

THE ARCHITECTURE ISSUE



Skyway Golf Course in Jersey City, N.J.

Short And Sweet

Concise Course Designs Stand To Benefit The Game

BY JOHN STEINBREder

Ever since the mid-1800s, 18 has been the magic number when it comes to holes on a golf course. Most layouts old and new have that many, and the majority of handicap indexes issued by the game's governing bodies are based on full rounds played on traditional-sized tracks.

But there is a growing trend toward layouts of more varied compositions. They often are called short courses, and the term can apply to any track that is not a standard 18-holer. And short courses certainly are proliferating, as resorts, clubs and other course operators look to add more fun to the game, especially for seniors, juniors and those just picking up the sport – and to do so at lower prices. These types of layouts also are designed for people who do not always have the time to play a full 18 – or those who want another way to practice.

Consider how Pinehurst, Bandon Dunes, Sand Valley in Wisconsin, Big Cedar Lodge in southwest Missouri and Silvies Valley in eastern Oregon have added to their golf menus par-3 courses that range from seven holes to 17. Some of those even have opened expansive putting courses modeled after the iconic Himalayas by the Old Course at St. Andrews. Like Bandon (with the Punchbowl) and Pinehurst (with Thistle Dhu). The folks at Streamsong Resort in Central Florida have found another way to go, and that is with short courses within big courses, with the Red and Blue there (designed by Bill Coore/Ben Crenshaw and Tom Doak, respectively) configured so that the sixth in each case ends up at the clubhouse, for those who prefer to play abbreviated rounds.



The Thistle Dhu putting course at Pinehurst

At the same time, municipalities such as Winter Park, Fla., and Jersey City, N.J., are discovering that nine-hole layouts are just what their residents desire when it comes to affordable recreation in their public places. And some developers are finding that stand-alone layouts of different sizes also can prosper, as businesses as well as shining examples of first-rate course design, with the highly acclaimed, nine-hole Sweetens Cove outside Chattanooga, Tenn., being among the latest and most celebrated examples of that.

“There is definitely a move toward shorter courses, and I think it is a good one,” says Steve Smyers, the noted designer and a past president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects. “I grew up playing a par-32 course, I have designed short courses and reversible ones and I understand the pleasure that courses of, say, nine or 13 holes can bring and how much sense they can make.”



The Top of the Rock par-3 course at Missouri's Big Cedar Lodge

Interestingly, the earliest Scottish layouts were what we would consider short courses today. Leith Links was only five holes when it opened in 1744. The Old Course at St. Andrews

started as a nine-holer, was 12 holes by 1764 and did not become 18 until 1857. Prestwick, the site of the first 12 Open Championships, initially was a 12-hole track. It wasn't until the Old went to 18 that that number started to become the standard.

Even as 18 became the norm, however, the Scots continued to construct nine-holers. As stand-alones, and also as complements to the bigger courses that were being built. Like St. Olaf, which Old Tom Morris laid out by the Championship Course he designed at Cruden Bay. And the Wee Course at North Berwick, which is nearly as beloved as the fabled West Links there. The same thing happened in the States as the royal and ancient game started to take hold in this country. A short "ladies course" opened at Shinnecock Hills in 1893, for example. Then in 1927, the leaders of The Country Club in Brookline, Mass., engaged architect William Flynn to construct a nine-holer called the Primrose to go along with that retreat's main track.

As golf grew in popularity, towns and cities started constructing short courses when money and space prevented communities from building bigger ones.

Short courses attained a sort of eminence in the golf world when George Cobb and Augusta National co-founder Clifford Roberts laid out the Par 3 course at the home of the Masters in 1958. In his book, *The Story of the Augusta National Golf Club*, Roberts wrote that he initially set out "to develop something outstanding as a practice facility and an enjoyable golfing diversion." But two years after it came on line, the course also began serving as the site of the Par 3 Contest at the Masters. Sam Snead won the inaugural edition, and it quickly became a staple of the championship and one of the most popular parts of Masters week for patrons. CBS Sports began televising the Par 3 Contest in 2008, and by doing so elevated the profile of short courses to previously unforeseen heights.



The Par 3 course at Augusta National

A true visionary, Roberts long ago saw the value of a short course at Augusta for his members and their guests, a place for them to warm up before playing the big course – or to enjoy an easy nine holes after their morning games when they did not have the time or the energy to play 36. He also believed it was a very effective place to work on one’s short game.

Equally far-sighted was Mike Keiser, the Chicago-based greeting card magnate who in 1995 opened a private, nine-hole homage to Pine Valley called the Dunes Club, near his summer home in New Buffalo, Mich. Dick Nugent handled the design, and architecture critics positively fawned over the finished product and how well he used the well-contoured, sandy-soiled land. It wasn’t long before the Dunes Club made its way onto some of the top-100 lists, and when it did, golfers who previously had been locked into the concept of 18-hole layouts began to appreciate just how satisfying a well-conceived nine-hole track could be.

Then in 2013, a little more than a decade after Keiser had given the golf world Bandon Dunes, he engaged Coore and Crenshaw to build a 13-hole, par-3 course there called the Preserve.



The Preserve at Bandon Dunes in the foreground

A shift in interest and attitude had taken hold, and any stigma that had been attached to courses of alternate lengths began to disappear.

Rob Collins is a fan of that move. "Short courses have so much to offer," says the architect who created Sweetens Cove with his colleague Tad King. "They can be more fun. They can take less time to play. And designers can endow them with more variety, more strategy and more sustained interest so they are every bit as good as, if not better than, an 18-hole course."

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ARCHITECT KEITH RHEBB

Architect Keith Rhebb agrees. A longtime associate of Coore and Crenshaw, he collaborated with Riley Johns on the much-lauded renovation of the nine-hole municipal course in Winter Park, Fla. They also recently completed work on a 10-hole short course that will come on line at Forest Dunes Golf Club in Northern Michigan next summer.

"In many ways, these shorter courses give us the freedom as designers to be a little more creative," Rhebb says. "We can give golfers the chance to hit multiple shots, in some cases even giving them the option to use putter off the tee. Or maybe to play a bit of cross-country golf and make up their own routings by playing to different greens from different tees. We have smaller pieces of land, so we have to work hard to get the most out of what we have. And with there being fewer holes, you have to make sure every one is special. You cannot get away with having an average hole connecting a couple of good ones, as you might be able to do with an 18-hole layout. With a short course, every hole has to be good. Very good, in fact."

As much fun as they may be to play – and to lay out – short courses do present their own sets of challenges when it comes to working from a business standpoint.

"It's not so much of an issue when you build one that is a part of a broader golf facility, whether a club or a resort," says Josh Lesnik, the president of KemperSports who years ago served as the first general manager at Bandon Dunes and since has helped Keiser open every one of his courses. "You already have the maintenance crew. You have the mowers. And you have the golfers coming to play the bigger courses on your property."

Where it gets tricky, he adds, is when you have a stand-alone.



Sweetens Cove

So how does a course operator make it work? It helps that as a rule, overall costs are less for a shorter layout because there are fewer greens to mow and roll and fewer bunkers to maintain. And most short courses have considerably less fairway turf. Building them in high-population areas where there are few public golf options is important, and that is one reason why the Skyway Golf Course in Jersey City and the Winter Park muni do so well. Same with Sweetens Cove, Collins says, because it is located in an area where there are some 10 million people within a two-hour radius. Establishing the sort of ambience that makes it a place where people want to “hang” can also be beneficial.

“You also have to really manage your costs,” Collins adds. “Our clubhouse is called the Shed and is only 20 feet by 10 feet. We have been open five years but are only now getting indoor plumbing. Previously, we have used portalets. We don’t have a bar, but we do sell beer. Next year, however, we will have a bar and a little food service.”

The key, of course, is the course itself, and the one at Sweetens Cove is a very good one, as are so many of the shorter tracks that have opened in recent years.

More and more, golf is coming in many different packages.