

COURSES

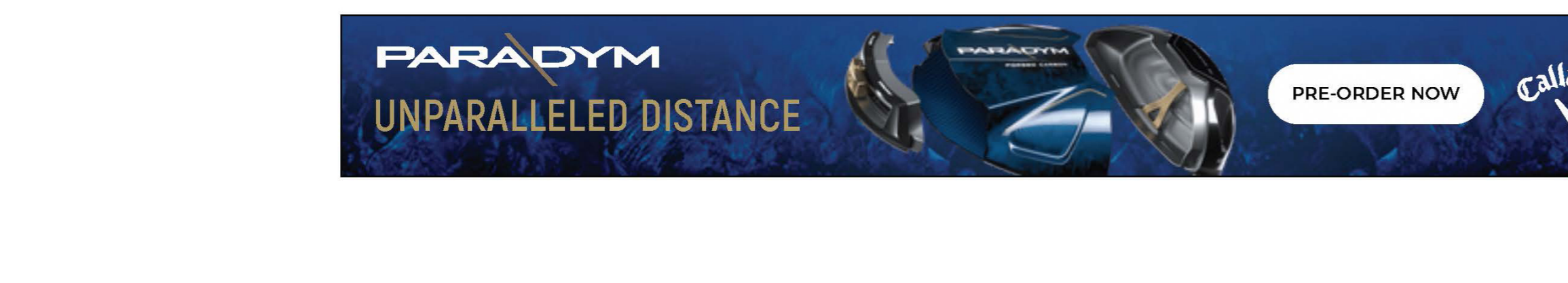
How one design feature (if utilized effectively) can give an entire course character

By **Derek Duncan** | May 02, 2020 f t in

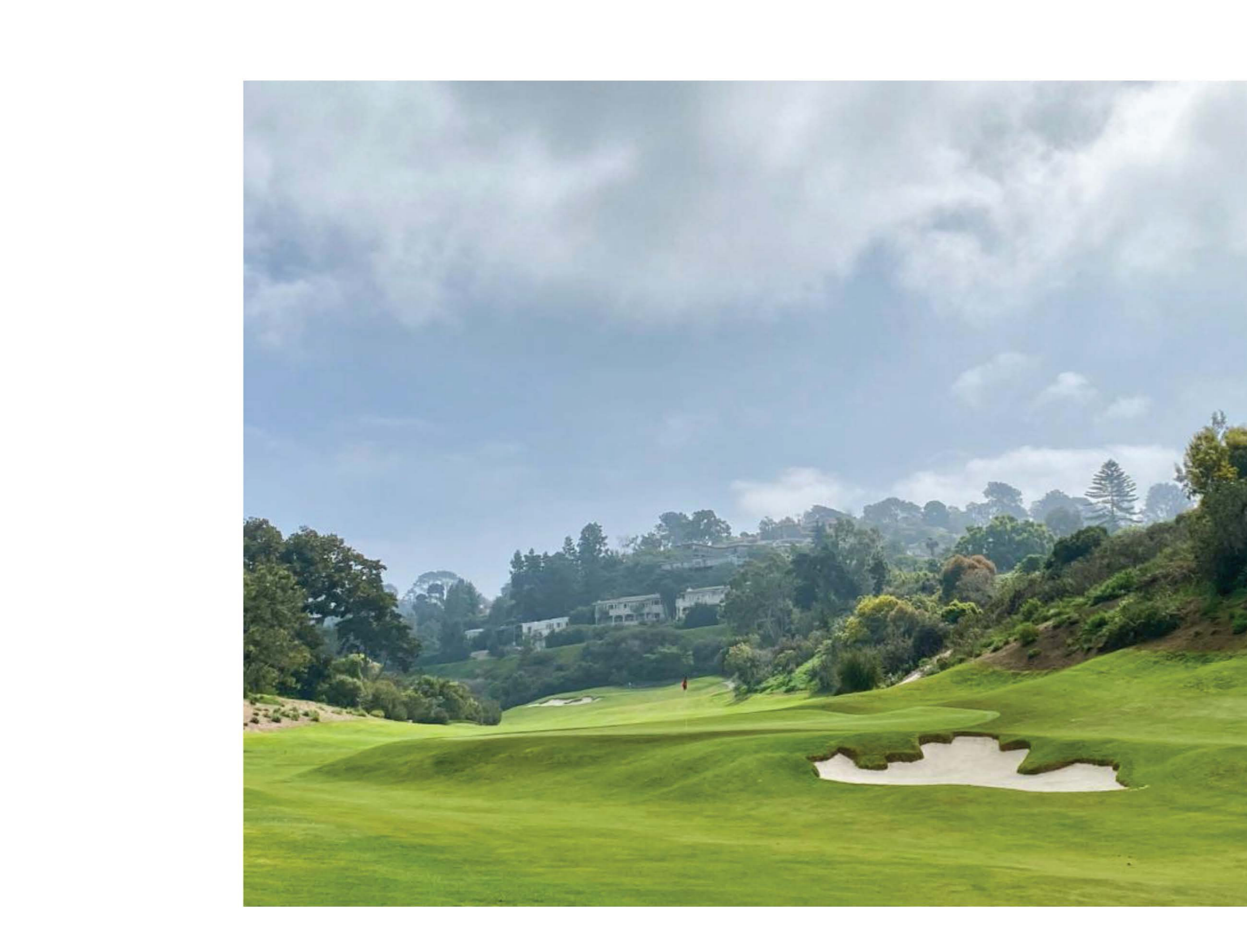


A single great feature, or even a merely interesting one, can enshrine a golf course with character.

Pebble Beach and Cypress Point show off a rocky coastline like few others, but the endowment doesn't have to be that grand. Character can come from lesser features, like a sand ridge (Seminole), a snaky tributary (Augusta) or an island green (TPC Sawgrass). It doesn't even have to be a landform: Think about wicker baskets (Merion) or rake lines and menacing bunkers (Oakmont).



The defining feature of La Jolla Country Club, a timeless little enclave propped up in the oceanside foothills north of San Diego, is a large ravine that cuts across the lower third of the property. What's notable about it is not just that it happens to be deep enough and wide enough to enclose almost perfectly in the bottom two end-to-end holes, but that the bottom was used at all.



In the spirit of adventure, William Watson, who designed the course for the country club in 1921, might have chosen to route holes back and forth over the ravine, creating a dramatic par-3 or two (the carry distance is only about 100 yards), or angled longer holes across it where the player could bite off as much canyon as the drive dared.

But Watson believed this: What could be more adventurous than going down into the ravine? That would have been the more severe challenge of the day, when it would have taken two armies, trained in jungle warfare, to bushwhack their way through the trees, cactus, mud (the ravine was a major waterway in times of heavy rain) and whatever other in-hospitalities the old California terrain could summon.

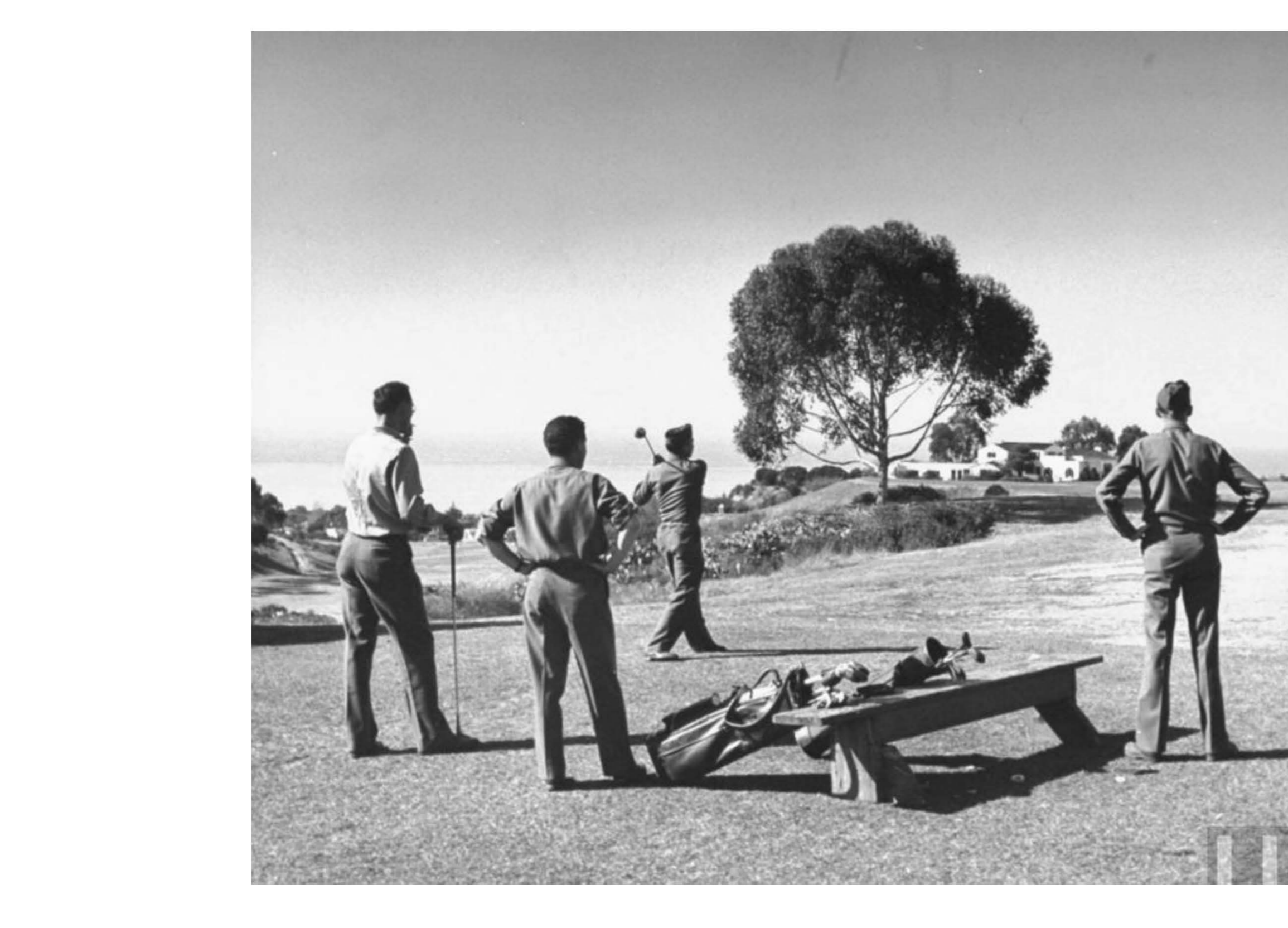
But clear it they did, and there lies now the 11th (above) and 12th, two of Southern California's most memorable holes, the latter of which ends abruptly at a green pushed up against a hillside with no apparent place to go next. It's a little disorienting to come to such a full stop—a dead end, really—unless you're used to hiking deep Himalayan crevices, or play at Bel-Air. In this case, though, there's no secret tunnel, no hidden elevator inside the mountain. But upon closer inspection there is, to the right and short of the green, a shrouded path that transports you, eventually, back to the upper world in the proximity of the 13th tee.

The rest of the holes play on either side of the canyon across wide, tilting plateaus overlooking the quiet glamor of La Jolla below and the infinite blue Pacific beyond. Or at least they do now. Prior to the club hiring Irvine-based architect Todd Eckenrode to renovate the course in 2019, those sweeping views were mostly blocked out by columns of mature trees, planted for beautification in the 1960s and '70s. And the club loved them.



Let's stipulate up front that we all like trees. But, considering that trees can be had nearly everywhere, do we like them more than the ocean, which only a small fraction of golf courses in the world can see? This is the argument Eckenrode made to the club, and he turned to history to bolster his case.

"When we look at the aerials from the '20s and '30s, there was nothing. It was truly a bluff-top setting," he says. "As with any club, [tree removal] is difficult. But eventually, as the views began to open up and the course began to feel less cluttered, people got on board quickly."



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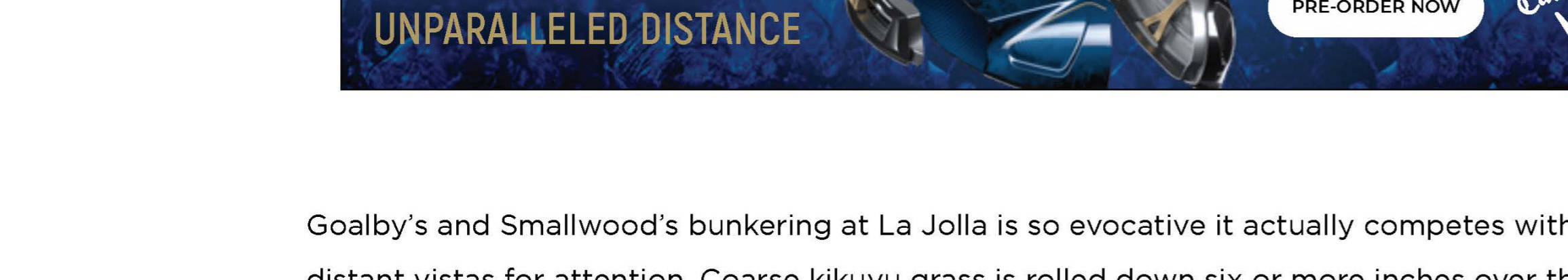
Clearing out rows of ornamental trees, with the assistance and support of superintendent Dennis Fowler, allows the eye to focus on the attractive remaining eucalyptus, melaleuca and Torrey pines. The holes now feel connected, the spatial qualities of the site can be appreciated and there's more room for the golf.

Trees lining the canyon to the left of the bending par-4 10th, for instance, once forced drives to the right, dictating a short club off the tee to keep the ball from traveling through the fairway. With most of them removed, the hole now tempts aggressive plays down the left along the mostly denuded edge of the ravine.

About five years after the Watson design opened, the club hired William P. (Billy) Bell to revamp the course. Among the most prominent moves Bell made was to add intricately-shaped bunkers similar to those he built with George Thomas at places like Riviera and the Los Angeles Country Club. Over the course of decades and later renovations, however, Bell's bunkering was gradually buffered out.

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Eckenrode and shapers Kye Goalby and Matt Smallwood were able to reclaim the earlier look of La Jolla's lost bunkers by riffing on Bell's Southern California style, while also arranging them to better engage hole strategies. At the par-5 15th, they're draped at staggered, encroaching angles to form left-right and right-left shot shapes, and at holes like the third, fifth and thirteenth the bunkers have been pulled off the green complexes to complicate layout and approach shot decisions.



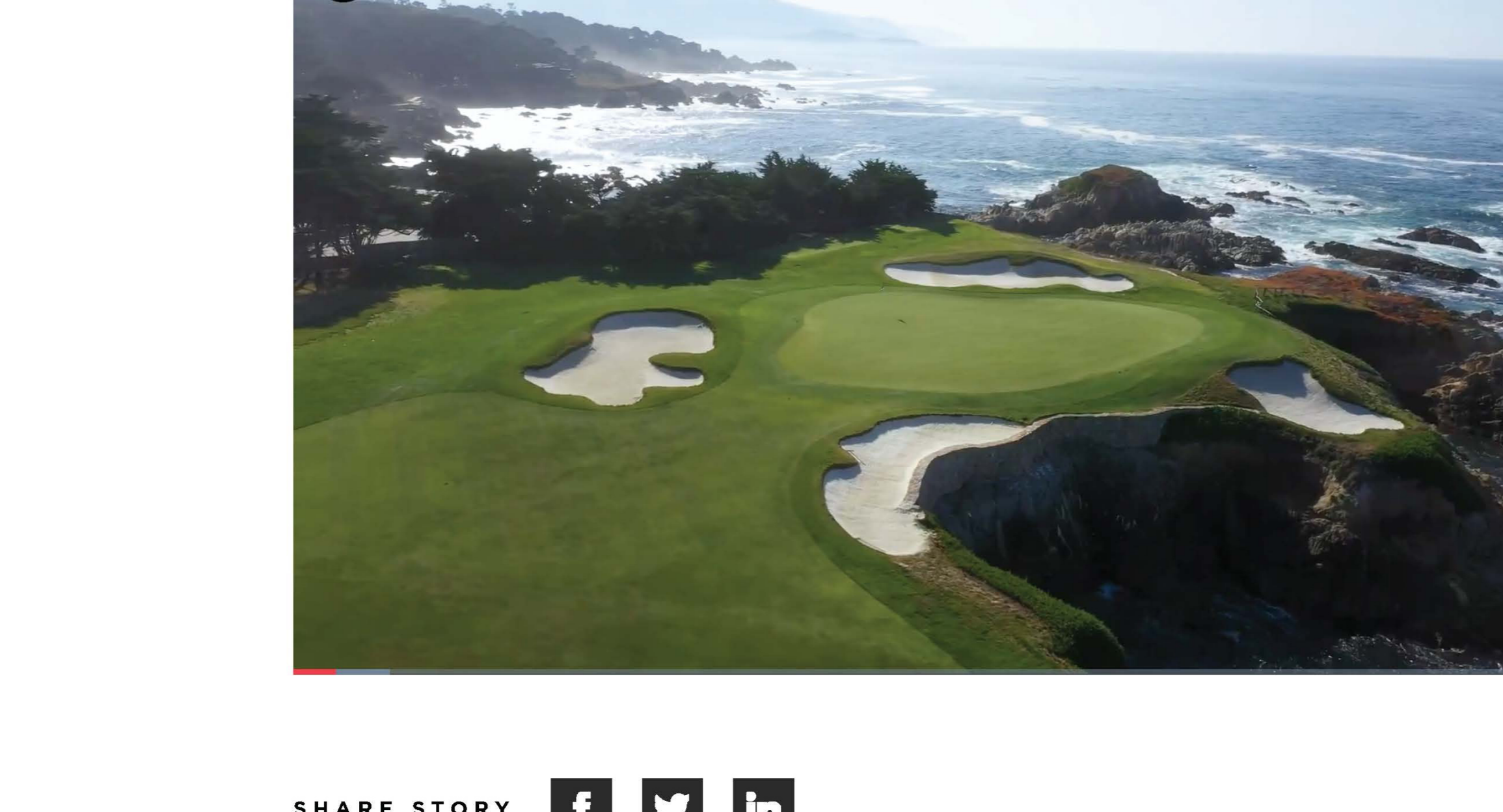
Goalby's and Smallwood's bunkering at La Jolla is so evocative it actually competes with the distant vistas for attention. Coarse kikuyu grass is rolled down six or more inches over the top edges giving the bunkers a scruffy eyebrow effect. The irregular shapes—low on entrance, higher at the rear—create the impression that wild chunks have been torn from the earth, an especially powerful provocation seen from the first tee.

La Jolla exemplifies how removing trees and opening up sightlines can produce an immediate, visceral impact. As he's done for other, older California clubs (like Brentwood and Lakeside in Los Angeles, and Diablo and Orinda Country Clubs in the Bay area), Eckenrode has helped highlight the club's charming, historic character by enhancing its natural assets. Throw in a garnish of thoughtful, eye-catching bunkering and you have a simple but powerful recipe for success.

It's a recipe that travels well, and one that other clubs and courses could benefit from learning.

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