

Long Ain't What It Used To Be

You will know about Bryson DeChambeau overpowering the US Open venue, Winged Foot - a course measuring 7,477 yards with a par of 70 (35/35) comprising 4 par 3s, 12 par 4s and 2 par 5s. DeChambeau regards hitting the ball long distances as a skill in itself (which it undoubtedly is) and has a publicly stated objective to launch drives with a carry of over 400 yards. In Deeside terms that means hitting a drive from the yellow tee on the Haughton 10th hole and carrying the green! With that thought in mind I had a look back through the Club archives.

When opened in 1903 the course was originally a 9-hole layout but within a year or so it was extended to 18-holes. The course was bounded on the north by the former Deeside turnpike road (remnants of which is still there today down the right hand side of the entrance road - it disappears under the clubhouse before reappearing below the Haughton 1st tee area) and on the south by the River Dee. Described as including 'natural bunkers, pools, broken ground, hills and whins' the course measured 5,090 yards with a bogey score¹ of 77 (37/40) comprising 3 par 3s, 9 par 4s, 4 par 5s and 2 par 6s - yes that's right 2 par 6s.

The par 6 on the front nine stretched to 568 yards - it was aptly named 'Long'. To put that into perspective the longest hole on the present Haughton course is the 3rd which measures 557 yards from the black tee. Present day members have a choice of tees to play from and I am willing to wager that for the vast majority their only acquaintance with the black tee on the Haughton 3rd hole is when they walk pass it to the Haughton 13th tee. A century ago Deeside members had no such option as each hole had only one tee.

Incidentally 'Long' was a longer (much longer) version of the current Blairs 3rd hole. The Blairs 3rd hole measures 447 yards so the next time you are on the tee there look back 120 yards - that will take you to the yellow tee on the Haughton 13th hole. The 'Long' was played from there to the Blairs 3rd green. When you consider that, until steel shafts arrived in the 1920/1930s, our forebears had to play with hickory shafted clubs the hole must have been a formidable challenge.

By contrast the par 6 on the back nine, the 13th, was a more modest 511 yards. The hole was played from a tee in the vicinity of the ladies tees on the Blairs 3rd hole northwards to the present day Haughton 13th green. It was called 'Combine' which remains the case today - albeit in those days it ran straight whereas as now it is a severe dog-leg right.

Any meaningful comparison between a Winged Foot course (7,477 yards par 70) with the Deeside course of over a century ago (5,090 yards bogey 77) requires account to be taken of the increases in driving distances over the years. According to a recently published R&A/USGA report² in the late 1890's typical drives for elite male golfers were in the range 160 - 200 yards and for recreational golfers the range was 100 - 150 yards. By 1904 driving distances increased by 10 -15 yards corresponding with the introduction of the wound rubber core ball (the 'Haskell'). Thereafter as result of various factors including steel shafts, deeper faced drivers, refined dimple patterns on balls, the physique and fitness of players and the condition of courses distances increased gradually per the following table.³

¹ Bogey was the term which later became Par

² R&A/USGA Distance Insights Report published on 4 February 2020

³ Taken from R&A/USGA Distance Insights Report

Date	Recreational Woman	Recreational Men	Elite Woman Typical	Elite Woman Long	Elite Men Typical	Elite Men Long
Circa 1900	75- 100	100 - 150	120 -140	150 -170	160 -200	200 - 220
Circa 1930	100 - 150	130 - 180	175 - 225	225 - 250	220 - 260	270 - 290
Circa 1980	110 - 150	160 - 200	200 - 240	250 - 270	240 - 280	280 - 300

With the above table in mind, it is little wonder that in 1905 four shots were required to reach 'Combine' let alone 'Long'. In similar vein, given that the par 3 18th hole on the same course measured 183 yards reaching that green in regulation must have been deserving of a round of applause in itself!

On Saturday 24 August 1912 the Aberdeen Press and Journal reported that the Deeside course was to be improved and carried an illustration of the new layout (essentially the same as before although longer at 5,525 yards) and the revised card of the course. The 'Long' remained a par 6 but with 'Combine' having been shortened to 475 yards it had become a mere par 5 resulting in the bogey score reducing to 76. Over the years as hitting distances increased the Deeside course was lengthened but by contrast the bogey score reduced.

DeChambeau has a plan and it is clearly working for him but ultimately whilst distance hitting is great there is no substitute for talent. On 4 June 1949, when playing in the Deeside Club Championship (the Dunriach Cup) qualifying rounds, Hector Dey broke the course record with a score of 67 (5 birdies, 1 bogey) and in the process won the Beldornie Trophy by a mere 7 shots. At that time the course measured 5,839 yards and had a bogey of 71 (35/36). Given the hitting distances in that era, a score of 67 was a truly magnificent effort but then you don't, as Hector did, win the Dunriach Cup nine times without possessing a modicum of talent.

A couple of final thoughts. Firstly if you marvel at the distance today's professional golfers hit their irons you need to factor in the marked change in the loft and length of irons since the 1970's. Back then a 7-iron had a loft of 40° and a shaft length of 36" - a 5-iron had a loft of 32° and a shaft length of 37". Today the loft on a 7-iron is 30° and the shaft length 37" - in other words a modern day 7-iron is a 1970's 5-iron. Secondly rather than trying to hit it further I intend lobbying Council to turn back the clock and make the Haughton 3rd and 13th par 6s - any one care to join me?

David Rennie
Club Archivist