

# Golf's Accidental Architecture

The Unplanned Wisdom of the Links

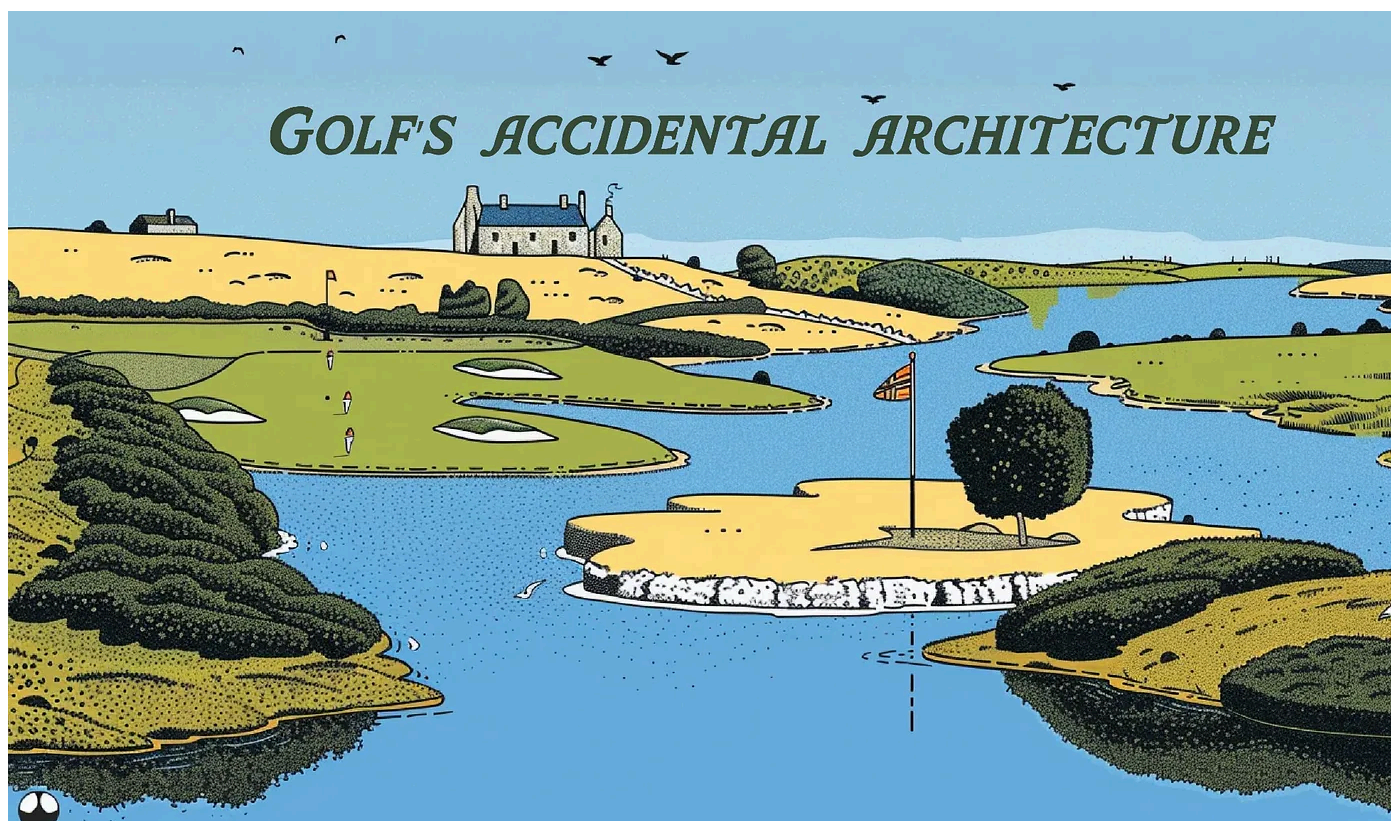


THE FREEMAN

APR 09, 2026



Sh



*By Allen Mendenhall.*

Spring comes in its usual manner: gloriously and without permission. The flowers open along the fairway edges just beyond my window, improbable and insistent, and the lake catches the morning light and holds it there, shimmering.

I live on a golf course, have lived on one long enough now that the geometry of it—par 3, the lake, the bunkers, the pale sand raked into something resembling order—

become familiar yet remains amazing to me. I watch the golfers pass by the way one watches clouds. They come and go. They suffer.

I still play, now and then—less than I once did, but enough to remember why I start and why I sometimes wish I hadn't. There's a particular cruelty to golf that no other pastime quite replicates: a single bad hole can undo the quiet pleasure of three good ones; the game gets inside your head and rearranges the furniture. I have walked off courses in a dark mood that no reasonable man could justify, having paid handsomely for the privilege of feeling worse than when I arrived.

So, I ration it now. I'm selective. I choose my days as I do my arguments: only when I feel reasonably confident that I can win.

Lately, though, I've noticed changes in the course. Small things, the kind that multiply like years. A tree removed here. A bunker reshaped there. The rough that was once punishing beside the green has been gentled, tamed, made merely inconvenient. For years ago, they installed new greens.

Contemplating all this quiet tinkering, I recalled something I first encountered not on a fairway but in a book: Friedrich Hayek's portrayal of spontaneous order, the notion that the most complex and functional systems in life are rarely the ones anybody planned. They are the ones that grew: language, markets, the common law, and, it turns out, golf courses.

It began, as so many good things do, in Scotland—a cold, windswept, willfully beautiful country that seems to have invented this sport the way it invented whiskey: not by design, but by combined habits and stubbornness and some deep perversity of the national character.

The earliest courses weren't created so much as discovered. The land along the coast—links land, they called it, sandy and undulating, shaped by dunes and sea wind and centuries of patient erosion—simply *was* what it was. Players navigated burns and

gorse and the natural hollows of earth, and the game arranged itself around what was already there.

No architect submitted a proposal. No committee approved a layout. The course emerged as a path through a field when enough people walked the same way: organically, incrementally, encoding the knowledge of ten thousand individual decisions into something no single mind could have conceived.

The bunkers are the purest expression of this. Those sandy torments that have ruined so many otherwise pleasant Sunday mornings did not begin as hazards at all. They began as sheep shelters: small depressions where animals sought relief from the coastal wind, hollows deepened by erosion, burrows left by rabbits going about their own business entirely indifferent to the Scottish passion for hitting balls across open ground.

The golfers came along afterward and found that these accidental wounds in the earth made the game more interesting, so they kept them, played around them, built the rules of engagement with them over generations. Nobody decided that bunkers should exist. They simply did, and the game was wiser for having inherited them.

The Old Course at St. Andrews understood this implicitly. Its Road Hole Bunker was ancient before anyone thought to design anything. It was a scar in the earth, mapped in the 1820s, and the game genuflected to it rather than the other way around. There was a purity to that, a humility before received, unplanned wisdom, the course as a kind of constitution, its hazards encoding centuries of evolved knowledge about what makes the game worth playing.

Then came the planners.

As golf moved inland in the mid-1800s, spreading south and east, designers found themselves without the natural architecture of the coast and decided to manufacture their own. What followed was the Victorian-era of golf course design. It's not

remembered fondly. Cross-bunkers were laid across fairways like legislative mandates: rectangular, geometric, inescapable, placed perpendicular to play so that every golfer, regardless of skill or strategy, was forced to carry them or be punished.

Steep earthen walls, deep ditches, hazards designed not to create interesting choices but to enforce compliance—these were the rationalist's vision of order imposed upon a landscape that had previously found its own. The result was ugly, rigid, and inferior to what the wind and sheep had managed without any help at all.

The rescue came, as it often does, from people wise enough to distrust their own cleverness. The Golden Age of golf architecture—the 1910s through the 1930s—gave us Donald Ross, Alister MacKenzie, A.W. Tillinghast, Harry Colt: men who studied old links not to copy them superficially but to understand *why* they worked, to recover the logic that had been encoded in them by centuries of unplanned evolution.

They moved bunkers back to the edges of the fairways, creating choices rather than ultimatums. They made hazards ragged and organic, shaped by artistic intuition rather than the surveyor's right angle, mimicking what erosion and weather would have produced given enough time. They built courses that rewarded local knowledge, that offered different routes to different players, that asked questions instead of issuing penalties. They were, you might say, suspicious of imposed order, respectful of what emerges when human ingenuity works *with* accumulated wisdom rather than against it.

One thinks, inevitably, of Augusta National. MacKenzie designed it with Bobby Jones in 1932, and it remains the cathedral of this strange religion, its fairways wide enough to invite ambition, its greens subtle enough to punish overconfidence, its azaleas blooming every April with the extravagance of something that knows it's being watched. The Masters is here again, and Augusta will, as always, reward the patient, destroy the reckless, and look magnificent doing both.

After World War II, the planners returned in force. Robert Trent Jones and his generation built longer, wider, more formulaic courses: bunkers placed at standard distances from tees, hazards parallel to play, everything optimized and quantified and somehow, diminished. The courses were technically demanding and spiritually inert, the golf equivalent of a city planned from scratch on a grid: functional, perhaps, but lacking the texture and surprise and hidden logic that only time and accident can provide.

Technology kept advancing. Players kept hitting farther. The architects kept chasing the ball, as though the solution to the game's essential wildness was more control, more planning, more intervention, never quite grasping that the wildness was the point.

Here, outside my window, something like a correction: the rough trimmed back to native grasses along the lakeshore, trees removed not to lengthen the hole but to let light reach the ground the way it once did. I watch a golfer now—a man of middle age and considerable optimism—take his stance at the tee box about fifty yards away. He swings. The ball describes a small, hopeful arc against the blue. It lands in the bunker.

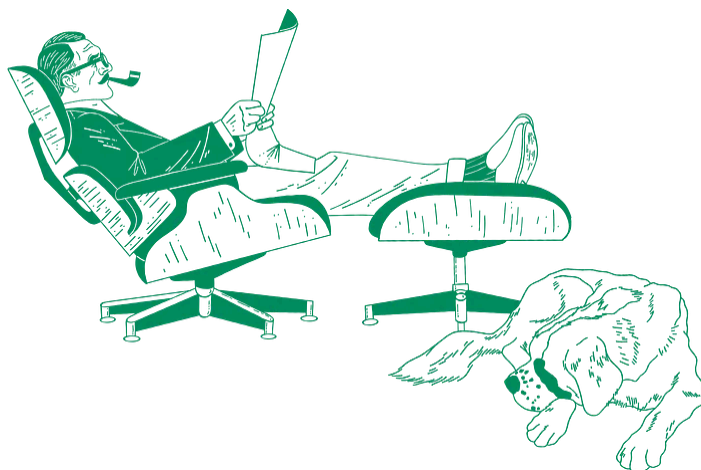
He slumps. I know that posture intimately. I have worn it myself, more times than I care to count, and I will wear it again soon, because despite everything—the dark moods and the wasted afternoons and the humiliations that no grown man should voluntarily seek—I keep going back.

This is the thing about a game that nobody designed: it contains more than anyone puts into it. The bunker that began as a sheep's shelter against the wind holds, somehow, six centuries of human folly and hope and the irreducible stubbornness of people who believe, against all available evidence, that they are about to play the round that justifies all the ones before it.

No committee decided that golf should matter. No architect planned for it to get under your skin. It simply did, gradually, accidentally, through the aggregated choices of

countless people who were mostly just trying to get the ball in the hole.

I believe a good round is coming. I believe this absolutely, and I have no interest in argument that I am wrong.



*Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Free Enterprise Initiative and a Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at [AllenMendenhall.com](http://AllenMendenhall.com).*

---

## Subscribe to The Freeman

Launched 10 months ago

Markets, liberty, culture. We are anti-anti-anti-Communist.

[Upgrade to paid](#)

By subscribing, you agree Substack's [Terms of Use](#), and acknowledge its [Information Collection Notice](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).



5 Likes · 4 Restacks