

MAC: ONE OF THE GOLDEN AGES GREATS

I'm fascinated with Vernon Macan, an Irish immigrant to British Columbia who became the most successful golf architect throughout the Pacific Northwest during the 1920s era – the so-called Golden Age of golf design.

Macan was a respected contemporary of the Golden Age greats – Donald Ross, Alister Mackenzie, A.W. Tillinghast, fellow Canadian Stanley Thompson et al. He outlasted them all, too.

Macan's first golf course design (and, arguably his best) at Colwood (today Royal Colwood) in Victoria, was completed in 1913. Remarkably, Macan continued to design and supervise the construction of golf courses until his sudden death in 1964.



Pictured later in life, Arthur Vernon Macan was born in Ireland in 1882; he immigrated to B.C. in 1912... Macan's design philosophy was based on the writings of Englishman John Low, who in 1903 published Concerning Golf, the first book to include thoughts on golf course architecture

Yet outside the Pacific Northwest, Macan is a relative unknown. His life work goes largely unappreciated because it's so regional in scope, but also because little remains. A variety of factors have conspired to eliminate Macan's original works. Golf courses evolve of course. But more so, Green committees and contemporary course architects have shown little interest in, and respect for Macan's original ideas and painstaking efforts.

Fighting with Canadian Forces during the First World War, Macan was seriously injured at Vimy Ridge, in France. Fit with a wooden left leg, it was difficult for Mac – as friends called him – to effectively scout certain properties to devise a routing plan. In turn, he was forced to turn down a number of potential commissions throughout his career.

He continued to play fine golf though. Macan's handicap rose by just two strokes – four to six – following the war. His reputation as a fine player – winner of the British Columbia, Washington, and Pacific Northwest Amateur championships – provided Macan with clout. He became known as an expert on all matters relative to golf, including course design.

The 1922 Pacific Northwest Amateur championships contested at Colwood amounted to free advertising, too. The course was enjoyed by nearly all participants – golfing travelers from throughout the Pacific Northwest who suddenly desired Macan-designed courses. Soon after, Macan was laying out new courses and remodeling old ones up and down the west coast.



Macan was headquartered in Victoria, the provincial capital, where he spent most of his time at Victoria Golf Club... Macan remodeled the Victoria course on several occasions; as a result, a number of greens at Victoria are works of art, featuring brilliant contour... pictured is a four-loop, beginning with the par-four seventh at top-right, and including consecutive par-threes at the eighth and ninth

Between 1922 and '25, Macan designed and supervised construction (he was very hands-on throughout the development of his golf course designs) at Marine Drive and Langara in Vancouver; Fircrest and Broadmoor in Washington; Columbia (today Columbia Edgewater) and Alderwood in

Portland; and others, including the California Golf Club near San Francisco.

Alderwood, which no longer exists, was the first course west of the Mississippi River to host the United States Amateur, in 1938 (won by Johnny Goodman).



This bunker, front-left at Marine Drive 's seventeenth green, is called Big Bertha...

Not unlike Alister Mackenzie, who he openly admired, Macan was the opinionated author of many interesting articles featuring in various golf magazines. Below is a sampler of his thoughts on a variety of subjects.

On golf course architecture: I could only suggest that all golf course architects read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the philosophy of Bob Jones outlined in Chapter 19 and 20 in his autobiography with regard to his and Alister Mackenzie's desires at Augusta.

On his own work: I personally could ask for no better compliment than for a course I have designed to be criticized as calling for a maximum use of golfing brain power.

On bunker placement: St. Andrews is plastered with central bunkering. There is in the golf architectural world too much of the very best authority for me to have to make any apology for advocating centrally located bunkers.

On designing greens: I design some of my greens to suit the run-up type of shot. This is one of the great shots in golf, but very few of today's top players can execute it. That is why they criticize my work.



... when the hole is cut in a difficult position at this 438-yard hole, back-left behind Big Bertha, the club employs a skull 'n' crossbones flag!

More on greens, following criticism of his new Shaughnessy course in Vancouver, completed in 1960: Today, the uninformed believe a green should be constructed with the slope from back to front, so that it will retain the ball. In brief, this suggests the shot should be a mechanical operation and the result a mathematical certainty. This is not the game of golf. Golf was not conceived as a mechanical operation but rather full of fun and adventure. Many things could happen to the ball after it pitched on the green. The ill-happenings were not regarded as ill-fortune or ill-luck, but part of the adventure, and the more skilled found methods to overcome the risks of ill-fortune.

On becoming a golf course architect: There is an immense gap between an ambition to designing great golf courses and an ambition to making a lot of money through developing and producing golf courses. If you desire money you should study business administration, clubhouse design, and many other subjects which have little to do with the actual design of courses.

There's a movement afoot these days to restore the original works of the great golf architects of the past. Vernon Macan shouldn't be forgotten.

In fact, following a brief visit last year, I can confirm Royal Colwood is a prime candidate for restoration. It's an excellent design; much of Macan's original work is intact (so, required work would be relatively simple and inexpensive); plus, as Macan's first golf course design – in his hometown – Royal Colwood would serve brilliantly as a tribute to one of the Golden Age greats.

HEROES OF GOLF: VERNON MACAN ARCHITECT AHEAD OF HIS TIME

By Jeff Mingay

"Mingay, an aspiring course architect who is beginning to get some work, is a Macan connoisseur."

Lorne Rubenstein, Globe and Mail golf columnist.

Vernon Macan arrived in Victoria, British Columbia in May 1912, and was surprised he had missed the golf season. Canadian winters are kind to this provincial capital on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, and without mechanical mowers, it was far easier to keep fairways and greens playable during the winter months, when grasses are dormant.

Macan shrugged off his scheduling error and made plans to enter the 1912 British Columbia Amateur championship that December at Victoria Golf Club. An accomplished tournament golfer, Macan had won often in his native Ireland and fared well in Britain too. Two years earlier, he had advanced to the third round of the British Amateur, losing a hard fought match to J.E. Laidlay at Hoylake. So it came as no surprise when Macan defeated the perpetual provincial champion, Harvey Combe, by five strokes to claim the 1912 BC Amateur title. The following year, Macan repeated as provincial champion and also won the Washington State Amateur championship and the prestigious Pacific Northwest Amateur. In doing so, he became a recognized authority in the region on all matters concerning the game, including course architecture, for which he had a true passion.

As early as 1913, Macan's first 18-hole golf course design was unveiled at Colwood Golf Club on the outskirts of Victoria. During his years on the golf team at Dublin's Trinity College in the late 1890s, Macan made several trips to St. Andrews, Scotland, out of which sprang a lifelong love affair with The Old Course. In the spirit of St. Andrews, his Colwood featured wide fairways and large, rolling greens. It was the first course in British Columbia - perhaps the Pacific Northwest - to be laid-out in a strategic style, so as to cater to golfers of all abilities.

"I do not believe super tests of professional golfer's skills is the answer to golf course development," Macan wrote years later. "Take care of the man who pays the bills. He is the foundation of our clubs. Any great golf course must supply maximum enjoyment to the mass of a club membership and is incidentally a fine test of golf."

Colwood, which was granted an official "Royal" prefix by King George V in 1931, proved to be the first of some 70 layouts designed or remodeled by Macan between 1913 and 1964. His work not only revolutionized the art of golf course design in the Pacific Northwest, but also had a profound impact on the development of the game along the west coast during the first half of the 20th century.



Golf architect Vernon Macan, late in his life

Born in Dublin on May 23, 1882, Vernon Macan attended Shrewsbury School as a boy and was introduced to golf at nearby Shrewsbury Golf Club around 1891. His father, and namesake, Dr. Arthur Vernon Macan, was a prominent physician, knighted in 1903 for his outstanding contribution to medicine in Great Britain. During the late 1880s, shortly after his own wife had died during childbirth, Dr. Macan instigated sweeping changes to standard hospital practices (principally in regard to hygiene) that almost instantly reduced the childbirth mortality rate in Dublin from 90 to 10 percent.

In 1900, Vernon Macan enrolled at his father's alma mater, Trinity College. But rather than pursue a career in medicine, he elected to study law. Macan's decision had very little to do with any sincere interest in becoming a barrister, writes his biographer, Michael Riste. Rather, it's more likely Macan sought to become a lawyer because the local bar association had a golf club affiliated with the seaside links at Portmarnock.

Following his marriage to Juliet Richard in 1911, Macan went to work for his father-in-law at the Richard Law Firm in Dublin. Within a year, his lack of interest in the profession was obvious, and Mr. Richard presented him with an ultimatum: Practice law or practice your golf? Macan chose the latter. And when he left for Victoria the following spring, without his pregnant wife in tow, there was speculation Macan was a "remittance man" —one who had accepted financial incentive from his family to leave Ireland and never return. This speculation has never been confirmed.

Macan laid-out one more course at Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island prior to the outbreak of the First World War. By that time, Julia and his newborn daughter had joined him in Victoria.

Although he was 33 years old with a professional designation that presumably could have exempted him from active military service, Macan voluntarily enlisted with the 88th Victoria Fusiliers in January 1916. He was trained as a machine-gunner and, on April 10, 1917, participated in the Allied assault on Vimy Ridge in France. During the early hours of that legendary battle, Macan was struck in the left foot with an exploded shell casing and was immediately evacuated to London. He remained in a critical state for nearly a month, and the severity of his wounds eventually resulted in the amputation of his left leg from the knee down. It was not until early December 1917 that Macan was permitted to leave hospital, at which time he returned with his wife and young daughter to Dublin.

Throughout his recovery in Ireland, Macan read and re-read all of the available literature on golf course design and construction he could get his hands on, including John L. Low's landmark book, *Concerning Golf*, published in 1904. Low was the first to codify a set of principles for golf course design. His writings were a major influence on the master architects of the so-called Golden Age of Golf Design, between the wars, Macan included.

On October 11, 1919, Macan returned with his family to British Columbia. The next day, despite the loss of his left leg, he won The Bostock Cup competition at Victoria. Macan's golfing skill did not decline following the war: His handicap only increased by two points - from 4 to 6.

In 1922, Colwood hosted the Pacific Northwest Golf Association championships. It was largest field ever assembled for the event and nearly all in attendance were enamoured with the golf course. Shortly thereafter, Macan was entertaining a plethora of proposals to design new courses and remodel old ones. Between 1922 and '25, he was in fact the busiest golf course designer in the Pacific Northwest, with projects in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon and California.

A. Vernon Macan
GOLF ARCHITECT

Care The Fairway, 127 MONTGOMERY ST., SAN FRANCISCO
Care Spalding's, IN SEATTLE AND PORTLAND, OREGON

Now in California, Mr. Macan will undertake the designing of new courses or the remodeling of old ones. Mr. Macan personally superintends the construction of the courses he designs.

Among the courses designed by Mr. Macan are:

- 1913—Colwood Golf & Country Club, Victoria, B. C.
- 1920—Inglewood Golf & Country Club, in conjunction with R. Johnstone, Seattle, Wash.
- 1921—Marine Drive Golf Club, Vancouver, B. C.
- 1922—Fircrest Golf Club, Tacoma, Wash.
- 1923—Alderwood Golf & Country Club, Portland, Ore. (in seed).
- 1924—Columbia Country Club, Portland, Ore. (in seed).
- 1924—Municipal Course, Victoria, B. C. (in construction).
- 1924—Municipal Course, Vancouver, B. C. (in construction).
- 1924—California Golf Club, San Francisco (in construction).
- 1924—Washington Golf & Country Club, Seattle, Wash. (in seed).
- 1925—Contra Costa Country Club.

I have also been consulted by the majority of the major clubs of the Northwest, including:

- The Seattle Golf Club, Seattle.
- Waverley Country Club, Portland.
- Rainier Golf & Country Club, Seattle.
- Vancouver Golf & Country Club, Vancouver, B. C.
- Shaughnessy Heights Golf Club, Vancouver, B. C.

with a view to improvements.

Later in his life, Macan claimed to have worked for every club in Portland with the exception of Portland Golf Club. It was a proud personal moment when his 1924 layout at Portland's Alderwood Country Club was selected to host the 1937 United States Amateur, the first USGA event ever staged in the Pacific Northwest. In the end, Macan was satisfied with the champion: Johnny Goodman, winner of the US Open in 1933, who defeated Ray Billows 1 up in the final.

Macan had considered Alderwood, which no longer exists, to be his finest work. Then he completed Shaughnessy in 1960. Laid-out on a spacious, rolling tract of land along the Fraser River, Shaughnessy benefited from the free hand and generous budget provided to its designer. Macan boldly peppered wide fairways with centrally-located bunkers to create an array of optional routes. And he built large greens, some of which featured massive interior contour and others that retreated from the line of approach. Pitching greens from front to back was a common scheme employed by Macan to promote an earth-bound game.

An advertisement Macan ran in The Fairway magazine, 1925.

"I design some of my greens to suit the run-up type of shot," he told Harry Young, the long-time golf columnist for Victoria's Daily Colonist newspaper, in 1963. "This is one of the great shots in golf, but very few of today's top players can execute it. That is why they criticize my work."

During the 1966 Canadian Open, won by Don Massingale, the professionals indeed criticize Macan's work at Shaughnessy. Many of the pros, Jack Nicklaus included, were perplexed when their lofty approach shots would pitch on the front portion of a green and carom over the back. Macan, who passed away in 1964 at the age of 82, was not there to defend his design ideals, but he had explained his thoughts on green design to a group of Shaughnessy members who, years earlier, had voiced similar concerns.

"Today, the uninformed believe a green should be constructed with the slope from back to front, so that it will retain the ball," he said. "In brief, this suggests the shot should be a mechanical operation and the result a mathematical certainty. This is not the game of golf. Golf was not conceived as a mechanical operation but rather full of fun and adventure. Many things could happen to the ball after it pitched on the green. The ill-happenings were not regarded as ill-fortune or ill-luck, but part of the adventure, and the more skilled found methods to overcome the risks of ill-fortune.

"I personally could ask for no better compliment than for a course I have designed to be criticized as calling for a maximum of golfing brain power," he vehemently added. Unfortunately, Macan's work at Shaughnessy has been significantly altered, leaving little more than his original routing intact today.

Robert Trent Jones, Sr. who many modern pundits consider to be the most successful golf course designer in history, described Macan as a man ahead of his own time, particularly in regard to the design of his greens. Speaking with Riste about Macan's work in 1990, Trent Jones said, "Today, the professionals have become so proficient at playing shots from 150 yards and less that the greens must be designed to make this shot more difficult."

Trent Jones speculated that had Macan set up shop on the East Coast, he would be as revered today as his most respected contemporaries, including Donald Ross and A.W. Tillinghast. Macan's brilliant work was so regional in scope that his celebrity remains confined to a small number of clubs in the Pacific Northwest. Though he had arrived there a season off-schedule, he would prove to be a man ahead of his time.

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