

CLUB LIFE



*The
Games
Golfers Play*

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WHAT MAKES A CLUB GREAT



THE QUESTION is one my friends and I often ponder after a round, and it really is quite simple: What makes a golf club great?

The obvious first answer is that a great golf club must have a great golf course. But there are many other factors involved.

 A great golf club has small scorecards, primarily white and about the size of a playing card when folded, and not illustrated with photographs. Like Augusta National's. Pencils with erasers are a nice touch as well.

 A great golf club also has a small but well-appointed pro shop, and the 1st tee is just a short walk away, which is what you'll find at Cypress Point and Riviera. It is a place that has a fabulous porch (Shinnecock) and at least one signature drink (Southsides, again at Shinnecock) or dish (snapper soup at Pine Valley, or perhaps freshly cooked lobster at the National Golf Links). But the food never comes close to overshadowing the course, and there is never any question that the most important hires are always the head professional or course


superintendent and not the pastry chef. You talk about the quality of the layout and the joy of the golfing experience when you leave, not the lunchtime buffet. And it doesn't matter if you ever have an actual dinner at the club. Golf remains the focus of the association, and members recognize that most club eateries function about as well financially as the Argentine economy and bleed gallons of red ink for what often is some of the worst food in town. They also appreciate that club restaurants frequently detract attention from the course and also serve to attract members who don't care as much about the game and might concern themselves more with the entrees that make up a 15-course brunch buffet.


The exception to the above rule, of course, is those clubs, like Augusta, that take in a lot of overnight guests and have people staying on the premises for two or three days. In those cases, a first-rate dining facility is an understandable necessity. And so is a well-stocked wine cellar.

A great golf club has a strong caddie program, a small fleet of golf carts that are available only to those who have legitimate medical excuses, and a head professional who got his or her start in the caddie shack or bag room. It is the sort of spot where touring pros and top amateurs play on their days off.


A great golf club does not have to institute a "No Cell Phone" policy because the membership is so old that no one has a cell phone or knows how to operate

one; and even if they did, it would never occur to them to bring one onto the course. It is also where you will find an honor system at the practice range and at the halfway house. Members at clubs like that have no interest in cheating each other out of a few bucks.

 Speaking of halfway houses, a great golf club has only the most austere setup for those mid-round breaks. It does not have monstrous walk-in refrigerators or ultra-modern hot dog grills, but rather the simplest selections of drinks and snacks, and maybe even a day-old sandwich or two. After all, we are only talking about a four-hour round at most, not a five-day desert march, and it seems ridiculous to need—or want—much more.

A great golf club still has a men's grillroom, no matter how politically incorrect that may be, and is the sort of place that might require a jacket in the bar but no clothes on the course (such as Garden City, where members can play in the nude for all they care). It also has a place in the locker room where you can sit and have drinks after your rounds.  All the flags on the greens are the same color (yes, you have to figure out where the pins are by yourself) and there are no GPS systems or yardage markers. It is also a spot that is so old and traditional that it can no longer host a U.S. Open either because it lacks parking, length, or the inclination to be overrun by hordes of golf fans—and the United States Golf Association—just for a little extra money


and recognition. But it would be happy to take on a Walker Cup, or some similarly prominent but low-key amateur event.


 great golf club has only a short walk between greens and tees (Cypress Point, again) and a course designed by an architect who long ago went on to his great reward (such as Charles Blair Macdonald, Seth Raynor, A.W. Tillinghast, Alister Mackenzie, or Donald Ross). And at some point during your round, you play one of the great holes from the British Isles, whether it's a Redan, Road, Postage Stamp, or Eden.

Great golf clubs do not have swimming pools. Or if they do, they are completely unused, as is the case with the one at Seminole. They also forsake tennis courts, understanding the importance of having places that are only—and unabashedly—about golf. As a result, the membership is more focused about what it wants, and there is a greater commonality of interest and purpose. Different factions divide no one, and no one is distracted from the thing that kindled creation of the club itself. Which, of course, was golf.

You see, it is a fact of club life that a sort of one-upmanship occurs whenever the finance committee starts doling out money at budget time, and as soon as it reveals its allocations for the golf course, some disenfranchised group of swimmers will inevitably start screaming about getting their fair share for larger lockers, perhaps, or fluffier towels.


Great golf clubs also have very small or inactive memberships, so the courses are almost always empty and the pace of play delightfully quick. I played 36 holes at Chicago Golf Club last fall with two other fellows in just over six hours, without even stopping between rounds. And the one time I teed it up at San Francisco Golf Club, I saw only one other group on the course.

 On a Saturday afternoon, no less, and it was a fivesome that finished in less than four hours.


 A great golf club understands just how special an experience it offers first-timers and makes a point of treating its guests as well as its members. That's one of the things that make Augusta National and Cypress Point so good. And greatness must be bestowed on any club that is able to maintain the same feel and character over the years. Like this venerable spot I know in New England that not too long ago looked into renovating its clubhouse. When the estimated price soared too high for those old-line Yankees, they started scrounging for ways to cut back. One suggestion: Instead of replacing the floorboards of the expansive porch, which had been pocked with spike marks, they would simply flip over the wood and use the other side. It sounded good to one and all, but when workers turned over the first boards, they found the previous club leaders had had the same idea some decades before.

As for the name of that wonderful place, it is something readers are going to have to do without, because


the club boasts one other element that makes it, and those like it, great. And that is having utter disdain or ambivalence when it comes to publicity.

 long ago determined that the presence of train tracks frequently is a sign of great golf. Think of Royal Adelaide in South Australia, with its commuter line rolling through that wonderful layout, which Mackenzie tweaked during his historic trip Down Under nearly a century ago. Or Pine Valley in southern New Jersey, where the rumble of a freight train through the sandy woods late on a summer afternoon is only one more reason to fawn over that fabulous retreat. Even the one-time presence of rail lines (St. Andrews) or the proximity of tracks and the sound of, say, an engine's whistle (such as Dunbar in East Lothian) often means the course itself will be sweet.

Strange as it may seem, airports can also be an indication of a quality layout. I first came to that conclusion while playing Royal Dublin and Royal Portmarnock in Ireland, and it was only reinforced after a trip to Australia a few years later, and a lovely round at New South Wales Golf Club, during which I got to watch several 747s take off from Sydney's airport and climb into the wind. I sometimes get that same sensation in the States, whether I am teeing it up at a place such as North Shore Country Club outside Chicago or Blind Brook, which is near the White Plains airport in New York's Westchester County.

 have long had a theory with restaurants that you can judge the quality of an eatery by the size of the pepper mill, the idea being, the larger the mill, the worse the restaurant. And I have developed a similar premise about golf clubs, believing that the smaller or more obscure the entrance sign, the better the course and club. Much of that stems from my liking a place that is so secure it does not feel a need to trumpet its location. That's most definitely the case with San Francisco Golf, and there is something beguiling about a club that first-time visitors may pass by once or twice before finally finding their way in. The thought, of course, is that a special spot often needs to be unearthed before it can truly be enjoyed.

And if a sign is a must, then I am keen on the way Chicago Golf handles it, with a name board so obscure and difficult to see as you pull up to the club drive that it might as well not be there at all.

When it comes to clubhouses, I prefer structures that are small, simple, and feel more like quaint abodes than the types of overblown wedding halls that seem to be all the rage in some circles today. Those that straddle opening holes, such as Merion's, are wonderful for players and spectators alike, so long as none of the golfers go sideways with their first shots,  and I am big on clubhouses that overlook the finishing hole and afford golfers sipping their post-round quaffs the opportunity to watch others finish. That's one of the best

things about the 18th at Garden City on Long Island, and also the Country Club of Fairfield on the Connecticut coast.

Another asset of any great golf retreat is the ability for guests to transfer charges to their home club, which Cypress allows. I also like spots, like Cypress, that have rooms for out-of-town members and their guests. A night or two in a place like that can be sweet, especially as you coddle a late-night cognac on the edge of your bed and listen to sea lions bark from their rocky lairs off the 17th tee, knowing you have plans for 36 holes the following day.

→ I have long held affection for clubs that not only have caddie programs but also caddie scholarship trusts. Or at the very least, provide important financial support to regional foundations that help loopers make their way through college. There is also lots to like about spots where members linger happily at the 19th hole after their games, not simply to drink but also to relish each other's company in settings that are all about golf. Even better are places where the game and ambiance is so revered that members often jump in carts when they are done playing—and finished with their first round of drinks—to go out and watch friends make their way in.

☰ These days, I find myself favoring clubs that keep all signage to a minimum. Frankly, I always have felt that less is more on any course, which is why I love

places that use only the most basic tee markers (such as those little pieces of wood at Pine Valley), eschew ball washers (because caddies will take care of that task), and forget about putting litter baskets at every tee (because it is just as easy for a player to stuff any garbage he finds or accumulates in his pocket or bag until the round is over). The idea, of course, is to eliminate as many potential eye sores as possible and make a layout as visually enticing as it is fun to play.

→ But I seem to be a glutton for field grass that turns such a wonderful brown in the late summer in my part of the world, and moves like waves in the morning wind. In addition, I never worry about too much bird or wildlife. Turkeys frequently roam the fairways of my place, and we often see cottontail rabbits, pheasants, ducks, red-tail hawks, and the odd fox or coyote. Many times, my friends and I are treated to the glorious sight of a kingfisher diving headlong into one of our water hazards to snatch a bite to eat, or sea gulls dropping clams on the beach road that runs along our second and third fairways, using the asphalt to break open mollusks for their daily repast, and that never fails to take the sting out of a bad score. The waterfowler in me even enjoys the Canada geese. I know their presence irks large contingents of golfers, but I never feel the birds do as much damage to our track as to warrant such unwavering disdain. And the pleasure I get in watching them trade back and forth on a weekend

morning more than offsets the occasional dismay at some droppings on a green.

→ I know that bigger seems to be better in the golf world these days, but I have high regard for the places that do not feel the need to stretch themselves out to absurd lengths to accommodate the prodigious driving distances of a minuscule percentage of players. Better to tighten the fairways, perhaps. Or grow the rough. Or add a few strategic bunkers. And what's wrong with even shortening a course on occasion by building forward tees on some holes to give them much different—and often more difficult—perspective?

→ That sort of philosophy also has me praising golf courses where par is 70; it seems a quaint number that harkens back to a lower testosterone time, when all par-4s did not have to be 450 yards, and no one had a heart attack if you occasionally hit a wedge for an approach shot.

Besides, I like the fact that you can be nine over par on a track like that and still break 80, which is my goal every time I walk onto a course.

I must also confess an unrepentant bias to layouts of a certain age. And that emotion reminds me of something my friend Jenkins said after he spent a golf holiday playing several highly rated modern tracks.

“I am not going to live long enough for any of these new courses to be any good,” he sighed.

I chuckled heartily at that comment, for it mirrored something noted golf architect Tom Doak wrote in the Foreword of George Bahto's compelling book on Charles Blair Macdonald, “The Evangelist of Golf.”

→ “Some people prefer older women,” he penned. “I prefer older courses.”

To be sure, there are several modern layouts that tickle my fancy, chief among them the three courses in Bandon Dunes, Oregon (one of which, Pacific Dunes, Doak designed), the Straits course at Herb Kohler's golfing paradise in Wisconsin, and Bill Jones's superb Ocean Forest in Sea Island, Georgia. But they are much more the exception than the rule, and when I am forced to choose where I want to play, I almost always opt for the more seasoned layouts.

Why? Let's start with the fact that older courses often were built on the very best pieces of property, mainly because they came into being first and good land was relatively cheap and easy to acquire back then.

☞ Therefore, they have the most interesting terrain with all the views, contours, elevation changes, and diversity that make great layouts great.

I also find an appealing maturity to those types of tracks and a pleasing sense that they have been there for a while and aged quite nicely, like a fine bottle of port. Generally speaking, they possess a wonderfully modest subtlety to their designs because they were put together

by architects who did not have the technological means to move a lot of earth and had to deal with what the Good Lord gave them.

In addition, they rarely were as pressured as modern designers to come up with 18 signature holes on any one course and overreach in an attempt to bolster their reputations and justify their fees. And in many cases, those aged tracks boast a compelling heritage that can be delightfully recounted with each round. Perhaps Marion Hollins and Francis Ouimet played there with a member in the 1920s, or Billy Casper competed in an exhibition with a local pro a month before he won the U.S. Open.

→ I also liked the fact that most older courses utilize smaller parcels of land than the newer tracks, giving them a sense of efficient beauty and deft design. And I appreciate how some of those venerable layouts can get away with eschewing such modern necessities as, say, an irrigation system, or at the very least one that douses every square foot of land. Yes, the green grass of a well-watered track often does look beautiful, but a true links is to be played on the ground and in the brown. There is a terrific elegance and quality to that look that most current course owners and builders would not allow for fear of scaring off potential members or players.

Older courses are generally part of older clubs, and those are usually much more attractive retreats than their younger counterparts. The ones that have been

around since the Jazz Age, for example, often have a charming history as well as staff members—be they longtime locker-room attendants or hoary head pros—who have worked there for years and give it a special flavor. In addition, I find the newer clubs frequently loosen admission standards to make sure they fill their pricey rolls, and that leads to difficult memberships. That sort of situation is of great concern to Jenkins, and he tells me that while he could afford to pay \$300,000 for an annual membership to one of those places, he would rather quit the game than endure the kind of aggravation that is apt to exist there.

☞ You see, old clubs rarely get people who try to change the essence of the game as it is played at those spots, or the nature of the club. And their membership ranks are generally filled with folks who know each other, which leads to a more comfortable social fabric and more compatible operations. However, many of those newer spots, which have been predicated on attracting a high net worth membership, lack that sort of tradition due to their young age and do not have that kind of cohesiveness because money is not exactly a unifying factor—in golf or anything else.

They say that youth is wasted on the young, but when it comes to golf, it is often wasted on me as well. Give me something with a little age.

It's just one more thing that helps make a club great.