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Too Tough to Handle?

What's long and hard and often produces more pain than pleasure? The answer, of course, is the modern golf course.

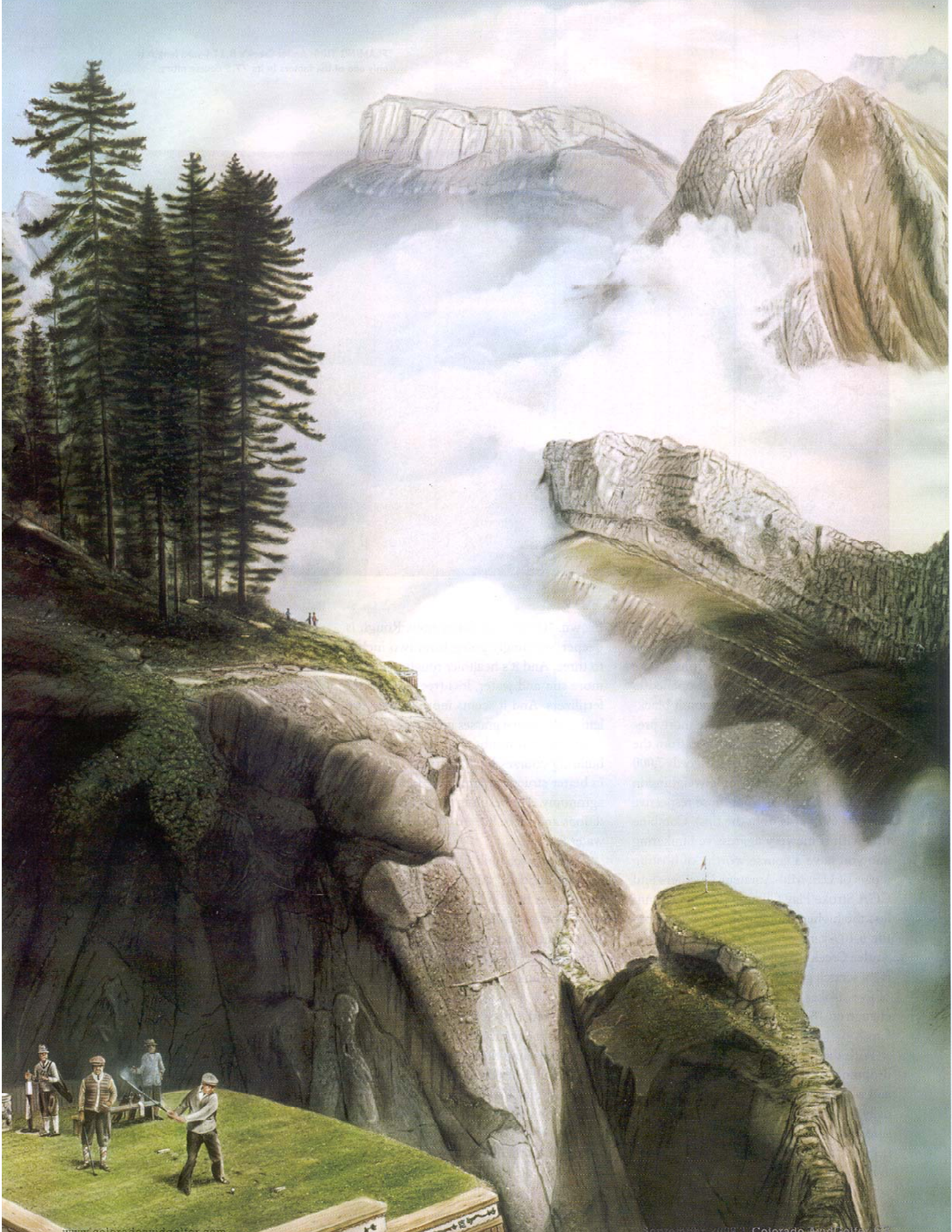


By Lois Friedland. Illustration by Loyal "Bud" Chapman

Last June, when the "People's Open" arrived for the second time this decade at Long Island's Bethpage State Park Black Course, you had to wonder what "people" the USGA had in mind. Yes, it's a public course that locals can play for \$60. But how "inclusive" is a place that famously warns on the first tee, "The Black Course Is an Extremely Difficult Course Which We Recommend Only for Highly Skilled Golfers"?

In Colorado, no courses carry such warnings. It's caveat dufer. Courses such as Castle Pines, Cherry Hills and The Broadmoor naturally imply difficulty by sheer dint of their national championship pedigrees. But slope and rating numbers provide the only gauge, and as Red Sky Golf Club Director of Golf Jeff Hanson points out, "Over the last eight years, courses have become too difficult for the average golfer."

That's an observation supported by the Colorado Golf Association. "We've definitely encountered 'rating creep' since 2001," says Gerry Brown, the CGA's director of course rating and handicapping. Brown attributes the upward trend to turf improvements that result in accelerated greens, equipment advances that have forced courses to become longer, and the need to create original designs to attract members and sell real estate.



FLAMING TIPS: Antler Creek's 8,114-yard length is only one of the factors in its 77.5 course rating



Brown won't name courses, but a look at some that have opened during the past decade bears out his observations. Take Antler Creek Golf Club, which opened in Falcon in 2004. The main reason it black-tees at 8,114 yards was to create more premium lots along the course. Even from the blues and golds, Antler Creek exceeds 7,000 yards, with the fifteenth hole weighing in at 620 and 665 yards from those respective tees (it's 697 yards from the tips). Combine that with some very aggressive bunkering and you have a course worthy of hosting a pair of U.S. Mid-Amateur Qualifiers and CGA Stroke Play Championships. But unless the higher-handicap golfer plays from the 6,409-yard whites, it's tough sledding. Antler Creek's stroke rating is 77.5, meaning a scratch golfer would finish on average of five strokes over par. Those tees would change an 18-handicap into a 24 at Antler Creek.

With the total number of rounds played dropping, new equipment sales declining, and with private country clubs and high-end daily fee facilities under great financial pressure, it's time to ask whether courses have become too tough for their own good?

It's a common discussion among those who rate golf courses, says the CGA's

Brown. "Greens are faster now. Rough is deeper, seemingly going from two inches to three. And it's healthier rough thanks to more sun and water, less trees and better fertilizers. And it seems more courses are letting the native grasses grow."

There's no doubt that the science of building courses has improved, resulting in better structural integrity, drainage and agronomy. The result is firmer, faster conditions and more hazards like bunkers and water features.

"The courses built today are technically more difficult," admits architect Robert Trent Jones II, who has designed such Colorado courses as Keystone Ranch, Rollingstone Ranch, Crested Butte, Ute Creek and Brightwater. "The holes are longer, there are more bunkers and the targets are smaller."

Jones credits these architectural trends to advances in equipment and better elite golfers. At the same time, he laments the loss of the analytical side of the game. "Today's golfer just hits it and then finds it," he says. "They don't think of the tactics and that the game is sort of like outdoor chess. They have not studied the course. And many don't practice. Many don't have the skills needed to hit some shots."

Rate Your Game

Like a ski resort that doesn't want beginners on black diamond slopes, golf courses try to help golfers find their comfort zone through a ratings system. The course's "stroke" rating reflects what a very good golfer would shoot on average. The slope rating reflects the challenges likely to be faced by a "bogey" golfer, say an 18- to 20-handicap. Courses have various sets of tees, and each set has its own ratings. Of course, the biggest influence in these complex formulas is distance. The longer the hole, the harder it is—usually.

That said, Castle Rock course designer Jim Engh revolts against that credo. He believes the easiest thing an architect can do is create difficulty, and too often that means length. "I want intrigue. I want the golfer to think. I want to turn on the mind and let possibilities come into play," he says. "But at the same time, if an average or even good golfer plays my course from tees beyond his abilities, he's going to get his butt kicked."

For those who come in contact with the golfing public on a daily basis, it is easy to identify the greatest source of golfer frustration: golfers playing holes at yardages that exceed their talents.

"If people would check their egos at the door and play the tees that suit them, it

would be a lot more enjoyable for them," says Jim Nodurft, the PGA director of golf at Monument's semi-private King's Deer Golf Club, an open, rugged par-70 layout with almost 550 yards difference between the back and blue tees.

"I have yet to find a tee from which I make too many birdies," adds Ed Mate, executive director of the CGA.

For those die-hards who insist on playing "the whole course," it might help to remember that even Jack Nicklaus, on occasion, would play a course from the front tees. The point? Learn to score and have fun.

An Evolving Creation

Engh doesn't consider his courses all that difficult for the very good player. But he also knows that this is the smallest niche of the golf demographic. It is the pros, not the amateurs, whose mastery ignites discussions of whether equipment makes the game too easy.

"People watch too much TV," Engh says, and by "people" he means golfers and course developers. In other words, there is this common belief what a course should look like and how it should present its challenges. During the golf-course construction boom

At CommonGround in Aurora, architect Tom Doak had marching orders to make the course playable for the bogey golfer, who "is getting tired of being beaten up by golf courses," says Jerry Brown, the Colorado Golf Association's director of course rating and handicapping.

of the last 20 years, developers pressured architects to create the most challenging and visually pleasing holes possible. Often, those can be turned into a marketing angle.

"You have to remember that using golf courses to sell houses only started in the 1950s, in Palm Springs," says Jones, who admits that courses such as Chambers Bay—which has no real-estate component and will host the 2015 U.S. Open—are an exception in modern golf design.

The Colorado Golf Association and the Colorado Women's Golf Association have their own "core" course, CommonGround in Aurora. Architect Tom Doak had marching orders, Brown points out, to make the course "playable for the bogey golfer." The back tees are just over 7,000 yards, not far at 5,000 feet above sea level. The white tees are under 6,500 yards. "The bogey golfer is tired of getting beaten up by golf courses," Brown says.

Wolcott's Red Sky Golf Club recognized that. Players who are a five handicap and below love the black tees on the Norman Course, but many members who aren't quite skilled enough to play from the tips get frustrated, according to the club's PGA Director of Golf Jeff Hanson. The Wolcott club's Norman Course had a bunker on the eighth hole removed because it made the hole too difficult; "it's much more playable now," says Hanson.

The course is also considering adding a set of tee boxes between the back and the middle sets. "This will expand playing opportunities," he explains. "The blues are little too easy for some members but the blacks are too hard. Courses that are newer, like us, have to adapt. We keep a lot of history and track scores and we know what we really want."



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Just up I-70, at the Club at Cordillera, “the green complexes on the Jack Nicklaus Signature Summit Course are tough. That’s its trademark,” says Tom Stickney, the PGA Director of Golf Instruction at Cordillera and at Bighorn Golf Club in Palm Desert. Add on the topography of this course, high on a mountainside, and initially the greens on holes 15-18 were too tough for the average golfer. “We softened up some of the over zealous slopes to make it a lot more enjoyable to the average player,” says Stickney.

Cordillera’s Director of Golf Operations Brock Sloan explains how. “These greens were designed to slope from front to back and it turned out to be a little more difficult and a little more advanced than the average golfer understands. Most of the players were trying to get the ball to the middle, so the ball rolled to the back or off. We basically reversed the slopes. Now the greens slope back to front, so the green will slow down an approach shot, instead of the ball speeding up once it lands.”

Achieving a Balance

Private clubs listen to their members and often make adjustments. “It’s a tricky balance,” remarks one longtime golf committee member of an elite Denver-area club. “Members don’t want their club to be known as having a cupcake course, but the higher the slope and rating, the lower the indexes of the club members tend to be. That’s fine when they’re playing at home, but they tend not to be able to play to their handicap when they’re at other courses.”

Even legendary clubs like Cherry Hills have to strike a balance. During the recent course remodel, course directors wanted to create more challenges for the best golfers in order to attract more USGA events. Yet they also wanted to make the course a good “members” course. How was that balance achieved? New tee boxes increased the overall yardage by more than 200 yards, yet landing areas and green complexes were expanded. More tee shots from the middle tees found fairways, and more approaches alit on the greens. When the best players arrive, however, more distance will be required to find those generous landing areas, and the greens will be rock-hard.

Adjustments aren’t just confined to private courses. At The Golf Club at Bear Dance, opened in 2002, a number of PGA professionals carped about the sloped greens shedding many perfect approach shots. Fixes followed, and now the course—which serves as the Home of the Colorado PGA Section—

now ranks among the most enjoyable and challenging in the state.

The same holds true for Aurora’s Murphy Creek Golf Course. When the course debuted in 2000, the fescue around the bunkers at Aurora’s public Murphy Creek Golf Course proved “very penal,” according to PGA professional Caine Fitzgerald. The bunkers quickly received haircuts and Murphy Creek hosted the 2008 U.S. Public Links.

The Burden of Expectation

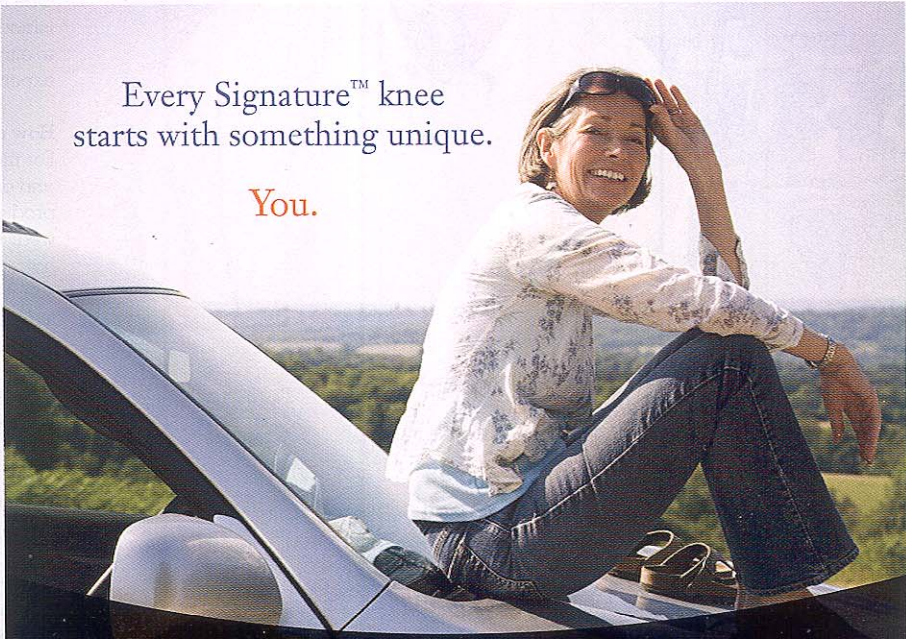
Challenging though courses have become,

golfers also need to recognize that not every hole is a birdie hole—or even a par hole. “There’s no rule that says you have to hit the ball at the pin every time,” points out Jones.

“If you’re going to play a course that is notoriously hard, it’s going to win,” says Cordillera’s Stickney.

“Relax and just deal with it. It’s just a game.” **AG**

Contributing Editor Lois Friedland lives in Morrison.



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