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GOLF AT A CROSSROADS:

Crenshaw Reflects

Two-time Masters champion Ben Crenshaw holds heartfelt convictions on where the game of golf is and where it should head. While attending CDGA anniversary festivities recently, Crenshaw shared some of these reflections with contributing writer Tim Cronin.

Q. Once when we were talking about golf architecture, you brought up a quote from Charles Blair Macdonald from 1927: “There is so much novelty in the game today.” It’s quite a few years after 1927. How much novelty is in the game today, and in your estimation, where is the game headed?

A. I really do think we’re at a crossroads. We keep hearing reports about the new converts to the game starting, and we’re having trouble keeping them. That’s not disturbing just yet, but we want those people to stay in the game the rest of their lives.

There are myriad reasons why. The family takes a lot of time. Golf courses are reacting to equipment. I hope that we don’t get into a spot where golf courses are getting too difficult. Golf’s supposed to be fun. There never were truer words spoken than when Donald Ross said, “Golf should be a pleasure, not a penance.” I wonder if when everybody goes and plays these days, that is so. Pleasure amongst your friends, that’s what keeps people coming back.

Sure, you want a test, but pleasure is still the name of the game. You don’t want a test beyond someone’s playing ability. That person will go on to another form of recreation.

Novelty certainly was what Macdonald was referring to when he spoke of design. He was very much a follower of classical things. He said it so well in his book, *Scotland’s Gift: Golf*, that a study of the classics, whether it was art, architecture, sculpture, was a study of what was timeless. His golf courses, along with those of his partner, Seth Raynor, endure.

Macdonald (said to) Raynor, “You have about six classic holes that most people in the British Isles say are the classic holes, fascinating for everyone to play.” He took the Redan from North Berwick in Scotland, the Alps from Prestwick, the Biarritz hole in France.

Raynor, wherever he went, inserted these holes onto the landscape, and somehow they look pretty natural, and they fit, which is really remarkable. Chicago Golf Club has wonderful examples of all those. They’re a pleasure to play, and they’re memorable.

It’s fascinating to me. Architecture and equipment obviously are so much a part of our game, and they always will be. The grounds and implements go together.

Q. Is it time for a freeze of equipment standards?

A. Well, I think we're coming to that. Some manufacturers say that physics is going to take over, and you can't go any further with the actual distances you can derive from these components.

It seems to be a little mad when courses begin approaching 7,400 to 7,600 yards. Obviously, there's different tee boxes, but gosh! I know many people in the game who would rather play an interesting 6,700- to 6,900-yard course rather than tackle one of these.

Q. There's nothing wrong with Merion?

A. That's right. There's nothing wrong with having different holes, different problems to work out that are not beyond someone's capabilities.

When I first heard Jack (Nicklaus), 20 years ago, start talking about the golf ball, we thought it was a bit sudden. We couldn't see it right then, but as the ensuing years went on, I think it was correct. The golf ball...they never believed the golf ball would be allowed to go this far from velocity.

I really do believe this. The longer you play the game, and the longer you learn it and know it, know the different places, you come back to those wonderful places that really whet the appetite, and they stay with the golf generations. Anybody would like to see those places retained.

They're like fine art and anything else worth preserving.

Q. In your case, it's quite a long way from the hill country of Texas to Chicago Golf Club. How did that connection come about?

A. It's unbelievable. That's one of the luckiest things that ever happened to me.

I was interested in golf history from 16 years of age on. I just kept reading and reading—I always wanted to visit Chicago Golf Club. My first trip to Chicago Golf Club was probably 1977. I was invited out there by a mutual friend, Ed Sneed, who used to play the Tour. Don Stickney, who was the pro then, went to Ohio State with Ed.

I went out there and met a couple of members who were nice enough, who enjoyed my company, and asked me back when I came back to town. I kept going out there, and finally, one day, one of them said, "Would you like to be a nonresident member?" I said, "I don't think anything would please me more." It just happened. I always say it's one of Chicago Golf's weaker moments.

Q. But you shot what would have been a course record except you played a second ball off the first tee. Sounds like they stiffened in some respects.

A. Absolutely! I had an incredible day. I made everything that day. I played with Tom Weiskopf, Ed Sneed and Don Stickney. We had a great time.

I'm so proud of that place. It's quite a unique place in every respect. It's so much fun to play that course, so many things about it that change from day to day, and for all sorts of reasons. It's relatively treeless, but Macdonald wanted you to feel the wind, and that's one of the great foes in golf, the unseen wind.

Q. When you think of the other courses in Chicago, which make your heart beat faster?

A. Shoreacres is marvelous. There's Onwentsia, and obviously, we've all been so enamored of Medinah. I was lucky

enough to play there, though in 1975 (the U.S. Open), I didn't keep it together. If I'd have won the Open there, I would have set golf back 50 years. I was in the trees all week.

Q. What do you think about Rich Harvest Links?

A. This is unbelievable. I have always heard about this, people have told me about it, and it's spectacular. It's one man's love, and Jerry Rich has a great desire to have a good time with his friends, but he's a very magnanimous person, very generous. This is very rare.

Q. Is there a chance you might design a course in this area someday?

A. I'd love to someday. My partner Bill Coore and I only do one or two courses at a time, here and there. We're hands-on. And my partner is an absolute god-send. In a nutshell, we like to try to entertain something on a nice piece of land with some golf enthusiasts, and see that golf gets a fair shake, and you just kind of go on from there.

Q. The CDGA, through its actions and its Foundation, has had an active role in the game over the years, hasn't it?

A. There are a few places around the country that have been very serious about their organizations, what they want to achieve through golf. They have longevity, a legacy of helping people into the game and keeping them there.

I've traveled all over the world playing golf, and there are few places where you fully feel a caring and giving community. Chicago is one of them. I salute you for giving of yourselves for endeavors such as this. 🍷



Ben Crenshaw talked shop during his clinic at the Sunshine Through Golf Foundation Outing in September.