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## THE PRINCIPLE OF FAIRNESS

**FAIRNESS - THE QUALITY OF BEING REASONABLE AND JUST WITHOUT FAVORITISM OR DISCRIMINATION.**

*“Equity has nothing to do with golf. If founded on eternal justice the game would be deadly dull to watch or play. The essence of the game is inequality. Take your medicine where you find it and don’t cry.” – Charles Blair Macdonald*

Fairness is almost considered a dirty word to golf course architects, especially when uttered by golfers. Rarely, though, is a golf architect allowed to turn a blind eye to the Principle of Fairness, free to design without practical considerations. No matter how much a golf architect may want to sidestep the discussion, it’s hard to avoid.

Whenever I engage a membership about its golf course the notion of fairness comes up almost immediately and by a cross-section of talent levels. As one breaks down their concerns, the “*fairness*” issue reveals itself as a matter of “*I don’t like that because it keeps me from my low score, which I deserve and am entitled to.*”

Lesser-skilled golfers often cite unfairness because they lack the ability to achieve a desired score. Many better-skilled golfers have much higher expectations but are the first to complain when they aren’t met – often blaming just about everything but their own shortcomings. Some even cry foul when they witness the lesser-skilled “*getting away*” with a poor shot when it ends up equaling the results of their own “*much better*” shot.

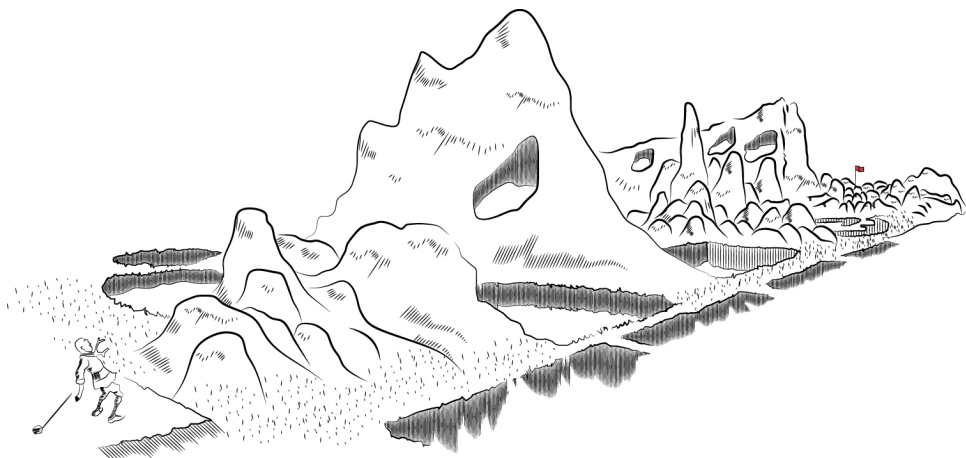
Most games of skill are such that all elements of the playing field are completely equal. Every tennis court is exactly the same size. The height of the net is the same for everyone, the ball is the same size and made of the same material for everyone. The service court is in the same place and the out of bounds lines are the same every time. Only when the playing field is the same for everyone can a player’s skill be fairly judged against an opponent.

The folly in trying to make golf courses fair for everyone is due to the fact that they’re so varied. There are no common dimensions other than the diameter of the cups on the greens. This lack of consistency is why golf is better described as a sport played within and against a *natural setting* rather than a game of skill played on a dimensioned court or field versus an opponent.

Many golfers mistakenly confuse “fair” and “playable” when it comes to golf course architecture. Fair (defined as “*in accordance with the rules or standards*”) refers to

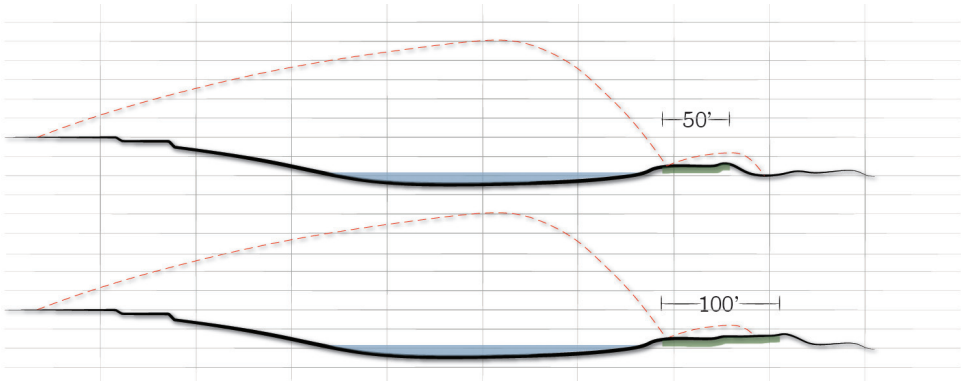
the way a task should be undertaken. When the issue of fair comes up among many golfers, though, the target of their frequent attacks is usually the golf course itself or features therein. But in reality, the argument is actually about golf course preparation and conditioning (how the task of maintenance should or shouldn't be undertaken). The act of undertaking something may be fair or unfair (making a green too fast for existing contours) but an inanimate object (the green itself) cannot be deemed fair or unfair. It just exists.

The definition of playable (suitable for playing on) applies strictly to the appropriateness of a playing field. A course that has the necessary features to play the game such as a tee, landing area, and green (including the hole itself) are the basic parameters of playable. Whatever the composition of those features is (or what exists between those features) is irrelevant if one follows the strict interpretation of the definition. Even if there are hard-to-see sand bunkers strewn across a fairway from tee to green, technically the hole is playable, although likely considered unfair by many.



*“Being particularly anxious that we should have one perfect hole on our new course, we canvassed separately the opinions of six of our leading links architects as to the construction. Their ideas we adapted ‘in toto,’ and feel that now we have at least one ideal hole!”* (Courtesy: W. H. Smith & Son)

Many complaints about fairness have to do with green speed and quality of bunker sand (operations). Secondary issues such as a narrow fairway due to trees on both sides are also a by-product of course operations. The bottom line is, when one breaks down the definition of fairness on a golf course and eliminates any maintenance considerations, there are very few architectural features that can be construed as unfair. One such feature might be a shallow green fronted by a hazard that requires a certain club to reach it but a different trajectory to hold it. In other words, if the right club to carry the hazard is with a three-iron but the trajectory needed to keep the ball on the green is that of a pitching wedge, the putting surface is too shallow. If no hazard existed, at least the golfer could call on a variety of possible approach shots to handle such a shallow target.



A forced carry to a shallow green with a long-iron has little chance to stay on the putting surface for most golfers (top) compared to a green that has more depth (bottom). (Courtesy: Patrick Gainer)

Another case is much more rare but happens enough that a golf architect must consider it: Creating a sand bunker that's so small that even the best golfers in the world have no ability to take a swing without hitting one side of the hazard with their swing. Due penalty for being in a bunker is an acceptable half-shot to a full shot, provided a swing can be made. Yet those who insist on fairness believe that every time golfers encounter sand, they should have the same success rate they have from the fairway. That's just not the case, because a bunker is a hazard and it should extract penalty for those who find one.



By 2012, the bunker to the right of the eighth green at Maidstone Club in East Hampton, New York, became too narrow to make a swing. Within months, the Coore-Crenshaw team restored it closer to its original width. (Courtesy: Richard Mandell Golf Architecture)

A difficult putt that must be perfectly struck isn't unfair; it's just difficult. Rarely, if ever, should the contours of a green be considered unfair because its speed can always be adjusted to match those contours. Unfortunately, that rarely happens because the modern golfer insists on speed over substance, eschewing fun and interesting highs and lows, ridges, swales, tiers and platforms for glass-like conditions with two-percent slopes everywhere. Daily pin placements are often considered unfair, even though they, too, are tied directly to green speed. Perhaps the only deviation is when pins are cut too close to the edge of a putting surface. Otherwise, cups cut anywhere else on the putting surface are well within the rules.

Even golf holes routed along severe side slopes that make it hard for a ball to stay in the fairway run a fine line between playable and unfair. Although many golfers zero in on the side slope as being the impetus for the unfairness, the fairway cut itself is often the culprit. Most of the time, adjustments to mowing height can compensate for the slope.



**Hole #15, Oconomowoc Golf Club in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin.** A severe cross-slope gives the impression that this fairway is unfair. Instead of a massive regrade, our solution to widen it to the left will keep tee shots in the fairway instead of always rolling into the right rough.  
(Courtesy: Richard Mandell Golf Architecture)

A frequent criticism that I hear from golfers of all abilities is the lack of flat lies in the fairways of many courses. I am always taken aback by these complaints because some of the greatest golf courses in the world have rolling fairways as a result of the natural topography on which they lay. This characteristic is one of the many reasons why golf and golf architecture are so compelling to so many. When golfers cry foul over a lack of flat fairways, I believe they are missing a joyous aspect of golf.

On the other hand, rarely do I hear that narrow fairways are unfair. It's as though golfers accept this condition as a critical tenet of the sport of golf. Originally only a course setup issue, it has crept into the design side as well. Thankfully, a renewed focus on strategic design and firm and fast conditions have re-introduced wider fairways. Unfortunately, the better golfers dislike wide fairways, feeling they



“dumb-down” the golf course and minimize skill. Upon closer inspection, though, they might realize that wide fairways can be more treacherous to the higher-skilled than a narrow, runway-type fairway. A wider fairway can demand more ball control from better players because their usually longer tee shots can garner much more bounce and roll and balls can run farther off line. If the fairways are narrow, those same tee shots likely wouldn’t find much trouble beyond rough. The lesser-skilled, on the other hand, gain a larger target for their frequent less-than-straight tee shots.

The first hole at Lake Forest Country Club (Hudson, Ohio) is a good example of how a wider fairway can be more challenging than a narrow one. Once we widened the fairway, a ridge was revealed that had previously been covered by deep rough. A line of White Pines blocked a creek at the bottom of the ridge further left. After widening the fairway and removing the trees and surrounding brush, the hole took on a brand new character because that ridge in the landing area now demanded much more precision off the tee. Any shots hit too far left can carom off the bulge



**Hole #1, Lake Forest Country Club in Hudson, Ohio:** Before clearing (above), rough and trees kept balls from straying too far off target. Once trees were removed (below), a natural crown deflected tee shots closer to a creek farther to the left. (Courtesy: Richard Mandell Golf Architecture)



down the hill toward the creek. Yet short hitters or the lesser-skilled simply gain a big catcher's mitt short of the ridge without the worry of hitting too far.

If fairness is indeed *"the quality of being reasonable,"* then a lack of tee box choices is unfair. Forcing the lesser-skilled to fall by the wayside because they lack the ability to reach a green in regulation from the only tees available is not a good formula for the business of golf.

Truthfully, much of the tee unfairness argument stems from the fact that most golfers play from the wrong tees based on their own unreasonable expectations. If a golfer playing from a certain set of tees is hitting it into water or bunkers on nearly every hole, that doesn't necessarily mean the golf course is unfair. Most likely it means they are playing from a teeing ground that may not match their skill set. The Principle of Fairness does not apply for those too stubborn to move up a tee or two.

Even though I never let fairness guide my creativity, I do utilize the Principle of Fairness so that more than one skill level can experience golf course strategy. As one who loves the central hazard, I prefer my tee boxes equitable so golfers can wade into the gray area of how that feature may affect one's decision-making. If lesser-skilled golfers were forced to play from tee boxes that are too far back for their game, they would never encounter a central hazard. They would always be hitting short of it off the tee and over it on their next shot. Creating multiple tee boxes to promote strategy for a variety of talent levels is a much more sensible use of the Principle of Fairness than removing interesting features elsewhere to eliminate *"unfairness."*

Of course, the central hazard is an easy target for those seeking out fairness in their golf games. The argument is always "How can you put a bunker in the middle of the fairway where everyone aims?" My usual response is an explanation of centerline golf, emphasizing the fact that the center of the fairway, although it may indeed be the middle, may not always be the best line of flight from tee to green. In



**Hole #16, Myers Park Country Club in Charlotte, North Carolina.** The central bunkers were built the year before the club constructed a new tee complex, which allowed everyone to challenge the hazards as designed. Lesson learned: Make sure the corresponding tees are built at the same time.

(Courtesy: Richard Mandell Golf Architecture)

many cases, the proper line may be to the left or right. Ironically, it's also "more fair" to have multiple routes to choose from rather than just one.

The Principle of Randomness versus the Principle of Fairness would be a true heavyweight bout for the ages. If the primary reason to develop randomness is to create variety, uncertainty, contrast, and more, it would be impossible to develop fairness at the same time. By definition, fairness aims to create equal conditions or parameters for all players, which isn't the intent of the Principle of Randomness.

This conflict goes back to the thought that golf is not really a game of comparative skill between two opponents, and therefore does not need to provide comparable conditions for each. Golfers never technically fight for possession of a common object. A round of golf does not consist of one player on the offensive side trying to accomplish something specific and an opponent taking the defensive side trying to keep the offensive person from succeeding (although that would be fun to watch). Rather, competitive golf is between two people (or teams) comparing scores on a hole-by-hole basis (match play) or a group of people (or teams) comparing scores on a stroke-by-stroke basis (medal or stroke play) over a series of golf holes based on how each performed against nature (the course) in whatever condition the course may be in. Tennis, by contrast, pits two people of varying abilities on a court of exactly the same dimensions for both, an equally fair venture from both sides of the net and a game that ramps fairness up further by making players switch sides at equal intervals.

The Principles of Fairness and Visibility would certainly make great doubles partners. Visibility is a clear crutch for many, particularly those who strive for fairness in golf. The primary benefit of the Principle of Visibility is to let golfers see everything in front of them. That's certainly a fair approach, so to speak. As long as every golfer can see everything, there wouldn't be any hidden features or surprises that one might use to gain an advantage. I say the advantage goes to the team of Randomness and Chance, serving for the match over the teams of Visibility and Fairness. Home-course knowledge and the member's bounce tip the scales for me.

Unlike strategic and heroic design, penal design does not provide multiple options and often involves a carry that some golfers may not be able to pull off. That doesn't necessarily make penal design unfair, though. For starters, if teeing grounds are provided to achieve Tee Shot Distance Equity, any forced carries should be manageable provided the golfer has chosen the appropriate tees for their corresponding ability. Secondly, the width of a particular penal fairway is the same for all players regardless of which tees they are playing from. Hazard locations (which may line both sides) on a fairway are also the same for all. Granted, playability may come into question but fairness cannot. For example (theoretically), if one player were forced to play a narrow penal golf hole as their eleventh, and their opponent gets to play a wider, more open, and even shorter hole as their eleventh then that's certainly unfair. Yet playing the same exact hole cannot be considered unfair for one and not the other. Less playable, yes, but less fair, no.

A golfer cannot claim unfairness citing a lack of ability either; that's why the handicap system exists. Handicapping is a way to create equity among golfers of varying abilities, specifically because golf's playing fields differ so much. In fact, that



is the exact reason every golf course has its own Course Rating and Course Slope for every teeing ground. Tennis does not need a handicap system because the court's dimensions are exactly the same for everyone.



"Rub of the Green" has been part of golf since its origins. The "Road Hole" starts with a tee ball over the Old Course Hotel. A shot off the wall is an "accidental deflection" with no sympathy for where the next shot may come from. (Courtesy: William Fullerton | Dreamstime.com)

The "Rub of the Green" concept defines how we should all consider the Principle of Fairness. It was originally explained in the Rules of Golf as an accidental deflection which has no bearing on its result; the golfer was to play the ball as it lay. Despite its removal from the rules in 2019, it still means there's no room for unfairness in golf. An accidental outcome in the path or lie of a ball is a deeply-rooted element of the sport. Therefore, if one's ball gets stuck under the lip of a bunker, and one's opponent's ball rolls to the bottom of the same bunker, as Mr. Macdonald advises, don't cry about it.

So what does all this mean when we consider the Principle of Fairness? Simply put, a golf course architect has very little responsibility in making a golf course "fair." Yet there is some benefit to architects who strive to make their work playable for as many golfers as possible. The trick is to design such a course where playability is achieved for all while providing challenges commensurate with each talent level without sacrificing strategic or visual interest. This is how the best designers apply the Principle of Fairness through the other principles of golf architecture.

What makes golf different from sports such as tennis or baseball is the diversity of its playing fields. By virtue of this diversity, golf is not a game meant to be fair. As soon as we give up on this diversity in order to balance the skill levels of the participants, we may as well give up on the sport of golf altogether. A game that's played outdoors and often in a variety of weather conditions cannot possibly worry itself about fairness.

*"The only unfair hole is one on which a cup has not been cut."* - Forrest Richardson