

# FROM THE ARCHITECT'S DESK



By Kevin Norby

## GOLF COURSE DESIGN 101

I often meet people who, upon learning that I am in the golf course design business, say something like “so you’re the guy I should blame for making the golf courses so hard”. The reality is, as golf course architects, our goal isn’t usually to make golf difficult. Our goal is usually to create an experience that is fun for the average golfer while, at the same time, provide enough strategy and interest to challenge the more skilled golfer.

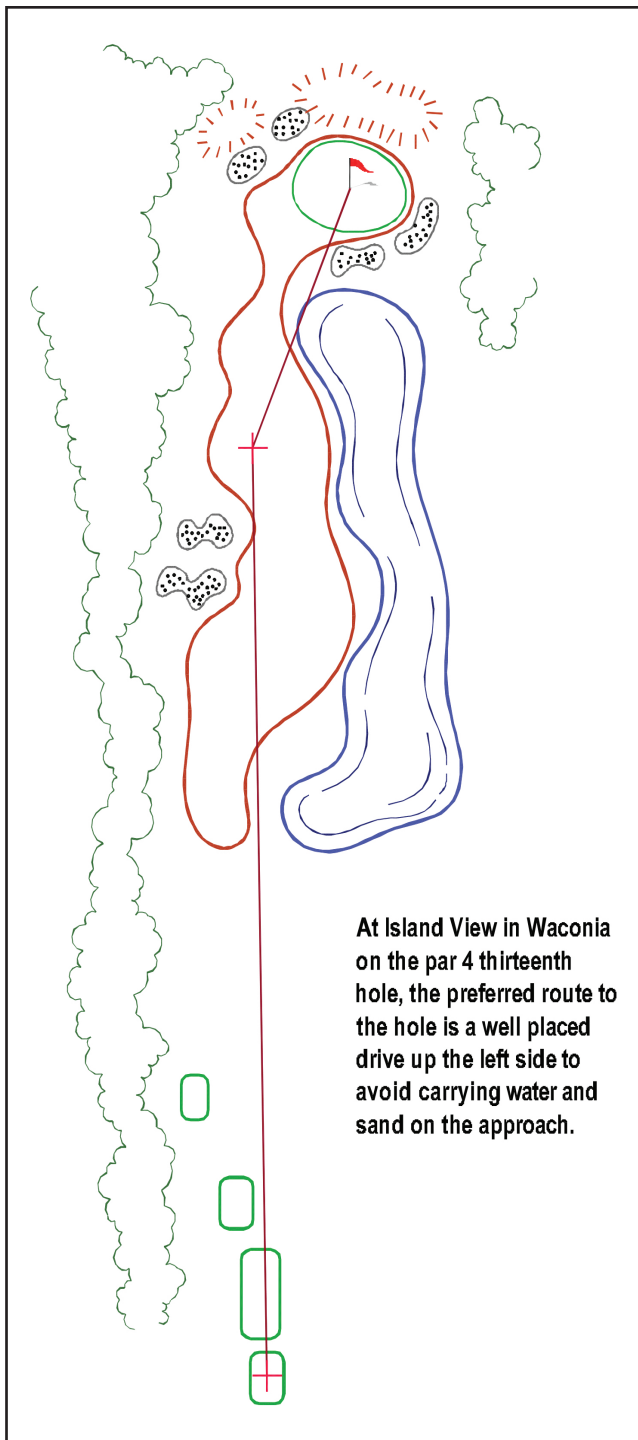
### WHAT DRIVES DESIGN?

The way we design a public golf course is often very different from the way we design a private course. At a private club, the skill level of the average golfer is usually somewhat higher than the skill level of the golfer at a public golf course. The National Golf Foundation tells us that the average golfer shoots a score of just over 100 and that only 6 percent of all golfers score in the 80s. Only 20 percent of all golfers have USGA handicaps. In fact, we know that many golfers don’t consider themselves golfers at all. Instead they play just a few times a year simply for fun and the social interaction - not for the strategy or the challenge. The fact that you are reading this article probably means you consider yourself a golfer. My goal as a golf course architect is usually to design a golf hole or a golf course that everyone can enjoy. In part, we do that with multiple teeing areas, carefully designed landing areas and strategically placed bunkers and hazards. In my mind, the gauge of a well-designed golf course is one that has eighteen good golf holes – not fifteen good holes and two or three holes that are quirky or unsafe. To improve your opportunity to shoot lower scores, it may be helpful to try to understand the architect’s vision and thought process.

### PREFERRED ROUTE TO THE GREEN

Every golf hole has a preferred route to the green. Your role as a golfer should be to discover that route and to then attempt to navigate the hazards by executing the right shots. Courses that allow you to simply pull driver hole after hole and bang the ball down the fairway are not nearly as interesting as those courses that require you to make decisions about the placement of your shot in order to approach the green from the most receptive angle or to avoid having to carry a hazard on your approach shot.

One of the ways that architects try to create some strategy and interest is to consider the placement of hazards and to create



At Island View in Waconia on the par 4 thirteenth hole, the preferred route to the hole is a well placed drive up the left side to avoid carrying water and sand on the approach.

preferred angles of approach to the green. A good example of this is No. 13 at Island View Golf Club in Waconia where, in 2010, we moved the entire fairway closer to the water on the right side. As a result, a drive that is pushed to the right now requires an approach that not only has to carry the water but also must carry one of two large greenside bunkers to get to the green. On the other hand, a drive positioned up the left side of the fairway doesn’t require the golfer to contend with either water or sand. As an added twist, long hitters will find that a large tree on the left makes it a challenge to approach a left pin position with a high-lofted wedge. So, most of the time, the preferred shot may actually be to lay back to allow for a seven or eight iron on the approach.

Standing on the tee, the golfer should look to see where the pin is cut and then attempt to identify the best route to the green.

### DO SOME RESEARCH

We all know that the more you play a course the more familiar you become with the routing and the better you tend to play. After the first time or two, you learn where to hit the ball and what areas to avoid. So, next time you are going to play a course for the first time, it may be helpful to do some research. Before you play, visit the course’s website to see if they’ve posted descriptions of the holes or the architect’s comments.

If the website doesn’t offer any insight, try visiting Google Earth or any number of other websites to get an idea for how to play the hole. Also, when you check in, see if the course offers a yardage book. Photos and drawings of the course in the yardage book or checking the yardages and notes on the scorecard can give you some insight into how the architect envisioned playing the hole or which plan of attack might give you the best chance at birdie.

### TRICKS AND ILLUSIONS

Many architects like to reuse the same tricks or ideas. Next time you play a new course, see if you can find out who the architect was that designed the course. Personally, I tend to dislike hidden bunkers or hazards behind greens but some architects do this on a regular basis – particularly on short par fours and short par fives. Donald Ross is widely renowned for his turtleback greens and steep falloffs or

Island View #13 Drawing

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Grand National Golf Club #5

deep greenside bunkering off the backside. Knowing who the architect was may help you identify the problem areas and a strategy that suits your game.

Some of my favorite holes are short par fours where I ask the golfer to decide on the tee whether they are going to lay up to play conservatively or pull driver and risk bogey or double bogey. Short par fours and short par fives are good opportunities to incorporate a green that runs away from the tee to require a high soft approach or a pitch with spin. Good examples of this are No. 15 at The Refuge in Oak Grove, No. 12 at Deer Run in Victoria or the new No. 5 at Grand National. In 2011 at Grand National, we built a new short par four that plays just 370 yards from the tips. A good drive leaves a wedge to the green but a shelf in the middle of the green can run an aggressively struck ball away from the approach and off the back of the green. So, to hold the green, the golfer needs an accurate wedge with some spin or a shot that lands on the front and feeds to the back.

Another trick is to use water that gets progressively narrower or a series of fairway bunkers that get progressively smaller to create the illusion that a golf hole or landing area is longer than it really is. One of the most common illusions is to position raised bunkers in the approach to the green so that the green appears tightly bunkered when in fact the bunkers may be 30 to 40 yards short of the green.

Next time you play golf, do some research ahead of time and try to decipher the architect's vision and strategy for the holes. Simply pulling driver isn't always the best opportunity to score low.

Kevin Norby is the owner and principle of Herfort Norby Golf Architects based in Chaska, Minnesota and is a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects.

In 2013, Kevin will be writing a series of eight articles for Tee Times magazine.

Recent projects include renovations at The Minikahda Club and Pebble Creek Golf Club in Minnesota, Coal Creek Golf Club in Denver, Colorado and Sunbird Golf Club in Phoenix, Arizona.

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