

SEEING THE LIGHT

The benefits of a tree management program



Drew Rogers

Pinehurst, Oakmont, Cypress Point, Cherry Hills, Pine Valley, Oak Hill, Oakland Hills, Peachtree, Oak Tree...just a few of the more famous golf

courses you may have heard of.

They're all singularly unique, yet there are some similarities among them. For instance, they have all hosted various championships, and yes, they're all on the top 100 list. But what's more, the names are all derived from types of trees, from the tall, majestic pines of the Carolina sand hills and the hundred-year-old oaks in the east and midwest, to the peach trees of Georgia.

The unique qualities that trees possess are provoking enough to have landmarks bear their names. I think we would all agree that trees are a major part of golf because they always seem to be present on great golf courses. What would these courses be without trees? Without the gangly cypress trees, would we have named a course "Iceplant Point" in place of Cypress? Doubtful.

If it's true that we associate great beauty in golf with landscapes that are comprised at least partly by trees, why then, for the past several years, have we also been hearing more and more about removing trees from golf courses?

A regular part of an annual maintenance regime usually involves at least the trimming of trees for purposes of continued health and appearance. Certainly some trees must be removed each year on golf courses because of

their decline. Disease is also to blame for some loss of trees. These are more typical explanations that most people cannot question.

But why are so many older courses engaging in what has been termed the "mass removal of trees?" Some think that green committees are trying to make their mark. Others believe that golf course architects have a strong dislike for trees. As Donald Ross, the pre-eminent Scottish golf course architect once said, "As beautiful as trees are, and as fond as you and I are of them, we must still not lose sight of the fact that there is a limited space for them in golf." Ross was noted for pre-



ferring a more open venue for golf, and promoted wider fairways than most, with influence on the ground game rather than aerial shots.

He believed that the open space allowed for more variety of hazards and angles to be integrated, allowing for more "strategic" options for the player.

In contrast, you will see many other courses today that employ trees as the major hazard on the golf course. Trees can line both sides of the fairway, leaving the player with few options beyond hitting a straight shot down the fairway.

Architects classify this scenario as "penal" rather than strategic. This set-

ting is typically where you begin to see problems arise, not just with the playability issues, but also with shade, root growth and lack of air movement, as they tend to all take their toll on the turf.

So, how are these problems created in the first place? When courses are first built, the holes are sometimes routed through forested areas. Trees are then marked to be cleared by the architect in order to make space for the hole and a framework of mature vegetation is preserved to frame the hole and separate it from others. If not enough space is allowed, overgrowth of the trees will take place, leaving only a narrow, confined corridor in which to grow grass



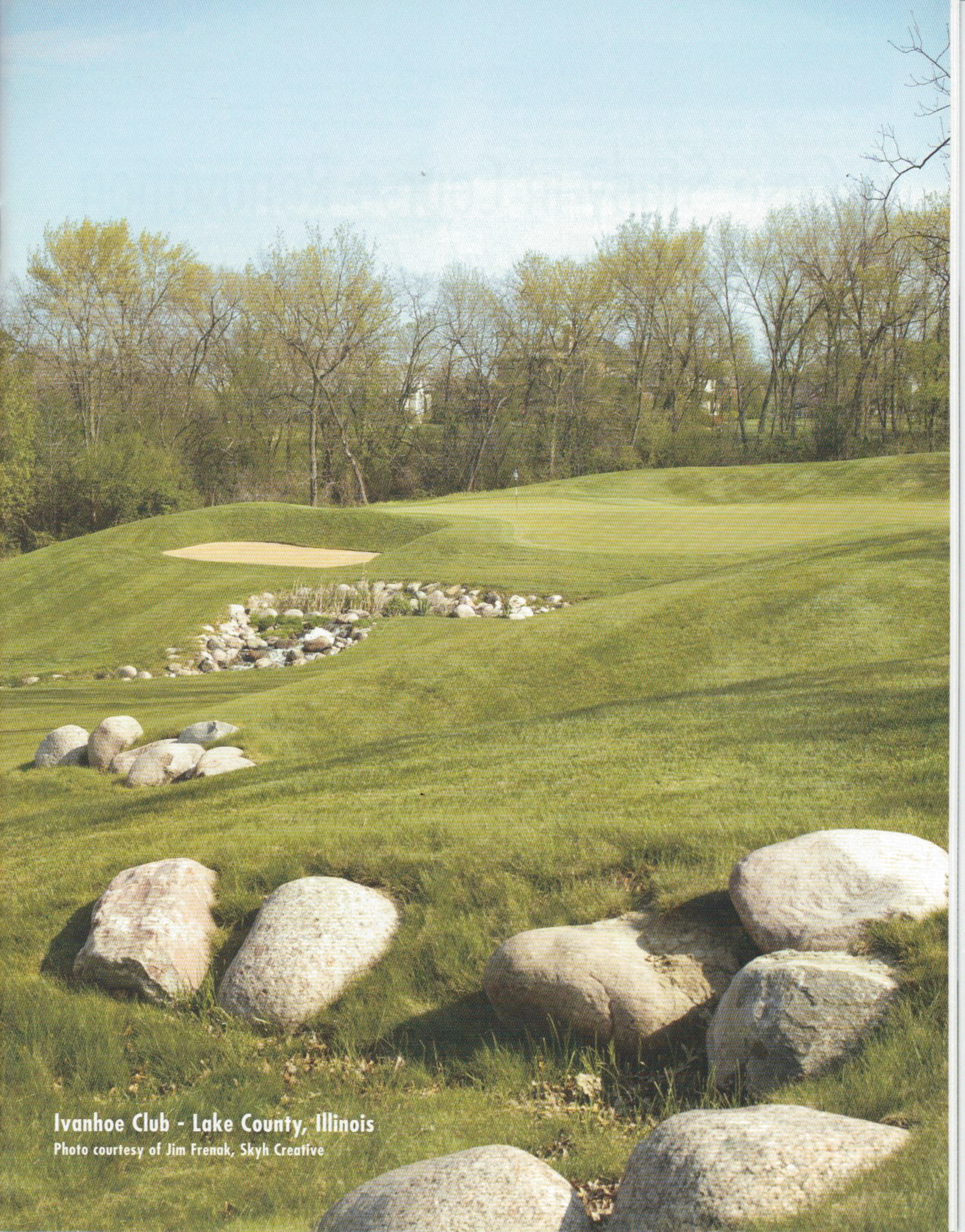
and play golf. Many times this condition is not fully realized until 20 or 30 years after the course opens.

The photos illustrate how removing trees widened a narrow corridor. Improved turf and strategic options are now presented to the players where a straight shot was once the only option.

In contrast, other holes may be routed through more open expanses of land where no trees exist. There is really nothing but lower vegetation, grasses and the contour of the ground to distinguish the holes. In such cases, though not always advisable, trees are sometimes planted in

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Ivanhoe Club - Lake County, Illinois

Photo courtesy of Jim Frenak, Skyh Creative

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order to accomplish what forested holes innately possess...framing, backdrops and separation.

Sometimes trees are even planted to add to the strategy of a hole or to add to its beauty. Regardless of the reasons, trees have been planted on courses for quite some time, almost to the point that we nearly forgot about them.

But today, trees are no longer forgotten. Most trees that were planted 20 or 30 years ago are now nicely matured and are functioning in the way that they apparently were intended. So what's the problem? Many of these trees were planted without discretion as to their mature size, habit and even their species characteristics. In fact, improper planting of trees can completely ruin a golf hole or even an entire course. Ever been in a fairway bunker only to have a 40-foot oak between you

- Can cool the microclimate in places throughout a course
- Like turf, are a source for oxygen
- Can create effective buffers where undesirable views and noises are present
- Are a source for wildlife habitat and food
- Can help to frame a golf hole aesthetically
- Can serve as effective separation between golf holes
- Can be used as a safety buffer
- Can be very strategic features within golf holes
- Can be viable features, if properly pruned and maintained.

As you can see, there are a number of positives and negatives with trees on golf courses. I'll also argue that you have experienced a few of them yourself, if not the majority. Trees are not bad things unless they are used improperly, that's the distinction that must be made clear.

Today, it would be wise to consider the following: Creation of a master tree program (for planting and removal of trees and creation of acceptable plant species to be used for new or replacement purposes as well as their proper placement).

and the green? Let me clue you in...the oak was not supposed to be there in the first place. It was planted too close to the fairway and now creates a serious playability issue.

What are the other issues? That same oak tree that blocks out the fairway bunker shot is also casting shade across the entire fairway in the mornings and the grass is thin throughout that portion of the landing area. Roots are surfacing into the fairway, sucking moisture from the turf and pushing up through the asphalt cart paths in the rough. There are even some roots growing into the bunker floor. The superintendent has tried everything short of artificial turf and simply can't grow grass here anymore or control the root growth.

Whether these explanations apply to your course or not, I can confirm that there has indeed been a more recent focus on trees as they relate to a list of other critical influences. That list beckons consideration as it applies to your facility.

When trees are too close to play, the following issues may arise:

- Adversely affecting playability of the holes
- Adversely affecting the architects original design strategy
- Prohibit sunlight from reaching the turf, necessary for healthy turf to exist
- Prohibit air circulation needed to cool and dry the turf
- In southern climates, shade contributes to winter kill
- Root growth drains moisture from the turf root zone
- Root growth damages paths, drainage and otherwise playable turf areas
- Roots are hazardous to golfers when near the surface and can catch a clubface.

Trees can be incredible assets on golf courses if they are properly positioned, and if they are of an appropriate species. Additionally, trees:

- Provide shade for players to escape direct sunlight

Today, it would be wise to consider the following: Creation of a master tree program (for planting and removal of trees and creation of acceptable plant species to be used for new or replacement purposes as well as their proper placement).

- Avoid the "memorial tree program" unless properly integrated into the master plan. Improper choice of species creates aesthetic, maintenance and playability issues.
- Trees, as yardage markers should be avoided completely. Consider removing overgrowth of vegetation in roughs and in forested areas so that saplings do not mature and create problems with other trees, etc.
- When planting trees, consider planting them in groups or en mass rather than singular or in unnatural rows. Avoid the use of conifers; especially in high play areas where the low lying limbs prevent players from recovering.
- Utilize open areas for creating native grass areas and wildlife habitat preservation.
- Trees take a tremendous amount of time, effort and money to properly maintain; they must be pruned once or twice a year and their litter (limbs, twigs and leaves) must be cleaned up regularly. Think about the cost of keeping up several thousand trees! G&G

Drew Rogers, ASGCA, has been with Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates since 1992. As a senior design associate, Drew is responsible for all aspects of design development, construction drawings, bidding, construction management and client communication. He has extensive experience in master planning for improvement/restorations to existing facilities, land planning for large scale golf communities, as well as broad based ecological planning.