

in play

BY TOM FERRELL AND MARK FINE • PHOTO BY TONY ROBERTS/CORBIS

ON COURSE



“I couldn’t help it. I can resist anything except temptation.”

—Oscar Wilde

head games

HAZARDS TEMPT, TAUNT AND INTIMIDATE

Almost anyone could walk along a balance beam placed on the ground. Raise that beam up a few feet in the air, however, and the fear factor kicks in. What if I fall? Don’t look down. Just put one foot in front of the other. The psychological process has opened an internal dialogue. The same effect occurs when the course designer introduces hazards on a golf hole. The golfer starts to think about all the “bad” things that can happen. Suddenly, the unconscious process of execution is disturbed, and the chances of success decline.

The most basic psychological effect that architects can employ—and the one encountered by the golfer at the opening of this article—is the “line of charm,” a term coined by the early 20th-century designer and writer Max Behr. Unlike the line of play—a strategic route the golfer follows to get from point to point—the line of charm is a provocative path that attracts the golfer’s eye. It’s often an instinctive route that shaves off distance and cuts the corner. It almost always falls close to hazards. It challenges the line of play that the architect has outlined, causing psychological stress as the golfer determines how best to attack the hole.

There may be no more famous “line of charm” in golf than the 16th hole at Cypress Point Golf Club. Though few will ever play the hole, which stretches out onto a rocky promontory in the Pacific, almost every serious golfer has imagined the challenge while staring at the stunning photo-

graphs. Here, golf course architect Alister MacKenzie utilized one of the most dramatic hazards in the world, the Pacific Ocean, to intimidate and excite the golfer on the tee. Beyond this intimidating hazard, MacKenzie also created dissonance in the golfer’s mind by stretching the limits of the one-shot hole—the 16th measured a whopping 235 yards. By utilizing a dramatic hazard and the perception of “par,” MacKenzie drives traffic away from the safer layout and pitch route that would ensure no worse than a bogey four for most players and toward the heroic shot over the ocean that could yield a birdie or par, but will likely yield double-bogey or worse. One thing is certain, however: Anyone who ever has the opportunity to face down such a shot will long remember the psychological experience, regardless of the outcome.

No one should confuse golf course architects with psychologists, but as Bob Dylan once said, “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.” Most course designers are or have been golfers themselves. They know how golfers react when faced with various types of strategic and penal hazards.

Of course, architects can play tricks on golfers as well. The difficulty or penal value of a hazard and the fear, excitement or arousal it inspires may not always match up. Often, the psychological factors introduced by the hazard outweigh the physical danger.

A large bunker at greenside, for instance, may cause golfers to play away from it only to bring deep rough or unpredictable hollows into play. Even more confounding is the phenomenon of the out-of-character shot often created by a seemingly easy or out-of-play hazard.

Think of a small pond placed directly in front of the tee box on a par-4, requiring only a 60- or 70-yard carry to an open fairway. How many times have you seen a golfer who almost always gets the ball airborne top or skull a shot right into the water? The image of the water has become the dominant thought, interrupting the normal execution process.

Water, of course, is golf's ultimate

5 All-Star Psychological Hazards You Can Face

- 1. The Island Green at the 17th**
TPC Sawgrass Stadium Course
- 2. The Pacific Ocean at the 8th**
Pebble Beach Golf Links
- 3. The Road Bunker at the 17th**
The Old Course, St. Andrews
- 4. The Carry Bunker at the 5th**
Bethpage Black
- 5. Himalayas Bunker at the 4th**
St. Enodoc, England

penal hazard. The very thought of it can turn a skilled player's arms and legs to jelly and turn his or her ordered mind to chaos. The short 17th at The TPC at Sawgrass Stadium Course, home of The Player's Championship, is little more than a pitch even for most recreational golfers. But the famed island green has wreaked more than its fair share of havoc solely through the intimidating presence of water surrounding the green. Pete Dye, with his unconventional layouts, angles and carries, is a master of psychological design.

Water may be the most fearsome of hazards, but architects throughout the game's history have relied on the psychological value of whatever hazards they had at their disposal. The Road Bunker on the 17th hole at The Old Course at Saint Andrews is a sim-

ple sand pit, but in playing away from it, the golfer brings other hazards—the road and a stone wall—into play. The blind approach over the "Alps" and the hidden Sahara Bunker at Prestwick introduce all the timeless psychological elements—stress, tension and fear. George Crump, who built Pine Valley Golf Club in the sandhills of western New Jersey, had limited water on site. He used dramatic carries over sandy waste areas to replicate the psychological effect, nowhere more effectively than at the par-5 7th, where he employed a vast waste area known as Hell's Half-Acre. Basically, he utilized sand to mimic water.

Golden Age designer A.W. Tillinghast tinkered constantly with the placement and appearance of his hazards. At Bethpage Black, he borrowed from the philosophy of early American architect C.B. Macdonald, who introduced the "Cape" hole at Mid-Ocean Golf Club in Bermuda. At the Cape Hole, Macdonald wrapped the fairway around Mangrove Lake, inviting the golfer to bite off as much of the lake as he or she dared. Tillinghast used this same approach by placing a large carry bunker on the 5th hole at Bethpage Black. Knowing that sand alone may not produce the desired effect, however, he placed islands of vegetation throughout the bunker, adding a second menacing characteristic.

The goal of every golfer should be to thoroughly read the presence of hazards—not just the dramatic ones but also the subtle ones, the rolls and slopes of the terrain and the hollows and roughs around the green. Then process the risk and play accordingly. Focus on the successful result, not the obvious or even hidden danger. The architect is trying to arouse fear, tension and stress. By fully understanding the architect's hand, you can increase the likelihood of avoiding his or her traps, whatever they might be.

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