

Royal County Down Golf Club, Northern Ireland

Thirteenth hole Todd Eckenrode

My introduction to Royal County Down Golf Club while competing in the 1999 British Amateur Championship was a brutal experience. A couple of practice rounds under my belt only served to further open my eyes to the many terrors that exist over this incredibly rugged golfing terrain. Sometimes, you're better off not knowing! My feelings of trepidation during competition, however, were tempered with greater feelings of excitement, fascination, and wonder, as I continually explored the intricacies of this great golfing links.

Many of the holes require substantial carries over the intimidating, massive dunes to landing areas that are blind to the golfer. This precedent continues throughout the course of your round, and a general feeling of uneasiness permeates, as the final destination of your shot is frequently unknown. It is vital to focus on a target, to trust your instincts of orientation, and, most importantly, to trust your swing. It is these qualities in play that make the long par-four, thirteenth at Royal County Down my favourite hole.

Interestingly, the tee-shot on the thirteenth differs from many others at Royal County Down in that the landing area is relatively visible ahead of you, with the fairway nestled into a valley between two dunal ridges. When I played the famous old links, the dunes on the left-hand side were covered in gorse, virtually ensuring that a ball hit to the left was lost. However, the dunes on the right were considerably more open and varied in vegetation. Clumps of gorse were scattered about, but predominately, the tall natural grasses covered this lower lying ridge immediately adjacent to the fairway. During the Amateur, the length of the hole mandated a driver off the tee for most players; if the hole happened to be downwind, or if you were a long hitter, then a safer club selection could be utilised.

The key to the hole, though, is how the right-hand side dunes affect the golfer's approach shot. After the landing area—approximately 100 yards short of the green—a ridge encroaches completely into the centreline of the shot, obscuring visibility to the entire

green. The pin, however, can usually be seen fluttering in the wind. Depending on your position in the fairway, you may also catch a glimpse of the left-hand greenside bunker, which provides a minor gauge on the green's proximity and distance.

This encroaching ridge is scattered with a variety of nasty bunkers, tall grass clumps, and thick gorse. In essence: it couldn't be much more intimidating. And though its effects cross back out of the centreline to continue up the far right side of the green, the ridge appears to continue right up to the green itself. In reality, the approach into the green is quite open, and it encourages a running shot to scurry on up to the pin. And yet, your instincts tell you that may be the last shot in the world to play! This contradiction is just one of several factors that makes the hole so interesting, forcing you to trust what you know to be factual, and not what your eyes might be relaying back.

To further heighten the effect, the bunkering set into this ridge is characteristic of the wonderfully unique style throughout Royal County Down. How I love this trademark rugged natural style of bunker, with its dark imposing lips that can be quite thick in spots and accented with tufts of tall natural grasses of contrasting colours along the top. The visual effect is that of a colossal bunker—vertically immense—where escape seems ever so difficult.

All of us have a tendency to play toward what we can see. Ultimately, this is a more comfortable feeling than flying blind, and it lures the golfer to play toward the left side of the thirteenth green. But this is a dangerous play, and precisely where the lone bunker adjacent to the green is situated—a brilliantly placed hazard that infiltrates the golfer's psyche, if ever one did. The greatest holes in the world are those in which the golfer is challenged both physically and mentally, and the thirteenth at Royal County Down certainly meets that criteria.

Todd Eckenrode—Origins Golf Design
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Par-4
MEN'S: 443 Yards
WOMEN'S: 406 Yards
DESIGNER: George Combe (1903)

