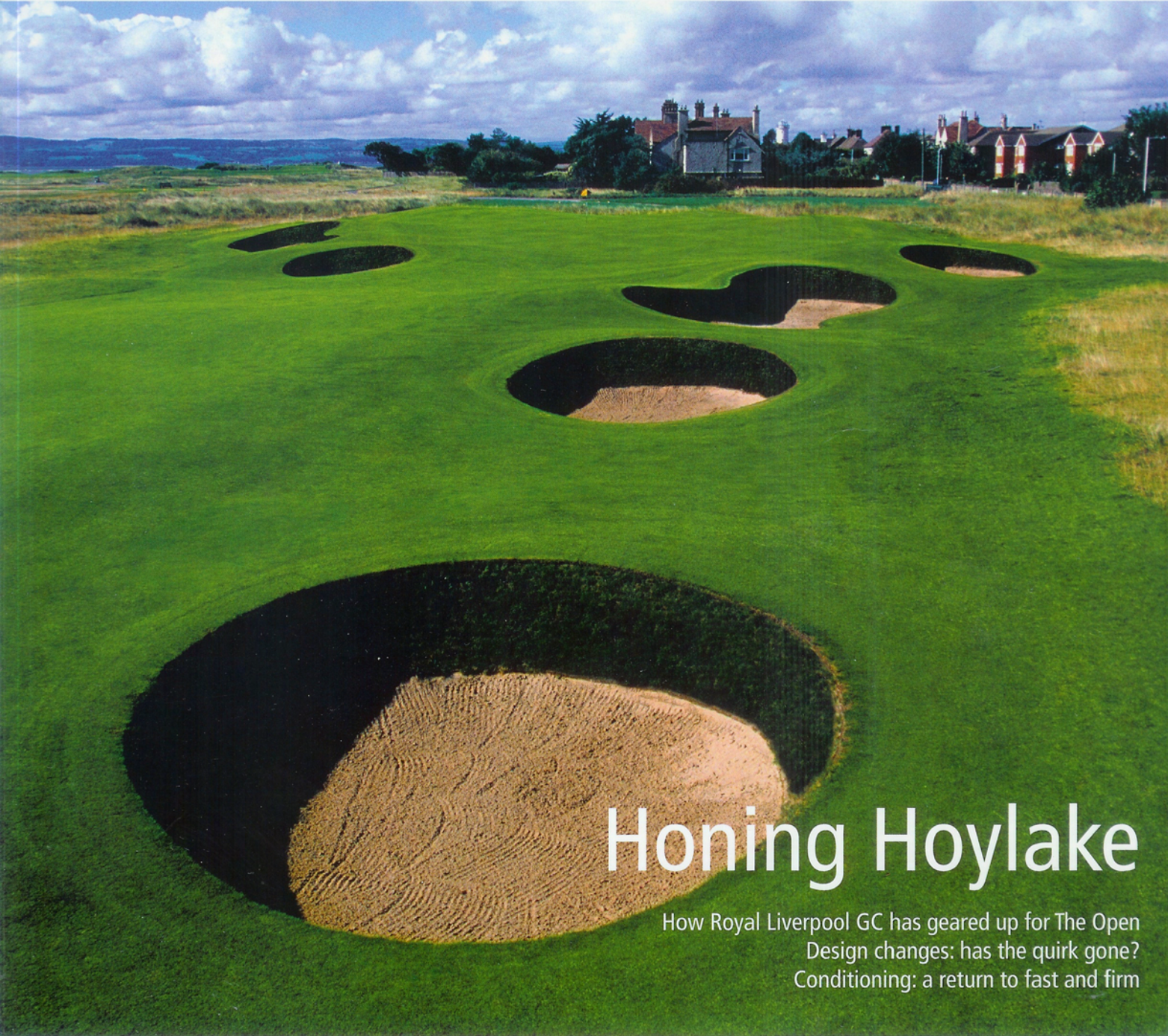




GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE

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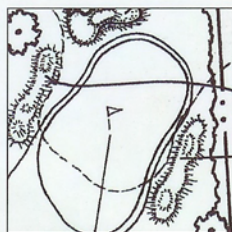


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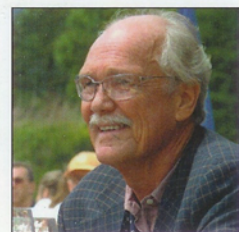
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Courses for horses?

Architect Paul Albanese tells *GCA* about restoring an old golf course using the equipment available to the original designer — and what he learned from the process

As happens often throughout the creative process, an idea that starts out as a lark will often become a fortunate set of circumstances. Such is the case when we decided to restore a few William Langford bunkers the old fashioned way — by using a couple of horses and a pair of antique wooden pull scrapers. Although this idea began as a nostalgic diversion, it evolved into a process that enabled us to understand the origins and forms of classic golf architecture more clearly.

Our firm was retained by Christiana Creek Country Club in Elkhart, Indiana, to redesign its bunkers in a manner that would reflect the old style, form and flavour of the original architect, William Langford. After spending many days trekking throughout the Midwest analysing great old Langford courses, and deciphering his philosophy of course design, we created a plan that embodied Langford's aesthetic.

Typical to our process, I was on site with our construction manager, Dan Grassi and shaper Dan Morrow, discussing the Langford bunker forms being created using the standard range of construction equipment: bulldozers, excavators, box blades, shovels and rakes.



Construction the Golden Age way

As we were working towards precisely recreating the nuance of old style Langford forms, we all recognised that the original bunkers were fashioned using standard Golden Age equipment — specifically, horses and pull scrapers. At that point, I offhandedly said: “We should just recreate these bunkers with horses.” Dan Grassi replied: “Do you want to do it? Because this is horse country, and I think I can find some to use.” After getting the superintendent, Mark Dennison, on board, we were off to the races (so to speak). Another odd coincidence: the site of this golf course is located on an old race track, the form of which is still visible.

The horses were Belgian, the operators were Amish, and none of them had ever stepped foot or hoof on a golf course. But that, I assume that may have been the same back in the Langford days. The horses, Charlie and Judy, had an uncanny knack for golf and I was amazed at how relatively easily they could be made to move in specific directions just by a gentle pull on the reins. The equine pair only had to be shown once that the bent grass greens were to be avoided, and they intuitively stepped around them. More than once, as Charlie was moving up a slope toward a green, I was sure the green surface was in danger, only to have the horses turn on a dime.

Each of the two horse teams had a driver, who directed the horse using the reins, and a ploughman who controlled how deep the scraper pan would cut into the soil. Both positions were important to operating the team, and creating the desired effect. The driver needed to direct the horse and pan to the bunker areas that needed additional excavation, and then quickly redirect the horse to where the soil should be dumped. The ploughman of each team had to gauge how much to lower or raise the handles on the scraper to make the appropriate cut or fill. The organic dynamic of having three living creatures work in unison to sculpt the land was, in itself, a unique and rewarding experience.

Although Christiana Creek and our team enjoyed the nostalgic experience of bringing out the horses to their course (many members brought their kids to see

the process), our team was equally interested in how these horses could be manoeuvred in order to create hazards for the game of golf. As we all took turns ‘shaping’ with Charlie and Judy, it became exceedingly clear as to why old style bunkers, created by the architects of yesteryear, look as they do. It takes a lot of energy to scrape the earth using literal horsepower. As the day went on, the fatigue caused us to dump the loads of dirt closer and closer to where we had first picked it up. This first hand experience gave me a further understanding for why classic courses have more blind shots and awkward lies. Shaping a whole course with animals would be quite a feat.

After an afternoon walking in circles with a horse, it does not take long to understand why old style bunker complexes have more abrupt edges, and steeper back slopes than the modern counterpart created with metal horsepower. After each ploughman picked up a load from the bottom of the bunker, it would be dragged to the back edge of the bunker, at which point the scraper is tipped up, and over, and the load dropped. This method creates a mound or backing around the back edge of the bunker, which is a form that can be seen on many bunkers created from that era. The modern shaping principle of tying-in contours to make them flow seamlessly with the existing land is much harder using a machine powered by oats and hay.

The experience of building bunkers with a horse is one I will never forget. I have always cherished the classic roots of golf, and enjoy studying the history of golf architecture. This experience enabled me to step back in time, albeit briefly, to get a better understanding of the tools our predecessors had at their disposal to create some of the best golf venues on earth. Understanding the historical processes of golf design will not only enable us to better preserve and recreate the old venues, but also to provide a window for how to progress into the future. **GCA**

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