

# Alister Mackenzie's inspired use of ground contours

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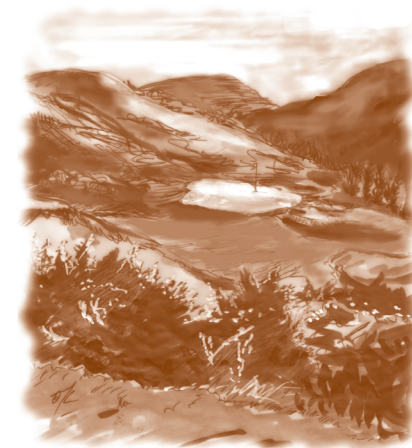
Picture the tee shot for the tenth hole at Augusta National during the annual playing of the US Masters. Regardless of whether a player's natural shotmaking pattern is a fade or draw, everyone stands on this tee and envisages working that ball from right to left. If they do, they are rewarded with a caroming kick off the right to left and downhill slope of the fairway. Their ball rockets forward, leaving them with a much shorter distance, and level lie in their approach to the green. The concept of this slope, this ground contour, is so profound that it almost forces the modern tour player to recognise this strategy, and engage in the lost art of shot-making to try to utilise its inherent advantages. This is certainly not the only instance of such thinking in the

designs of Alister Mackenzie. For a man who served as the consulting architect for the Royal and Ancient Golf Club, St. Andrews, his appreciation for the values of the ground game was probably unmatched.

My exposure to Mackenzie's legacy has been most intense at his 'big three' in California: Pasatiempo Golf Club; the Valley Club; and Cypress Point Club. Growing up and learning the game at Pasatiempo certainly exposed me to Mackenzie's genius, and perhaps his most personal work. It also greatly shaped how I learned to play the game, acquiring shot-making skills I probably wouldn't have learned elsewhere. Both of these facets were furthered at the Valley Club, as I played collegiate golf at Santa Barbara,

and longed for Mondays—our day to visit this jewel. I am least exposed to Cypress as far as number of rounds played, but its unmatched uniqueness and overwhelming quality have led to a never-ending study.

In studying all three gems of golf architecture, I gained an appreciation for Mackenzie's affinity for slopes, or contours, and how he utilised them in building strategies into a variety of shots on some of his best golf holes. The manner in which he utilised the sloping terrain on tee shots certainly provided some insight into his thinking. Interestingly, at Pasatiempo, some of the more profound slopes affecting tee shots have progressively become out of play, and easily carried by the longer hitters. This is in part due to the uncontrolled specifications



**OPPOSITE: A photo taken in 1929 of the par-5 tenth hole at Pasatiempo Golf Club, California, USA. A heroic tee-shot, shaped from right-to-left over the farthest point of the barranca, would bound to the top of the crest. Of note is the wide landing area, and alternate routes of play. (Photo courtesy of Pasatiempo Golf Club.)**



View from behind Tenth Tee, Opening Day Exhibition Match featuring Bobby Jones . . . Sept. 8, 1929





**This fearsome bunker at Pasatiempo's sixteenth hole was far easier to avoid if the tee-shot could be played from right-to-left, or alongside the ravine to the left. Such a shot could take advantage of a dramatic slope in the fairway running toward the green, thereby shortening the hole and opening up the approach. Mackenzie considered this hole his favourite par-4. (Photo courtesy of the Brooks collection.)**

on equipment, but also to a couple of design changes that happened in the 1940s to the second and tenth holes. In the original design, both played as par-5s with tee shots crossing the entry road to the club. Although the second hole is still regarded as one of the finest on the course as a modern day par-4, it was a much more interesting hole then. The landing area for tee shots on this hole is now an area of rough, a fairway far below the apex of a prodigious drive. Originally, a pronounced right-to-left slope affected the ball after the tee shot had landed. A sufficiently strong drive could

carry a slight crown in this slope and take advantage of a downward slope towards the green. This presented the player with an option to have a go at the green in two—as the approach favours a running shot coming in from the right—or lay-up in a good position from which to attack this very challenging approach to the green. A weaker tee shot would simply bounce to the left after failing to gain benefit from the downslope. This scenario lengthened the hole and increased its challenge, as the second shot had to be played off a strong slope and visibility to the hole was lessened.

The tenth hole is a fearsome tee shot to this day, but was even more so in the original design. Yet it was indicative of Mackenzie's belief that 'there should be heroic carries, but always an alternative route'. The deep barranca that must be carried is certainly the stand out feature that catches your attention. A more subtle aspect to the strategy of the hole, however, would have been the slope of the fairway beyond this chasm. A strong drive up the right-centre, with a nice draw to its flight, would have had the velocity to bound up to

the top of the crest. From here, options and temptation would have greatly increased the interest of the hole as the player could take a shot at the green in two, or position a lay up to the right to avoid the bold bunkering fronting the left side of the green, thankfully recently restored. A tee-shot towards the left side of the fairway, where the slope is significantly steeper and facing the tee, would have stopped dead in its tracks. This would have left an uncomfortable blind second shot played over the crest with little to orientate the golfer as to the direction of the green. Today's play, with the tee significantly forward and the hole played as a par-4, has its own strategies with regards to the slope beyond the crest. However, it does not present the range of options originally intended, and is best played more defensively.

Other holes on these noted courses where slopes greatly affect the strategy of the hole off the tee are the Valley Club's tenth, and Cypress Point's eighth holes, though in very different ways. The former offers golfers the opportunity to gain advantage due to the contouring, while the latter example demonstrates how



Aerial photo of Pasatiempo (1931). The clubhouse site is approximately in the centre of the picture, with the outward nine to the left, and the inward nine to the right. Play crossed the entry road twice on the second and tenth holes, both par-5s then. (Photo courtesy of the Fairchild aerial photography collection at Whittier college, C-1437, A: 7.)



Eleventh hole and green at The Valley Club, California in the 1930s. Mackenzie makes great use of the hill and sweeping tie-in to the green. (Photo courtesy of The Valley Club.)



slopes can serve as a defence of the hole, leading the golfer into potential peril. At Valley Club's tenth hole, a well played fade off the tee, down the left side can take advantage of the bounding slope to the right, gaining the most yardage running down the hill, and eventually settling in a level area on the right side of the fairway. From this position, your play is much easier as the options increase; your ability to execute is significantly increased by having a

more level stance. The tee shot at Cypress Point's eighth hole is unique for America: a frightening carry over the dunes, with a fairway that falls away from the turn of the dogleg right. A heroic carry over the right side, or a well-played fade off the tee, affords the player a shorter approach, a more level lie, and enhanced visibility to the green for the second shot. A bail out to the left off the tee catches the slope running away, significantly compound-

ing the difficulties from there on. Interestingly, all of these featured holes, apart from the last, were par-5s. Perhaps Mackenzie was merely adding to the variety of shots presented for tee shots on these holes. More likely, however, he was utilising these slopes to give a possible advantage to the player who didn't merely bash away brainlessly on the long holes. Perhaps he was playing on people's tendency to over-swing when teeing-off on long holes, and testing their mental ability to avoid this tendency. Regardless, the player who could grasp the strategies brought about by the natural contours, and perform shots with accuracy and shotmaking, could gain the advantage here.

A look at the approaches to the greens at these three courses adds insight to Mackenzie's thinking as well, and his belief in the influence that natural contours should have. Most of the front approaches to the greens at these three courses are open, at least to one side or from one strategic angle, encouraging an option for shots to bounce in. Pasatiempo typifies this feature less than the Valley Club and Cypress Point due to the many carries of the barrancas or ravines—it's



The approach to the sixth hole at The Valley Club in the 1930s. A powerful drive (played at 295 yards from the 'long' tee) could skirt the flanking bunkers and reach the green.

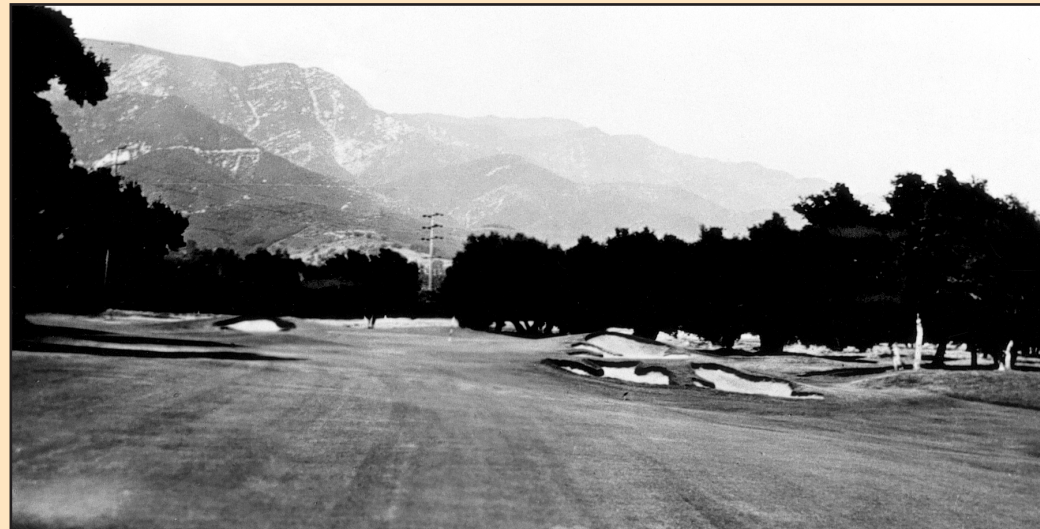


Photo taken from the fifth fairway at The Valley Club. Mackenzie and Hunter encouraged a running approach as the method to attack this mid-length par-4. (Photos courtesy of The Valley Club.)



interesting how often and varied these were utilised on the back nine—and the softer conditions that can prevail in the wet months. Side slopes were often utilised as well, such as at the Valley Club's eleventh hole, a wonderful par-3. This hole offers the opportunity to run a ball up the front approach, or to carry the front left greenside bunker and utilise the natural right banking slope. Mackenzie's attention to the effects of these approaches was not lost, and the details and subtleties never ignored. As Robert Hunter, Mackenzie's partner in that era noted:

There is no portion of a golf course which requires more care at the time of construction, and more attention later in the up-keep, than the area upon which most approaches to the hole will land. What decisive and subtle influences may be made to work upon the ball at just this point!<sup>9</sup>

Modern conditions altered the original intent of many of these playing characteristics. Common belief in long rough surrounding

the green complex, and the propensity to irrigate, heavily emphasised the advantages to an aerial attack more than one along the ground. A look at old photos of all three of these courses shows the green complexes maintained in a fairway cut, with a shaggy and rugged look to the bunker lines. What an infinite variety of shots would be required in such circumstances, instead of the tendency to merely grab the sand wedge and flop a shot out of the heavy rough. Not only would the tighter lies dictate that more 'shots' be played, but a level of playability is also added in such circumstances. The contouring in the immediate surrounds could be utilised more in playing shots that bank and kick, or defensively as backstops. The contours would be utilised as Mackenzie intended, thereby affecting play. Playability would be particularly enhanced when shots are required down the significant slopes of many of Mackenzie's greens. The combination of long grass surrounds and today's green speeds have rendered recovery from behind many of his greens a terrifying experience prohibiting aggressive play. This was certainly not his intent in such a general way.

Thankfully, the importance of the ground contours and their effects on how the game is played, along with many other facets of Mackenzie's genius, are being widely recognised both within and outside these wonderful golf clubs. The restorations are underway, and the results are fantastic. The broad concept of returning conditions of respective golf courses to 'firm and fast' is at least beginning on a greater scale, and I sincerely hope this will be furthered. The game of golf must have been so fabulously fun and interesting in the Good Doctor's day.