

A shining example of how clever course design can rein in the golfing power brokers

Jul 29 2008

Golfnorthwest

by Harold Brough, [Liverpool Daily Post](#)

THE OPEN left many memories. The huge crowds, cheerful and enthusiastic as always, even in the wildest weather. The rise up to the top of the leaderboard of oldie ex-champion Greg Norman. And also the players' struggle to dominate the golf course in the way they have in the past.

We have become used to the performances of the best golfers in the world being measured in terms of scores under-par. Their failure to produce that kind of result, the rarity of sub-par totals on the leaderboard, was one of the most surprising features of the 2008 Open, when the halfway cut came at a remarkable nine over par.

Of course, the weather could be blamed. The combination of gales and rain played a big part in producing scores which sent many top players home early.

Yet Royal Birkdale has had many days like those experienced at this Open. Indeed, the championship of 1961 is remembered not just for the first Open success of one of golf's most popular stars in Arnold Palmer, but also for the fierce weather.

Then the gales were of such strength temporary buildings, including the great marquee, were flattened. But Palmer returned 70, 73, 69, 72. The players at Birkdale in 2008 would have been satisfied with that.

Yet, almost 50 years after Palmer's win, they have greatly improved golf clubs and balls plus the greater physical ability that comes from the emphasis on coaching. fitness, strength, diet, training and preparations.

At the start of the final two days Birchwood's Phil Archer, asked on television for his thoughts about the coming day when the winds were expected to gather even greater strength, suggested that a score as high as 75 would not be a bad performance. Undoubtedly, such was the weather, many would have agreed with that.

So while the emphasis was on the weather to explain the exceptional high scoring, it may be that when Birkdale 2008 is discussed it will come to be regarded as an important step in the way golf courses are presented to challenge the big-hitters.

To some, like booming aces at tennis, the awesome spectacle of Tiger Woods and others crashing the ball out of sight has become an exciting part of the modern game. But talent, physique, fitness and modern golf equipment

have combined to threaten the ideals of the game itself. The ability of many players to hit the balls vast distances has made many golf layouts obsolete. Unchecked big hitting is reducing great golf holes to something like pitch and putt or at least a drive and putt.

So while the golf authorities have moved to limit golf equipment, at Birkdale the course was laid out, as usual, to present a great challenge but also to present greater emphasis on skill and course management. As Gordon Jeffrey, a past captain, says: "It is no longer about length alone."

So fairways were narrow, the rough tougher than in the past, new bunkers had been added and four new tees were made to alter the angle of approach to the holes to make players think more about the task ahead. Greens have lots of dips and rises.

Birkdale also brought in some subtle, yet hugely significant changes in the design under the guidance of architect Martin Hawtree.

The swales, little humps and rises around the green meant there were many moments when the hopes of players, rising as they saw the ball on the way to the hole, suddenly faded as their shot found a rise and suddenly slowed. Elsewhere, quite unexpectedly to those who had not made a very careful study, the ball would suddenly gather pace and finish off the green, yards from the hole.

Peter Alliss was perhaps thinking of all these changes, together with the effects of the weather, when he told TV viewer that it needs "a remarkable mind to work all this out."

So maybe the 2008 championship marked an important shift away from the dominance of power golf, an important step in restoring the importance of the skill factor.