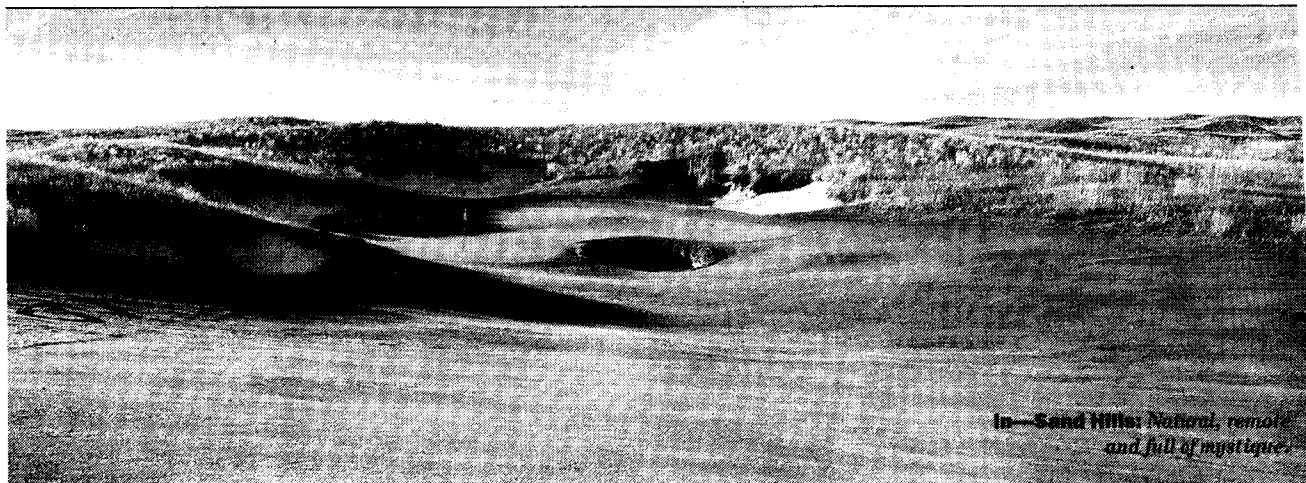


SPORTS



In—Sand Hills National, remote and full of mystique.

GOLF JOURNAL by John Paul Newport

How a Course Goes Cold

In the fickle golf world, it takes little for a venue to go from loved to hated

ROYAL LIVERPOOL, the site of this weekend's British Open, has not hosted the event in 39 years. This is notable because in the prior 70 years, from 1897 to 1967, it hosted 10 Opens, more than any course except St. Andrews, with 12. What causes a course with Royal Liverpool's pedigree—a revered links that was the site of golf's first professional tournament—to suddenly go out of favor?



In Royal Liverpool's case, the reasons are varied. The official line is that its infrastructure was inadequate for the demands of a modern tournament—not enough room for corporate tents, parking and so forth. But club members say it had more to do with Liverpool's decline since the 1960s: unemployment, race riots, soccer mobs, grisly crimes. The Open's overlords insist it had nothing to do with the course itself.

The club's return to the dance after four decades as a wallflower reminds us that golf takes more of its nourishment from the character of its playing ground than almost any other sport. Courses have personalities. They change and the circumstances around them change, causing some to fall into and out of fashion like hemlines.

Take Olympia Fields, site of the 2003 U.S. Open won by Jim Furyk. Eighty years ago Olympia Fields, south of Chicago, was the largest, glitziest, most successful country club in the nation, with four golf courses and a towering clubhouse. But gradually, affluent Chicago migrated north, not south. The golf courses, reduced to two, still had panache, as proved by the smash reception of the tweaked North course for Olympia Fields' first Open since

Out—PGA West: Tricked up with gimmicky novelties.



Getty Images (2); Aidan Bradley (Firestone); Patrick Dinkley/Stonehouse Golf (Sand Hills)

of favor among today's architectural cognoscenti. "The notion that, to be great, a course must be difficult to play has been demolished," Mr. Morrisett contends.

He credits Pete Dye with leading golf design out of the wilderness toward more inventive courses with more options that are more fun to play—a trend that former apprentices of Mr. Dye, such as Tom Doak and Bill Coore, are carrying to new heights. especially in de-

In—Royal Liverpool: A classic links in a troubled area, now back in favor.



1928. But the course's prestige has never returned to that of its glory years.

CCOURSES CAN LOSE their groove for other reasons. When Tom Fazio's Wild Dunes Links course near Charleston, S.C., opened in 1980, no less an authority than P.J. Boatwright, the late, much-admired longtime executive director of the U.S. Golf Association, declared it to be one of the 20 best courses in the world. Some still argue that the green complexes at Wild Dunes are the best set of 18 Mr. Fazio ever created. But before long, housing had so strangled the aesthetic appeal of the course that Wild Dunes no longer appears on any top 100 list, national or international.

One thing is sure: "Courses with great architecture never go out of style," says Ran Morrissett, a businessman from Southern Pines, N.C., who created and oversees GolfClubAtlas.com, the Web's most popular site for golf-course design buffs. But that doesn't mean opinions about what constitutes great architecture don't change.

Mr. Morrissett calls the postwar period until 1980 the "Dark Ages" of course design. The lead practitioner of the era was Robert Trent Jones Sr., whose roughly 500 courses overall are characterized by length, difficulty (at least from the back tees), bunkers that force high, aerial shots into the greens and limited strategic options. Courses like Firestone Country Club in Ohio and Mr. Jones's Hazeltine in Minnesota are distinctly out

signing courses that fit naturally and uniquely into the land. Currently one of the most buzz-worthy courses in the country is the very private Sand Hills, spreading so naturally through a remote landscape in Nebraska that it seems more a discovered place than a constructed one. The other primary trend among golf-course aficionados these days is for returning to the original design of the great early-century masters such as Seth Raynor, Donald Ross and A.W. Tillinghast.

Mr. Dye also built courses that are prime examples of penal architecture, a design style that Mr. Morrissett contends is now out of favor. Courses like TPC Sawgrass in Florida, with its famous island-green 17th hole, and the PGA West Stadium Course in the California desert extract extreme penalties for shots that stray even marginally from prescribed landing areas.

'TALK ABOUT DROPPING in and out of favor!" Mr. Dye, 80 years old, said with a laugh this week when I asked him about the Stadium Course. "When the Tour pros played there after it opened, they cursed it, they condemned it, they said they would never come back—and they didn't. I was crushed. But then the PGA club pros played their tournament there for 10 years or so, and they seemed to like it, and now it's the most played course in the desert. It's booked up all the time. Frankly, I don't know why people want to crucify



Out—Firestone:
A hard-to-play
'50s-style behemoth.

themselves on a course like that, but they do. And most of the business is repeat."

Just as mysterious to Mr. Dye is why some courses never come into favor at all. "Of all the courses I ever designed, I like Colleton River outside Hilton Head [S.C.] as much as any," he says. Located in a private residential community, the course has nine holes with views of the Atlantic, relatively little visible housing, short walks from green to tee and a pleasing, challenging design. "I don't know what more you could ask for," he says. No fewer than 10 of Mr. Dye's courses appear on the major magazine top 100 lists, but not Colleton River. When tastes change, maybe someday it will.

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