 9-iron at the 1968 Canadian Open.

Across Canada, pressure to impose modern play on traditional golf courses has the potential to significantly alter this unique part of our cultural landscape legacy. Thankfully, heritage-minded organizations and professionals, including landscape architects, are becoming increasingly aware of this threat and are working to mitigate its impact.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF GOLF DESIGN
Many well-known Canadian golf courses were created during the Golden Age of golf course design, from 1900 to 1940. Before this renaissance, golf courses built in Canada and the United States were at best rudimentary and often worse. According to author Geoff Shackelford (The Golden Age of Golf Design, 1999) some of the first courses were...
“primitive and downright freakish.” During the Golden Age, a new generation of golf course architects brought heightened sensitivity of the landscape to their designs. The original courses of the British Isles, for example, are now heritage resources which bear testimony to the works of master golf course architects. For contemporary golfers, these heritage courses also have considerable associative value as the site of significant golf-related events, and social value as part of the fabric of local communities.

Stanley Thompson was among the most prolific and respected of the Golden Age golf course architects. Thompson is recognized for his sensitivity in interpreting the natural characteristics of landscape. During his career, he worked on 121 golf courses in nine provinces and several others internationally. Many are well-known landmarks, such as Thompson’s three national park courses: Highland Links Golf Course in Cape Breton Highlands National Park, Banff Springs Golf Club and Jasper Park Lodge Golf Course. In 2006, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada named Stanley Thompson a Person of National Significance in recognition of his contribution to Canada’s built environment.

THE STANLEY THOMPSON INVENTORY
The Stanley Thompson Society (www.stanleythompson.com) was founded in 1998 to preserve the tradition and character of the golf courses he designed. With growing interest in golf and wider appreciation of Thompson’s unique contribution, many clubs have begun using the Thompson name to attract players and club members. Concerned that Thompson’s reputation might be diminished by unsubstantiated claims of affiliation with Thompson, the Society initiated a provenance research study in 2008, engaging the authors of this article as investigators. The study included a comprehensive and defensible inventory of his work in Canada, documented in a form that would be useful to the Society, golf course managers, researchers and the public, and recommended methods to support conservation of Thompson’s work.

GAME CHANGERS
Technological changes – everything from golf equipment to the way golf courses are constructed and maintained – have greatly altered the game. Media influences, too, have been major. The evolution of golf equipment has significant potential to affect the integrity of an historic golf course. New club and ball technologies have enabled golfers to hit golf balls farther and (for the most part) straighter than ever before. There is no doubt that this evolution has been outstanding for golfers’ self-esteem, but it presents a troubling prospect for designers. Thompson designed his courses with key elements strategically positioned to test the skilled golfer, yet out of reach for weaker players so they would have an opportunity to enjoy the game without being overwhelmed by the golf course. Advances in equipment technology have altered this dynamic by enabling better players to hit the ball well beyond the original target and thus rendering once challenging hazards somewhat obsolete.

Technological advances also affect maintenance and construction. In Thompson’s day, construction methods and maintenance practices were still quite rudimentary, requiring a great deal of manual labour and hand work to create key features of the course. Designers of the era took full advantage, expressing their creative vision by developing features and nuances with a very detailed level of precision. Renovations done today using modern means are a cause for concern as inherent equipment constraints have the potential to destroy character-defining features.

Media influences, too, present challenges, albeit indirect and unintentional. Since golf first appeared on colour television in the 1950s, the media’s influence on the industry and golfer alike has been enormous. Golfers develop expectations of how a golf course should look and play, based on PGA Tour courses they see on television each week.
The expectations become dangerous when they lead to proposals for a maintenance strategy or renovation plan that is in conflict with the original course design— or indeed, unattainable, if the design intent is to be respected. Green speeds provide a perfect example. Greens on most modern golf courses are designed to tolerate super-fast green speeds quite easily, whereas greens on many historic courses were designed to be much slower and featured steeper pitches and much more whimsical contouring.

**CONTEMPORARY PLAY ON A CLASSIC COURSE**
Finding a balance between the seemingly conflicting priorities of heritage conservation and contemporary play is often a matter of managing player expectations. Member education is essential. When members recognize that the golf course is a heritage landscape, valuable to the community and to the greater portfolio of heritage work, their expectations often shift. They are more willing to compromise, and often develop pride in this historical asset.

Detailed information about course design is also key. An inventory which identifies all character-defining features of the original design and then evaluates their current condition will provide a baseline that can underpin future renovation planning. A knowledgeable golf course architect is invaluable—one who will make every effort to conserve the integrity of the original design. This requires an in-depth knowledge of the original designer’s work and design principles.

**RESTORING CLASSIC COURSES**
Support for protecting or restoring classic golf courses may not yet be the norm, but according to Bill Newton, Executive Director of the Stanley Thompson Society, “many existing classic clubs are experiencing a rejuvenation of their memberships as golfers have re-discovered the older courses of the twenties and thirties. Appropriate length, degrees of challenge, mature landscapes, better social interaction, comfortable spousal and senior play, all lead to a more enjoyable experience on the so-called ‘classic’ courses.”

Golf course architect Ian Andrew is one of several Canadians focused on restoration of Canada’s heritage courses. Educated at the University of Guelph in landscape architecture, Ian has been immersed in the history of golf course design and the works of the Golden Age masters since he was a teenager. In the mid-1990s, he became actively involved in promoting renovation of classic golf courses because, in his words, “I saw too many classic courses being insensitively altered.” In recent years his...
FOR A TRIFLING THOUSAND DOLLARS...

Bill Newton, Executive Director of the Stanley Thompson Society, brings Stanley Thompson to life with vivid anecdotes in *Thompson Musings* (2010). Stanley Thompson was a prolific reader. Before building Anne of Green Gables Golf Course in PEI National Park, he carefully read and studied the novel and then incorporated natural landscape features that referenced Lucy Maud Montgomery’s story into his course design. At other times, Thompson was the consummate salesman. He’d meet prospective investors with exuberant enthusiasm. “Never have I seen such a piece of land,” he was wont to say. “For a trifling thousand dollars more, gentlemen, you can make this the finest course imaginable.”

STANLEY THOMPSON: CANADA’S MOST DECORATED DESIGNER

Two Canadian golf courses are currently ranked among the top 100 in the world, Highland Links Golf Club (#51 - world) and St. George’s Golf & Country Club (#55 - world). Both are Stanley Thompson designs. In Canada, the Thompson name occupies 15 places on the top 100 list, along with one course designed by Stanley’s brother, Nichol. SCORE Golf Magazine publishes the bi-annual ranking. http://scoregolf.com/rankings/top100/top-100-golf-courses-in-canada-2010/ • #3 - St. George’s Golf & Country Club • #4 - Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge • #5 - Fairmont Banff Springs Golf Course • #6 - Highland Links Golf Club • #7 - Capilano Golf & Country Club • #14 - Westmount Golf and Country Club • #46 - Brantford Golf & Country Club ** Nichol Thompson • #57 - Oakdale Golf & Country Club • #64 - St. Thomas Golf & Country Club • #79 - Summit Golf & Country Club • #80 - Sunningdale Golf & Country Club • #86 - Beaconsfield Golf Course • #87 - Royal Mayfair Golf & Country Club • #89 - Thornhill Golf & Country Club • #90 - Burlington Golf & Country Club • #91 - Cataraqui Golf & Country Club

Wondering what courses took first and second place? #1 National Golf Club of Canada in Woodbridge, designed in 1976, and #2 Hamilton Golf & Country Club in Ancaster, designed in 1914 by Harry Colt. Colt was paid 300 guineas for his work.
practice has grown, as many clubs and players came to the realization that they liked these old courses. Through Ian’s expertise, he has helped clubs see that even if major alterations have occurred in the past, it is possible to restore the character-defining features of an earlier design. Regarding his sensitive restoration at St. George’s Golf & Country Club for example, he says “we concentrated on putting the original features back the way they were originally found, unless greens had been relocated. In such cases, we tried to emulate the original features in the new green locations.” In addition Ian suggests that he rarely makes concessions for technology, opting instead to “look for back tees.” He tries to avoid changing holes as much as possible. He frequently points out to club managers that only five percent of their members are capable of hitting the longer holes that so many clubs now seek to incorporate. The other ninety-five percent of players, the bulk of the paying members, have a more pleasurable experience on the shorter, more interesting holes characteristic of the Golden Age courses.

MUNICIPAL DESIGNATION

Municipalities in Ontario are beginning to recognize that golf courses are worthy of recognition as heritage resources. The first to do so through the Ontario Heritage Act was the City of Windsor, which designated Rosedale Golf Course a cultural heritage landscape in 2003. This course was designed by another significant Golden Age figure, Donald Ross. In 2010, the City of Mississauga officially designated Lakeview Golf Course, by Golden Age designer Herbert Strong. Mississauga planner, Paula Wubbenhorst, notes that designation has helped to build broader community appreciation for this local landmark.

RECALIBRATING OUR PERCEPTION

Many golf courses remain off limits to the public and thus widespread public appreciation of their heritage value may not happen quickly. Nonetheless, landscape architects are in a leadership position. Although golf courses raise mixed reactions in the landscape architecture profession due to their association with environmental concerns, we have the sensitivity to perceive other values inherent in these cultural landscapes. As professionals, our role will be to carry out research, to inform the public and the golf club memberships where heritage value is identified, and to use our design and communication skills to demonstrate how to maintain the integrity of these unique landscapes while still supporting one of Canada’s favourite sports.

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