



ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF *THE CUT* GREG TURNER PRESENTS HIS VIEWPOINT ON THE STUNNING NEW HOME OF THE NEW ZEALAND OPEN

A world class golfing experience

PHOTOGRAPHS MARK HILL

ONE OF THE BEAUTIES of golf is that the courses upon which it is played can be so diverse in character. This does, of course, mean different things in different locations and requires from the design team a conscientious study of both the historical and physical characteristics of the locality.

If it has been the intention of the recent additions to New Zealand golf courses to deliver a strong sense of place, then most have failed miserably. However, the new Hills Golf Club (HGC), near Arrowtown, is, fortunately and pleasingly, an exception.

First and foremost, the site has an enormously strong physical presence. Where across the road at the Millbrook Resort the land is gently rolling, almost feminine, in its curves and scale, The Hills is far more tough and masculine. Don't get me wrong, I do not for a minute wish to suggest the terrain is not strikingly attractive, simply that it is a more 'in your face' aggressive landscape than its closest neighbour.

Clearly the decision has been taken to highlight and dramatise this quality rather than downplay it. The craggy Central Otago schist has been uncovered rather than buried and is therefore used as the internal focal point on a number of holes. For the same reason that so many golfing visitors enjoy the nearby Arrowtown course because of its more natural feel, the HGC course will undoubtedly find favour.

The choices of flora also speak of and for the locality. Tussocks abound and are interestingly juxtaposed with a variety of introduced trees.

If anything, HGC's planting regime may be verging on extreme. The movement and sway of tussock grass in the wind is quite compelling, and around tees and behind greens it is quite magnificent. But when the aesthetic of tussock meets the pragmatic of the game of golf, the relationship is less symbiotic. Tussock grasses are a violently penal golfing hazard and therefore the parts where they enter into the playing zones are areas of real aggression. Their impact on play at HGC will be dramatic and, while this may only result in a less aggressive intent for a NZ Open field, it might prove a little aggravating over time for those fortunate enough to play the course more frequently.

One of the striking and unusual aspects of the course is the panache with which the definitively human interventions around the course are handled. From the extensive stonework on bridges, through the contemporary



'bling' of the clubhouse to the stunning sculpture of Mark Hill (yes, it's not only a golf course but also a sculpture park), no stone has been left unturned when it comes to presentation.

So where does the course sit in terms of its design from a sporting perspective? For the purpose of this analysis I'm going to divide design principles into two divergent schools: penal and strategic. The penal school tends to work on the philosophy of penalising the errant, of punishing an

other than for those who choose to attempt to drive into the greenside bunkers, the supposed option of the right side will not really tempt.

At the following hole, also a par four, the fairway turns around a lovely tarn-like pond adorned with some wonderful dragonfly sculptures. I find this a really pleasant scene, with the green and beach bunker located across the corner of the tarn. But the combination of the second fairway bunker and square on green serve to remove the temptation for a brave tee shot into the neck. It's doubtful that any (other than the terminally desperate) will accept the challenge.

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This seems to be the pattern throughout the course, where the combination of tussock alongside landing areas, greens whose long axis tends not to specifically favour the braver

error. The strategic school concentrates more on rewarding the good, on creating a test of tactics to sit alongside the physical test of execution.

At this stage in its evolution (yes, courses are not set in stone nearly to the extent people may think) my feeling is that the test errs toward the penal rather than the strategic, this in spite of the fact there has been a clear intent on a number of holes to provide strategic options. My gut feeling is that the balance of reward in relation to risk is generally insufficient to encourage that risk.

I may be proved to be wrong in this matter – with the balance between what is a realistic alternative and what is not being a most subjective matter. And also that fine balance can be easily tilted in the other direction. For me, one of the fascinating elements of this year's Open will be whether the aggressive lines off certain tees prove to be tempting or not.

Let us look at specific examples. The fifth hole is a short par four where a central bunker seems to be located with the intention of encouraging the opportunity to take a more dangerous right-hand line from the tee. The problem is that the long axis of the green is angled in such a way to favour the approach from the safer left-hand side. I would therefore suspect that,

line from the tee and acute turning angles on the dog-legs mean penalties are too severe and rewards too minimal to actually tempt risk.

This is not an uncommon characteristic in new courses; getting right that tantalising balance between risk and reward has certainly been one of the leading determinates in how history separates great from good golf courses.

Most courses that have achieved greatness have gone through (and indeed continue to go through) constant revision and modification. For what was an unrealistic alternative a few years ago may now be totally realistic, and what once represented the perfect balance of risk and reward may today be a relative walk in the park.

In summary, I can only say this is a wonderful place to watch golf and a good course upon which to play. The surrounding vistas are nothing short of stunning. The combination of flora, exposure of schist and human intervention in the way of stonework and sculpture mean this is, and I suspect will even become more so, a truly world-class golfing experience. And perhaps most importantly, it offers a sense of place, it speaks of the landscape from which it is hewn and it says something about the man whose vision enabled it to be. Who could want for more? ☺