

How to create drama on a course

Golf course designers spend hours thinking about how best to create a feeling of drama for the golfers playing their courses, especially when it comes to the closing holes. Here, Tim Lobb reveals how the smallest natural hazard can create the greatest dramatic moments in golf.

Golf has produced so much drama over the years – especially on the closing stretch of major championships – that you could spend hours lost in discussion in the clubhouse bar, debating who and what was the cause of it all.

I remember being at the Open Championship at Carnoustie in 1999 when I found myself surrounded by a wall of excited photographers angling for a picture of a Frenchman – trousers rolled up, knee deep in the water of the Barry Burn – about to throw away the Claret Jug, the most famous trophy in golf, at the 72nd hole.

Jean Van de Velde needed only a double bogey six at the final hole to win The Open. He took a triple-bogey seven and lost in a playoff. He failed to appreciate the dangers posed by a stretch of water, only ten feet wide and spread out across the width of a fairway, thirty yards short of the green.

The Barry Burn is barely visible when looking at the green from Carnoustie's 18th fairway. It's almost sunken into the ground. While hidden, you know it's there. It does exactly what the course designer wants. It sparks in the player's mind golf's essential struggle – will you focus on your target and swing, or will you be distracted by the hazard and ultimately let your scorecard be hijacked?

Carnoustie's 18th hole and the Barry Burn are the perfect example of how a small natural hazard, like a stream (or 'burn' as the Scots call it), can create incredible drama and spectacular failure, even for golfers good enough to be leading the Open after 71 holes.

There are many examples of dramatic closing holes, like the island par-three 17th at TPC Sawgrass in Florida, and the par-five 18th at Pebble Beach, which winds around the cliff-edges of the Pacific Ocean. Here, the hazards are large in size, but they don't always have to be big to create big drama.

I believe that creating drama on a golf course depends most on the placement of the hazard, not its size or its ability to be visually intimidating. Some of the most dangerous hazards in golf are naturally occurring, simple, small and usually perfectly positioned. The Barry Burn is one, the 'Road Hole' bunker at St Andrews is barely as wide as it is deep, the 'Devil's Aperture' at Pine Valley's par-three 10th – a simple pot-hole in a bank side – is so deep and small that you are lucky if you even have a stance in it.

At Thomson Perrett & Lobb, we relish working with natural landforms that create opportunities for subtle and intelligent on-course hazards. It's important to think carefully about the strategy and placement of hazards, because it's the easiest thing in the world to over design a golf course with excessive amounts of water hazards and bunkering, to give the impression that it's a perilously difficult golf course.

This type of design is unnatural and unsustainable, and there's no need for it. The greatest skill a good designer can demonstrate is an ability to work with the land, in a way that is imaginative, sustainable and challenging to the mind of a golfer.

Excessive design can also result in the wrong type of golfer being unfairly penalised, with large bunkering often repeatedly punishing the poorer player.

A good golf course design has versatility and allows both the expert and novice to enjoy the course in equal measure, while hitting from different teeing grounds and experiencing different levels of demand on their shot-making capabilities – and that's what we try to build into our courses at TPL.

The 'road hole' bunker at St Andrews is perhaps the best-known hazard in golf and is a great illustration of clever natural golf design. It was controversially altered before the 2005 Open, reducing the front wall by around a foot and a half, but at its fiercest it was a mere six-feet high by ten-feet wide.

It's nicknamed the 'Sands of Nakajima,' after the Open challenge of Japanese golfer Tommy Nakajima died in 1978, after he took five strokes to get out. In 2000, David Duval, chasing Tiger Woods, took four to get out and ended with a quadruple bogey eight.

The sand trap sits short left of the 17th green, at the close of a narrow, fast running fairway. The slender green almost winds its body around the bunker, arching up high in the middle behind it, and dropping lower at the front right and left portions, where the slopes feed balls towards the bunker. The beauty of the bunker is that it forces a player to play to the right for safety and risk going through onto the road, or tempts the golfer to attack the centre of the green and risk finding the pot bunker.

Another example of how a great natural landform has been used to create a real strategists hole, is the deep swale that sits at the front of the third hole at the West Course of Royal Melbourne Golf Club in Australia. As a boy I played here many times and always found this hole fascinating.

The hole is a classic driveable par-four. The green is unique because it slopes heavily from front to back. Usually a green complex would be structured to slope back to front.

The deep swale that cuts into the front of the green makes it almost impossible to run the ball onto the green, and the approach shot must be struck precisely to make

the ball hold the sloping green. Anything short rolls back into the swale, while shots not struck well enough will race through the green and go over the back. This small, localised natural landform created the subtle hazards a golfer faces at this short but dangerous hole.

A great example of a deceptively simple looking hole is the 6th hole at Ballybunion Golf Club in County Kerry, South West Ireland. At just 364-yards and without a bunker in sight, it's tempting to try to overpower this subtle right to left dogleg hole. The key to success is to choose just the right amount of rough to cut off with the tee-shot to gain the best angle to approach a slim, elusive table-top green. Finding the wrong angle into the green usually means you'll miss it, and getting it up and down requires tremendous skills.

Hazards can come in all shapes and sizes but it is usually small natural ones that create uniqueness and creativity. In all Thomson Perrett & Lobb designs we try to utilise natural landforms and existing features as hazards as much as possible. Natural always look better than manufactured.