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The Golden Age of golf architecture spanned from the 1910s through the mid-1930s and produced not only a prolific number of golf courses, but also many of its most influential and enduring designs. The best architects of that era are names that are still well known a century later. Donald Ross, A.W. Tillinghast, William Flynn, Harry Colt, C.B. MacDonald, Seth Raynor, Alistair MacKenzie, Willie Park, Jr.: Their golf courses constitute the majority of the top 100 lists. In fact, 9 of the current top 10 ranked courses in the USA were designed during the Golden Age.

The factors behind the greatness of the Golden Age had as much to do with the architect as it did with the era in which they worked. Architects in the early 20th century often published writings about their designs and philosophies, encouraging, promoting, and uplifting their discipline in the process. Also to their benefit, these architects often had the ability to discriminate when it came to selecting a site. Parcels of land with optimal topography for golf and appropriate soil were selected whenever possible. Golf courses of this era were built largely by hand with the assistance of mule power. As such, golf holes were routed to work with the contours of the land on which they were built. Hazards were integrated into natural features both out of necessity and for aesthetics. Golf courses of the Golden Age reflected the land and created a connection between the land and the golfer, which is likely a major contributor to their enduring nature.

Most courses built during the Golden Age adhered to the strategic design principle of golf architecture. Playing corridors were often wide and hazards were positioned to provide options for routes of play. Whether it be a blind shot or a forced carry over a hazard, players were given a choice of obstacles to overcome on their path to the green. A more conservative tee shot may result in a difficult approach or require a longer route. Conversely, a successfully played bold tee ball would reward the player with an "easier" second shot. Strategic design embraces the concept of risk/reward. In no small part due to the playing equipment of the day, golf courses of the Golden Age also permitted a variety of types of golf shots to reach the green. Just like the courses of the British Isles, which are frequently exposed to

Golf Digest's 2019 list of Top 10 Golf Courses in the USA

- 1) Pine Valley (George Crump and H.S. Colt - **1910**)
- 2) Augusta National (Alistair MacKenzie and Bobby Jones - **1929**)
- 3) Cypress Point (MacKenzie - **1926**)
- 4) Shinnecock Hills (William Flynn - **1931**)
- 5) Oakmont (Henry Fownes - **1903**)
- 6) Merion (*East*) (Hugh Wilson - **1912**)
- 7) Pebble Beach (Jack Neville and Douglas Grant - **1919**)
- 8) National Golf Links of America (Charles B. MacDonald - **1911**)
- 9) Sand Hills (William Coore and Ben Crenshaw - **1995**)
- 10) Fishers Island (Seth Raynor - **1926**)

difficult weather conditions, Golden Age courses often encouraged the ground game to reach the green, albeit from perhaps a different angle from the most direct route. This feature not only created an additional option for play, but it also allowed golfers of all different skill levels to enjoy the game.

With the arrival of the Great Depression, followed by World War II, golf course construction came to a rapid halt in the mid 1930s, continuing through the 1940s. By the time it picked up again in the 1950s, much had changed.

**Golf Magazine's 2017-2018 list of
Top 100 Golf Courses in the USA**

- Number of Golden Age Era Courses – **66**
 - By Quartile
 - 1st-25th - **21**
 - 25th-50th - **14**
 - 51st-75th - **15**
 - 76th-100th - **16**

People's attitudes had changed. Anything modern was in vogue. Golf equipment continued to improve. And...the bulldozer came to be. Suddenly, the very same features of golf course design that made the Golden Age great and tied it to its origins were viewed as "old" and unnecessary. Steel shafted clubs and dimpled solid core balls allowed golf to be played in an entirely different way. The aerial game had arrived and golf

architecture followed suit. The hill or knob that a golf hole would have been previously routed around was simply bulldozed down to make way for a more "straightforward" style of golf, often with bunkers flanking both sides of the landing area. Golf holes were "framed" with a clear path of play. Blind shots and bunkers in the direct line of play were viewed as "unfair". This style of architecture was termed penal design and was the predominant design style from the 1950s through the 1990s. Golf holes built in this period were largely designed to look good on the cover of a magazine; the fact that their ethos demanded a one-dimensional style of play was irrelevant. The concept of fun took a back seat to defending par.

Unfortunately, the trends of the new era also made their way to older golf courses. Tree planting programs were initiated. Bunkers were filled in, moved, or otherwise renovated. Sometimes, mounds or hillocks were taken down. Not all changes were intentional, however. Over time, putting surfaces contracted and fairways narrowed from evolving mowing patterns and centerline irrigation systems. For many older golf courses, the unique features of the Golden Age gradually became muted. Unfortunately for one Golden Age architect, his designs suffered a greater degree of sterilization than his counterparts. Devereux Emmet was known for implementing "quirky" elements into his golf holes and these features were eliminated with such abandon over the years that few of his courses remain today which even closely resemble their original design.

Fortunately for golf, a new era of architects came along around the turn of the 21st century who embraced the ideals of the Golden Age. In doing so, they started a renaissance.

*(Up next: Elimination of Emmet at CCF.
Followed by: Restoration and the Neoclassical Age)*