

Louis Sibbett ("Dick") Wilson, was born in Philadelphia, PA, on January 29, 1904. Little is known of Wilson's childhood, however, many attribute his start in golf came by way of Merion Golf Club, where his Father worked as a dirt contractor.



Wilson attended the University of Vermont and was awarded a scholarship for football. He played the quarterback position. In 1924, he joined the golf course design firm of Howard Toomey and William Flynn. Between 1924 and 1925, Wilson worked in the field, (ironically) at Merion once again. Wilson went on to assist the firm at the Country Club, in Cleveland, two clubs in Boca Raton, nine holes at the Country Club, in Brookline, and the renovation of Philadelphia Country Club's Spring Mill course in preparation for the 1939 US Open. Wilson's most significant work came at age 27, while working on Shinnecock Hills, in 1931.

In the late 1930's, Wilson moved to Florida and oversaw the construction of Normandy Isles Golf Club, and as well, did renovation work on Indian Creek, in Miami. After the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941, lean financial times soon followed once again, post-depression. With little work on the horizon, Wilson took a position as the golf course manager at Delray Beach Country Club and picked up small renovation projects whenever he could. Soon after, he was drafted into WWII, where he was called upon to construct and camouflage airfields in Florida.

In 1945, Dick Wilson started his own course architecture firm. His first solo work was completed in 1947, at West Palm Beach Country Club.

By the 1950's, Dick Wilson and rival, Robert Trent Jones, were the most sought after golf course architects in the United States, following the death of William Flynn in 1945 and Donald Ross in 1948. Wilson had 9-10 design and field associates on his payroll and was working on close to 10 courses annually at his peak. The PGA tour held Wilson in high esteem, awarding him the design of their PGA National home course (now BallenIsles), in 1964.

Many experts consider his greatest design and the best example of his work to be Pine Tree Golf Club, in Boynton Beach, Florida. Praise for the course at the time was effusive:

"The best course I have ever seen." - Ben Hogan

"A truly great course." - Jack Nicklaus

"The greatest course I have ever played." - Ruth Jessen

“Dick Wilson’s greatest work of all.” - Gardner Dickinson

In 1964, Wilson was hired once again to renovate the East Course at Merion. Less than 12 months later, Dick Wilson died from a fall at Pine Tree in 1965, where he had a home nearby.
Courses

Dick Wilson designed many significant courses throughout his career. The following are considered his best:

Deepdale Golf Club in 1954. This commission came after the C.B. MacDonald/ Seth Raynor, original course was relocated due to the building of the New York Expressway. Deepdale is one of the most intensely private clubs in America.

NCR Country Club, North and South Course, in 1954. Both courses are stellar examples of what Wilson could do on a rolling piece of property.

Meadow brook Club, in 1954. In October of 1955, Herbert Warren Wind, described Meadow Brook as follows, “to my tastes, it is the finest golf course that has been built in this country since Bob Jones and Dr. Alister Mackenzie produced the Augusta National back in 1931. While the course is still much too young for the turf to have taken on body and for the whole 18 to have taken on a final aspect, Meadow Brook has struck me from my first visit on as a “born classic” destined to be mentioned in the same exalted breath with Muirfield, Hoylake, Pinehurst No. 2, Pine Valley and the other acknowledged touchstones of architectural greatness.”

Hole-in-the-Wall, in 1957. Gene Sarazen was quoted as saying, “If I only had one golf course to play, it would be Hole-in-the-Wall.” Course architect, Ron Forse said, “It is one of only a handful of courses in all of southwest Florida with no houses or buildings. Pure golf in a pristine, natural setting.”

Hillwood Country Club, in 1957.

Cypress Lake Golf Club, in 1959.

Royal Montreal, (3) courses, in 1959. Coldstream, in 1959.

Laurel Valley Golf Club, in 1959.

Bay Hill Club and Lodge, in 1961.

Doral Country Club, (2) courses, 1962, which includes the famed, “Blue Monster.”

Pine Tree Golf Club, in 1962. Ben Hogan declared Pine Tree, “the greatest flat course in America.” Tom Doak stated, “Pine Tree is the ultimate Dick Wilson layout – longer, flatter, more heavily bunkered and more difficult than most of his other courses.”

Callaway Gardens, 1963

PGA National, (2) courses, in 1964.

Bidermann Golf Club, in 1964. Added 9 holes and lengthened the original Devereaux Emmet design.

Cog Hill, (courses 3 and 4), 1963.

The Club at La Costa, in 1965.

Notable Wilson renovation work includes: Colonial Country Club, 1956.

Seminole, 1957.

Winged Foot (West), 1958.

Metropolitan, 1961.

Scioto Country Club, 1961. Aronimink, 1961.

Bel-Air Country Club, 1962. Greenbrier, 1964.

Merion (East), 1964.

A brief History Lesson

It would be derelict to discuss Dick Wilson's design philosophy without first acknowledging the state of golf preceding his prime, with the onset of the Great Depression from 1929-1933, another deep recession which encompassed 1937-1939, and lastly, the WWII's influence on the sport from 1941-1945.

"A golf course should look more vicious to the player than it actually is. It should inspire you, keep you alert. If you're playing over a sleepy-looking golf course, you're naturally going to fall asleep." - Dick Wilson, 1962, Sports Illustrated

All but the top courses were essentially in disrepair with green budgets slashed, bunkers being filled or left unkept, and once wide fairways began shrinking. To stay afloat, many dropped from eighteen holes to nine. Even top clubs have documented the near and actual bankruptcy during this period. Rationing due to WWII was an issue which led to the sport's further demise, as the New York Times reported, "gas and rubber shortages reduced play by approximately 50%." People were simply unwilling to waste gasoline to travel to the outskirts of town, to discover no golf balls were available and no caddies were left to carry their clubs.

Another contributing factor to the demise of golf was the massive tax increases of the 1930's, which cut into the discretionary income of golf's most ardent supporters. The Revenue Act of 1943, for example, doubled the tax on club dues and initiation fees. From 1932 to 1952, over six-hundred courses in America closed.

Things changed dramatically in the late 40's and early 1950's, as golf's biggest stars returned from war, economic conditions improved, and America shifted away from the industrial-era, to an economy which allowed more time for leisure activities. America's appetite for golf was stoked.

The "Dunlop 65", 1946. The Spalding, "Dot", 1955. Golf equipment took a huge leap forward in both quality and consistency, as rationing for the war effort was halted. Corporations such as

Firestone Tire (Firestone CC), Sylvania Electric (Sylvania CC), DuPont (Dupont CC), General Electric (General Electric Athletic Club), IBM (IBM CC), Bethlehem Steel (Bethlehem CC) and the National Cash Register Company (NCR CC - a wonderful 36-hole Dick Wilson design), saw golf as a distinct benefit in recruitment and employee retention, and as such, built full-scale multi-course country clubs, for the sole use of their employees.

The demand for faster greens and better conditioning for clubs also increased, as did the quality of equipment available for golf superintendents. E-Z Go, Pushman, and Club Car began selling golf carts during this period, replacing the golf caddie in masse.

It would be remiss to not include Ben Hogan's influence on golf's growing popularity and his impact on course design, as his play and writings of the time suggested a new era of Championship Golf, which demanded greater accuracy and precision, as well as bold strategy, not seen previously.

Design Philosophy

"A golf course should require equal use of every aspect of the game, rather than make a disproportionate demand on one or two phases, such as driving or putting," - Dick Wilson

Dick Wilson's design philosophy was rooted in the strategic, aerial game vs. the golden age-era architects, who leaned more towards front-facing greens with wide openings, and run-up shot options. This was no coincidence, as his early training came under the tutelage of Toomey and Flynn. William Flynn, a transplant from Boston, was part of the 'Philadelphia School of Architecture', whose 'members' included William Fownes (Pine Valley), Hugh Wilson (Merion), A.W. Tillinghast (Baltusrol, Winged Foot, San Francisco Golf Club), George Thomas (Los Angeles CC, Bel-Air), and William Fownes (Oakmont), Wilson's green complexes, often raised and set at 30-45 degree angles, were clearly the chief defense of par. From the fairway, the player could easily visualize the challenge ahead, with many of his signature false fronts in plain sight. Wilson was fond of incorporating rear and side fall-offs, concealed by creative, flash-faced bunkering that was often knitted directly into the putting surface.

Many of his green complexes contained at least one (front) greenside bunker that guarded the ideal line for players choosing the safe route from which to attack. Wilson's fairways were slightly narrower in width than his historical counterparts, but were by no means considered 'bowling alleys'. He would often add a fairway bunker (or cluster) that the better player could challenge to gain a distinct advantage and easier 2nd shot, but was careful to leave space for the higher handicap to still enjoy his round. Occasionally, on his more 'Championship' layouts, he would stagger fairway bunkers, which added options and visual intimidation for the better player.

Wilson's chief rival, Robert Trent Jones, leaned more towards straight-lined, narrow fairways, that were flanked by bunkers on both sides of the landing area. Wilson liked a little movement in his fairways and was not afraid to add hard dog-legs. Wilson's greens tended to be sympathetic (not overly done) with interesting interior contours, which could confound players who short-sided their approaches. While Robert Trent Jones insisted on pushing water features to the edge of his greens and at times, to near-fairway landings, Wilson made use of natural and man-made water surrounds to build up his distinctive green shapes, tee boxes, and to add interest to his already excellent course routings; but rarely made water an integral part of his course strategy, except for a few very select holes. Wilson also loved 'puzzle piece' bunkering, which became a signature.

While many would consider Dick Wilson's approach shot difficulty to be on the upper-end of his predecessors, the toughest shot on a Wilson design might well be the 40-50 yard, short-sided recovery. Being on the correct side of the fairway bares extra weight, given the day's hole location on a Wilson course; however, the architect did not dictate where (exactly) or how far to hit a drive on his par 4's and 5's. Nonetheless, Wilson does ask the player to make a decision on each hole based on the players skill level and risk tolerance - a hallmark of excellent course design.

Selected Quotes

"After the war, there was a need for golf courses. Mr. Jones figured out how to get them built quickly, Dick was different. He came in wiggling with all his bunkers. It was flat in South Florida, and he would come in and build up the greens and put bunkers in front of them. Dick was a good player, and he made a strong golf course. Dick brought a more severe style, but it was accepted. He did a lot of good work on flat ground in Florida, where you have to be more creative."

- Pete Dye, Golf course architect (note: Dye's Father 'Pinky' was a frequent playing partner of Dick Wilson at Delray Beach CC) "He always preached to stay within the history and tradition of the game, but push it out as far as you can. He was doing stuff that hadn't been seen before. He loved bold expression. If you turned the hole right to left, it was like a speedway; you were high on the right, low on the left."

- Robert Von Hagge, Golf course architect and former design associate of Dick Wilson "Wilson's use of tongues in the design of the greens, which provide for more strategic hole locations. I don't think people could really understand his nuances. His bunkering doesn't look as intricate as it really is. He was very subtle. The golfer didn't even recognize why he was being challenged that way. Wilson always made sure it was a golf course you wanted to play over and over again. He's never really gotten the credit he's due. Instead, the notoriety has been heaped on Robert Trent Jones, who was a better marketer during his much longer career."

- Rees Jones, Golf course architect "Where Trent Jones was prolific, Dick Wilson was proficient in that era. Wilson's courses were overall better, but Jones, the huge greens, and the championship golf, that's what people wanted.

- Ron Forse, Golf course architect "I enjoy their (Dick Wilson/Joe Lee) golf courses because I feel in control. I think most average golfers find the same comfort in their designs as well. Players arrive on the tee and understand what is asked with regard to shot selection. If they can accomplish the first task, they are rewarded with a clear line of sight or angle on the next. Even on Dick's most difficult courses, the player never find himself at the mercy of the design without undue cause. The hazards may compound, but only after failure on the first task. The shots, while demanding, are rarely improbable. I think maybe that's what most understood about the work; the visual aspect gives the player all of the information up front and it's up to them to hit the shot. In that regard, it's maybe more player-friendly than the neo-links style of the modern era with super wide corridors, and open green fronts, because the player doesn't know how to approach the hole without professional guidance or experience." - Joe Jemsek, Golf course architect

Noted Holes of Cypress Lake

Dick Wilson's design strategy was fully realized at Cypress Lake, where smart par, easy bogey, abound throughout the round:

#1 - Players can choose to fly their drives over the left fairway bunker for an easier, shorter approach, but risk water straight ahead or a difficult recovery left in the case of a hooked drive. Safer is a smooth, 3 wood or full hybrid, however, this decision leaves a more difficult, longer 2nd shot, with a dramatically tougher angle vs. driver.

#2 - The 2nd shot is critical to the strategy of this wonderful par 5, despite the holes scorecard length. 3 wood, firm hybrid, or even 4 iron given the wind of the day could make for an eagle chance, but trouble abounds right and short, where water creeps into play a half-wedge away. Birdies and certainly pars are more readily gained by simply laying up short of the cluster of bunkers left of the green, but the feeling of cowardice can remain later in the round as this early risk/reward hole and approach shot can haunt a player's score.

#7 - The drive and approach shot are as signature to Dick Wilson as is the Redan or Biarritz green to a C.B. MacDonald or Seth Raynor, par 3. Thread a drive and leave a wedge to one of the more severely angled greens on the course or lay-up short of the bunkers ahead for a longer, but bettered-angled approach with a longer club?

#11 - Is one of the most photogenic holes and certainly a stand-out as it pertains to strategy. The player can choose Driver through hybrid, given their risk tolerance and wind severity for the day. A long, accurate drive can lead to a chance at birdie or choose a hybrid, followed by a short iron to avoid one Cypress's challenging fairway bunkers.

#12 - Driver can bring much trouble into play on either side, on one of the course's tightest drives, however, laying up too short for the approach will often yield an inevitable bogey.

#16 - From the teeing ground, the left fairway bunker dares the longer player, but offers ample room to those who choose not to challenge it. As on many long approaches at Cypress, the more off-line one lands right or left, the more difficult the recovery shot. Does one merely bash 3 wood or play to the left side of the fairway with a long iron to leave a simple 3rd shot?

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