

## Play it backwards: A brief history of reversible golf course design

Share this article: [f](#) [t](#) [G+](#) [e](#)



By [Bradley S. Klein](#) Senior  
Writer  
Mar 26, 2018

Folks in Atlanta are spending a fortune to build a community golf complex with a 9-hole layout you can play backwards. If the idea behind the Bobby Jones Golf Course Foundation sounds loopy, it's meant to.

The [plan for the former 18-hole municipal tract](#) five miles north of downtown is to build a reversible layout that can accommodate play in either direction. There will also be a double-ended range, six-hole "Wee Links" and a clubhouse that will house statewide golf associations, a hall of fame and banquet facilities.

The centerpiece will be the last original design ever created by the late, Atlanta-based architect Bob Cupp (1939-2016) – one that includes nine double greens, each outfitted with two cups and flags, and able to play from seven sets of tees anywhere from 3,164 yards up to 7,349.

It's the latest iteration of a retro movement in golf development, one that actually harkens back to the game's roots at St. Andrews. Cupp was certainly familiar with those traditions, having written a novel about the ancient game there ([The Edict](#), 2008).

The careless golfer at St. Andrews might stumble into some of that history while playing the course. After hitting a tee shot on the par-4 12th hole, "Heathery," players might not notice a hazard situated only 75 yards in front of them that's pitched away from the line of play. It makes no sense being there – until you turn around and think of its ideal strategic placement as a fairway hazard for the tee shot on what would be reverse No. 7. When viewed that way, "Admiral's Bunker" is ideally situated to snare a drive played from the thirteenth tee and complicate the approach played to the 11th green.



Golfers used to play the "left-handed course" at St. Andrews, which began with a tee shot from the first hole to what is now the 17th green. (Getty Images)



It turns out that [The Old Course at St. Andrews](#) is where loop (or reversible) golf became an everyday occurrence. Or, to be precise, every other week. From 1872 to at least 1904, golf proceeded out there on what became known as the "left-handed golf course." The modern player is familiar with the standard "right-handed routing" of the legendary links. But in fact the course was played backwards, with play proceeding from the 1st tee to the 17th green and there around until the final hole, played from the 2nd tee to the 18th green, which would have involved a monumentally complicated cross-over with the opening tee shot. But that's how they played it on a regularly rotating basis for those 32 years, and often until at least 1920. Indeed, thereafter they've played the left-handed sequence intermittently, including for maintenance reasons and the occasional special event around April Fool's weekend. Major championships were held on the regular, counter-clockwise layout during that time, with the exception of the 1886 British Amateur, which proceeded counter-clockwise for the week.

The virtues of a reversible golf course were extolled in the most famous British book ever written about golf course design, H.N. Wethered and T. Simpson's 1929 classic, *The Architectural Side of Golf*. In a chapter on "The Reversible Course," the authors draw upon St. Andrews to point out the virtues of such a configuration. The scheme enables the turf to heal and allows play while distributing divot patterns across two landing areas, not one. The course is more interesting to play given the variety. The steady effects of a prevailing wind are relieved by playing the hole in different directions.

"You get two courses for the same money," they wrote — though their text makes it clear it's actually for "virtually" the same money. In their view, the aesthetic consequence makes the effort worthwhile: "And as regards the additional pleasure gained by a change of direction it is only necessary to think of the experience of motoring along a country road and returning the same way. Two entirely different aspects of scenery are provided."

It's also a great way to maximize use of a small parcel. When architect Stephen Kay was just getting started on his own in the mid 1980s, a client, the electronics inventor and entrepreneur Stanley Peschel, brought him to his 75-acre farmland in upstate New York and asked about doing a golf course.

"I might have been able to squeeze an 18-hole routing in," said Kay. "But was afraid about safety margins, especially if he ever sold the property and it became used for public play. So instead I came up with a nine-hole course with multiple tees, some multi-use greens, and a routing sequence that allowed it to be played as an 18-hole course."

**Boston Corners Golf Club**, on the corner where Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York converge, opened in July 1988 as a par-70 layout, 6,041 yards long. Technically, it wasn't a reversible course, but it embodied some of those principles, thanks to multiple teeing angles per hole and 10 greens, eight of which did double duty and one of which served triple duty (Nos. 4, 8 and 17 converging). It was ingeniously designed and fun to play. Unfortunately, after Peschel's death in 2002 the course was left to go fallow. Today on Google Earth, only the barest remnants of its features can be spotted.

A more enduring version of the reversibility principle can be found on another private estate course, Asherwood in Carmel, Indiana. There in 2000, architect Steve Smyers fashioned an unusual backyard tract for shopping-mall developer and Indiana Pacers co-owner Melvin Simons. Of course, not everyone has a 107-acre backyard, and Smyers filled it up with 10 fairways, 13 greens, 27 teeing grounds and massive sand sprawls – enough for an 18-hole layout that could stretch to 6,800 yards. The routing combines reversibility, overlap, and multiple angles to the same greens. As if that weren't enough, Smyers added a 9-hole par-3 course on the grounds that is fully reversible. For years, the course remained Simons' private enclave, but upon his death in 2009 the course became utilized for charity outings.



*Steve Smyers' Asherwood layout*

There are other reversible concepts that never came to be. Robert Trent Jones Jr. became one of seven finalists for the plum job of creating the [Rio Olympic Golf Course](#) in 2016. His firm teamed with the Brazilian golf executive Mario Gonzalez to present a bold, innovative plan for "two golf courses – one field of play." The proposed layouts included reversed holes, corridors played from very different angles, and completely different landing areas – all in order to avoid the inevitable wear and tear on the course that would handicap the women's competition scheduled for the second week. For reasons that were never made public, the Jones-Gonzalez plan was not selected and a plan by Gil Hanse was selected.

## Resorts embrace reversible golf

The purest embodiment of a reversible 18-hole course opened in 2016 at Forest Dunes in Roscommon, Michigan. Adjoining the resort's conventionally routed (and highly-regarded) Forest Dunes by Tom Weiskopf is a Tom Doak-designed layout called [The Loop](#) that includes two completely reversible layouts, Black (clockwise) and Red (counter-clockwise) set up for play on alternate days.



*The Loop*

With firm, tight fescue fairways the ground game is a major factor here. Knowing that the ball would roll a lot, Doak and his team provided plenty of width – 85 acres of fairway, well over twice what is in play for an average course. But there's nothing average about the place; not the greens, which average 9,800 square feet (again, about twice "normal" size, and certainly not their contours. In fact, the hardest part of the routing was not laying out the fairway corridors but making sure the greens would be receptive to approach shots from two different angles.

He had to route one course, then figure out the strategy for the reverse layout. He's mum on which of the two courses he laid out first. But he has found one curiosity about which of the two courses golfers favor.

"They tend to like the one they've played second, whichever one that is," said Doak.

That's probably because the first time around The Loop, you walk around in a bit of daze trying to figure out what's going on. It doesn't seem possible that the holes the other way around could possibly work. But the next day when you play the course in reverse - from which ever direction - it all seems to fit into place better and you recognize the landforms, though not the angles of approach. It makes for an engaging few days, even if some of the greens are a bit over-the-top in terms of slope and receptivity.

---

And then there's [Silvies Valley Ranch](#) in Seneca, Ore., the newest and arguably the most ambitious of the loop courses. For one thing, the location is a bit forlorn – smack in the middle of Oregon's central high desert, equidistant between Bend to the west and Boise, Idaho, to the east. The attraction at this brand new facility is a pair of golf courses designed by Dan Hixson, who also did [Bandon Crossings Golf Course](#) in Bandon, Ore. and [Wine Valley Golf Course](#) in Walla Walla, Wash.

Silvies differs from other loop courses because the ground is dramatic and steep – over 160 feet of elevation change across the site, making it elusive land for a strictly reversible golf course. In fact, Hixson didn't try, since to force that upon the site land would have been dogmatic. Instead, he followed the principle of making the best use of the site, for which he needed nine greens that serve double-duty and another nine that serve as solo putting surfaces. He also used 17 fairway corridors, some of them blended in or used partially to accommodate the alternate routing. All told, the shared courses occupy 130-acres dotted with towering ponderosa pines and scrubby sage and buckwheat.

Silvies is the latest iteration of a tradition that goes a long way back. Some might think of all this as a passing fad. For serious enthusiasts of golf design, these reversible courses make for thoughtful, neo-classic golf. Which is exactly the way in Atlanta, the Bobby Jones Foundation is looking to make the link between their namesake and the home of golf he loved so much.

Mar 26, 2018