

The 230 yard thirteenth at
Trump International Golf Links, Aberdeen
Photo by Caspar Grauballe

Golf's one shot epics

The long par three hole has always been a key part of the golf designer's armoury, but has fallen out of favour in recent years, as architects strive to appear more merciful. But perhaps it is making a comeback, suggests Adam Lawrence

Golf designers often talk about 'half par' holes: those that straddle the boundary between needing one and two, or two and three, shots to find the green. Such holes are valuable to any course, because they provide a wide spread of scores, and thus help determine matches or tournaments.

But it's noticeable that golfers tend to prefer those holes whose 'half par' score is lower than the actual number they see printed on the card— short par fours or fives — to those that go the other way, long threes or fours. Par might just be a number, but it is a potent one.

Yet the long par three, or one shot hole if you prefer, has plenty of pedigree.

The length of some par threes on classic golf courses is remarkable when one considers the equipment of the time they were created. Pine Valley's fifth and the monster thirteenth at the Addington south of London (cited by author Henry Longhurst as the two greatest inland one-shot holes on earth) are both barely changed from their initial forms, and they are not alone.

CB Macdonald, and his proteges Seth Raynor and Charles Banks, included the 'Biarritz' hole on most of their courses, and it was generally long enough to require a driver for most golfers. The famous 235 yard Biarritz at Yale University's course, most of which is over

water, must have been truly terrifying in the 1920s. "From construction photos and very early 1925-26 photos of play on the ninth, the placement of the teeing area and the green are the same. Therefore it is simply a matter of where what they call the back tee is placed and how it is measured. Otherwise the hole is unchanged in distance. No new back tees have been added," says Raynor enthusiast and long-time Yale member Geoffrey Childs, who cites a quote from Charles Banks: "The correct play for this green is to carry to the near edge of the groove or trench and come upon the green with a roll. The carry for this play is 180 yards from the back tee."

Photos: Evan Schiller



The famous Biarritz ninth at Yale must have been a fearsome prospect back in the 1930s

Macdonald conceived the Biarritz template as a way to test the golfer’s ability to hit an approach shot with one of his longest clubs, among the most difficult skills in the game. The irony is, of course, that back in the 1920s and for decades after, such shots were common, even for the best golfers — consider Ben Hogan’s famous one iron shot to Merion’s home green that won him the 1950 US Open. Now, absent significant wind, even the brawniest of par fours rarely demand a more than a mid iron for strong players, and architects are having to find different ways to test the long approach.

It might seem, then, that the very long par three would fit perfectly into today’s courses. Yet it seems to have fallen out of fashion. Dutch architect Frank Pont offers one explanation why. “The problem with par three holes that require a driver is that they are infinitely more difficult for lesser than for good players,” he says. “In the old days, a hole like that would be considered a bogey four, but we don’t use the term bogey anymore. The longest par three I have designed is the fifth at Swinkelsche in the Netherlands, which is 215m from the black tees, though from the normal tees it is 180m. I don’t think I would build a par three that was more than 170-180m from the daily tees. Generally, I like short par threes better, because you can make the green much harder and less receptive.”

Danish designer Caspar Grauballe agrees that the long one-shot hole is problematic. “I think a quote I once came across from John Low is a good guideline regarding the length of short holes,” he says. “Low wrote ‘The first point we demand in a short hole is that it should be short enough to call from the player some judgement as to strength’. A golf hole should not be all about brute force and the ability to hit the ball

far. It should be about playing shots which with careful judgement and execution, taking into account the landscape, weather conditions and most importantly the skill of the player, results in the best possible score. I personally think that very long par threes often have a tendency of becoming too difficult for most players instead of being a fun challenge where the dream of the perfect shot can flourish.”

“The longest par three I can recollect working on was at the Carrig Glas resort in Ireland when I was with Jeff Howes,” says Swedish architect Christian Lundin. “We planned a hole that was 225m from the tips, though slightly downhill. Thinking back I am happy it never got built! It would have been a brute into a quite small green site. Now, I would never build a par three to be played more than 180m from the average golfer. Even that would be ‘the full bag’ for many players.”

From this short survey of architects, therefore, we can identify two key reasons why long par threes have fallen from favour. Firstly, the greater variance of length between strong and weak golfers, created by modern club and ball technology, means that what is long for most is only a flick for the best. Conversely, a hole that is genuinely long for very good golfers will be way out of reach for most, absent a massive gap between tees. Secondly, modern architects are understandably concerned with how golfers would react to such holes. Making players suffer is a business strategy few are keen to pursue!

Yet one of today’s most acclaimed golf designers is known for including an extremely long par three on almost all of his courses. From Bandon Trails, to We-Ko-Pa and Streamsong Red, there are few of Bill Coore’s designs, with his partner Ben Crenshaw, that do not feature a one-shotter well over

200 yards. Generally, though (the Biarritz sixteenth at Streamsong is a rare exception), Coore’s long threes tend to offer a generous bailout area, combined with tighter protection on the direct line to the hole.

Bandon Trails’ 242 yard twelfth hole is a classic example of how Coore sets up a long three. A large green and vast expanses of short grass to the right offer a safe route, and the slopes to the right side of the hole help a running shot aimed up that side funnel down onto the green. A monster bunker, though, obscures the direct line to the hole, and swales to the front and left make firing straight at the green a dangerous play. It is a hole on which almost anyone should be able to make a four if he plays sensibly, and where everyone has a reasonable chance at a three. But those looking to make a birdie take on the greatest risks; classic strategy as it should be.

Other architects build similar holes. But most choose to stretch them a little further and call them short par fours. “At my Turfvaert I built a 230m par four for the second hole,” says Frank Pont. “It’s by far the most popular hole on the course. At that length the hole is a 3.5, and those are always interesting holes. However they tend to not be liked if you round them down — people consider them unfair. I like to include a few more bunkers and other difficulties around the green and then round it up to a par four.”

Christian Lundin agrees. “I would always prefer a 260 yard four to a 240 yard three,” he says. “No doubt, making pars and birdies makes golfers happy, and so I think favouring the short four over the long three is for the greater good of the game. Plus I think it is important to de-emphasise length: as architects it is important for us to build holes that are challenging, even though they are seen as short.”

Yet out and out long and tough par threes are still being built. **Caspar Grauballe** highlights the thirteenth hole at the Trump International course in Scotland, where he served as Martin Hawtree’s chief lieutenant. At almost 230 yards from the back tee, the thirteenth — which is basically the only hole on the Trump course that plays perpendicular to the shoreline, rather than parallel to it — is a monster.

“The site dictated the length of the hole,” says Grauballe. “Early on, we chose a great natural tee position in a small gap between two of the site’s very characteristic conical dunes for the back tee. A plateau for the green with the largest dune formation on the site seemed perfect.”

“As the setting for the hole offers few possibilities for laying up short of the green we focused on other measures to keep the hole playable; we let the green surface tilt towards the tees with a small tier running through the centre of the green to make it receptive of longer shots. The surrounds behind and to the sides of the green were made reasonably gentle and contoured to avoid balls rolling into the steep natural areas beyond and thereby give players a chance of recovering and getting their par. Several tees offer the players different lengths, but the setting of the hole has the most spectacular views from the longest tees making them close to irresistible to play from.

“We wanted to achieve a desirability about the hole that would entice players. The hole should look inviting and I remember standing on the back tee towards the end of construction with a famous professional golfer who felt it would be a nice shot with his four or five iron! However I think that the beautiful calm weather on that day may have made it feel shorter than the 229 yards it actually is.” **GCA**

Classic long one-shotters

Architects of the Golden Age were less nervous than those of today about building par threes that demanded a full driver or close to it. Pine Valley’s famous fifth was identified by Harry Colt, and provided the key to unlocking the routing of that course. Alister MacKenzie was, as legend has it, initially reluctant to build Cypress Point’s iconic sixteenth, as he feared it would be impossible for too many golfers; leading female amateur Marion Hollins stiffened his spine by smacking a ball over the cliffs onto the proposed green site.

These holes continue to challenge golfers to this day. The uphill third at Merion played to 256 yards in last year’s US Open, while in 2007 Oakmont’s eighth became the longest hole in Major golf to be designated a par three, at 280 yards. But it is downhill!

Cypress Point

16th hole – 233 yards



Pine Valley

5th hole – 238 yards



Merion

3rd hole – 256 yards



Oakmont

8th hole – 288 yards



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