

# Medaling with Design

**A** field of 144 professionals. Four 18-hole rounds. On a course measuring 7,100 yards. Playing to a par of 36-36-72. With a 36-hole cut to the low 70 and ties. The winner shoots, oh, 68-66-70-67—271, for a one-stroke victory. The runner-up cites a bogey on 14 he couldn't overcome and tells the TV interviewer a mud blob on his golf ball caused it.

This is medal-play golf in America, in all its ponderous minutiae. It can't afford to be quirky and unpredictable; if it were, the luckiest guy, not the most skilled, might end up fondling that big check on Sunday afternoon. And the massive effort of conducting a stroke-play golf tour would be reduced to folly.

Granted, if I were among the few who could play tour golf, I too would be out on those laser-graded fairways wondering if my yardage to the hole was 187 or 188. And a mud blob three dimples wide would be life-or-death stuff.

Instead I'm seated at a desk, attempting to hypenate and justify sundry views and opinions. This column's passionate conviction was going to be that the term "great match-play course" was a throw-away line, worth throwing away entirely. One of those aforementioned TV interviewers, NBC's Mark Roling, at least partially confirmed my suspicions.

"It comes in handy when you don't know what else to say," says Roling. "Kind of like when you're on a blind date and no one will say anything about the person you're meeting except, 'Great personality!'"

Things got serious when I put the question to Tim Liddy, an Indianapolis-based course designer who collaborates often with Pete Dye and also works solo, recently teaming with Dye on the well-received Bridgewater Club in Westfield, Ind. He contends that everyday match-play golf is golf, and that the bouncy, baffling, swerving, heaving, tilting, semi-blind golf holes of early British links are what golf holes ought to be—to the extent the land will allow. It's only when you redefine golf to fit the professional stroke-play tournament model that these values get eclipsed.

If courses were boats, Liddy's favorites would be



**Unique and fascinating hazards are OK in match play because their maximum penalty is mere loss of hole.**

tall-masted wooden sailing ships, tacking and rolling as nature dictates, not diesel-driven cruise liners plowing from point A to point B. He doesn't begrudge professional golf its need for quirky-free playing grounds; he just wishes tour-tailored medal-play layouts had less influence on course design in general.

Stroke and match play differ for the architect in terms of the style of hazard he can

build for each. Stroke-play competitors can't reasonably afford more than a one-shot or perhaps two-shot error, or the week would be a bust after two iffy swings. Their misplays have to add up to 6, not 11, thus the courses they play have to penalize errors in a carefully calibrated manner. No Devil's-Whatever bunkers in front of the green, nor much of anything from the Pine Valley wild-man/poet/mad artist school of design. In golf's original form of scorekeeping, the penalty was mere loss of hole for landing in one these hellaciously inescapable hazards. Which made them, if not reasonable, then at least legitimate.

"With the stakes so high in a tour event, there's a sense that everything has to be fair, which leads to everything having to be perfect, which in turn leads to things being artificial," Liddy says with a sigh.

This style of architecture shouldn't hold much inherent appeal, but there it is week after week on TV, that droning cruise ship of a golf course, being played by the world's best. The average American who hires a course designer can't help pointing to it and saying: "One like that." Which is how we end up with a duller game than we rightly deserve. ■