

The Pioneer



Reviving Dr Limburger

Golf architect Tony Ristola recently obtained access to hundreds of original plans drawn by German design legend Bernhard von Limburger. And, he says, they show that our current understanding of Limburger's work is deeply flawed

The legacy of Dr Bernhard von Limburger, the father of German golf course architecture is grossly misunderstood as hundreds of recently uncovered plans drawn from his own hand clearly illustrate. Most of his courses have evolved away from his ideals since his death three decades ago, and this drift can be directly attributed to the combination of time and lack of knowledge. Little is known about him and the design philosophy he embraced. Worse, what is commonly assumed is entirely false and can only add to the further erosion, destruction and elimination of his work.

Von Limburger was a disciple of the timeless truths responsible for the vast majority of truly great, cost effective and

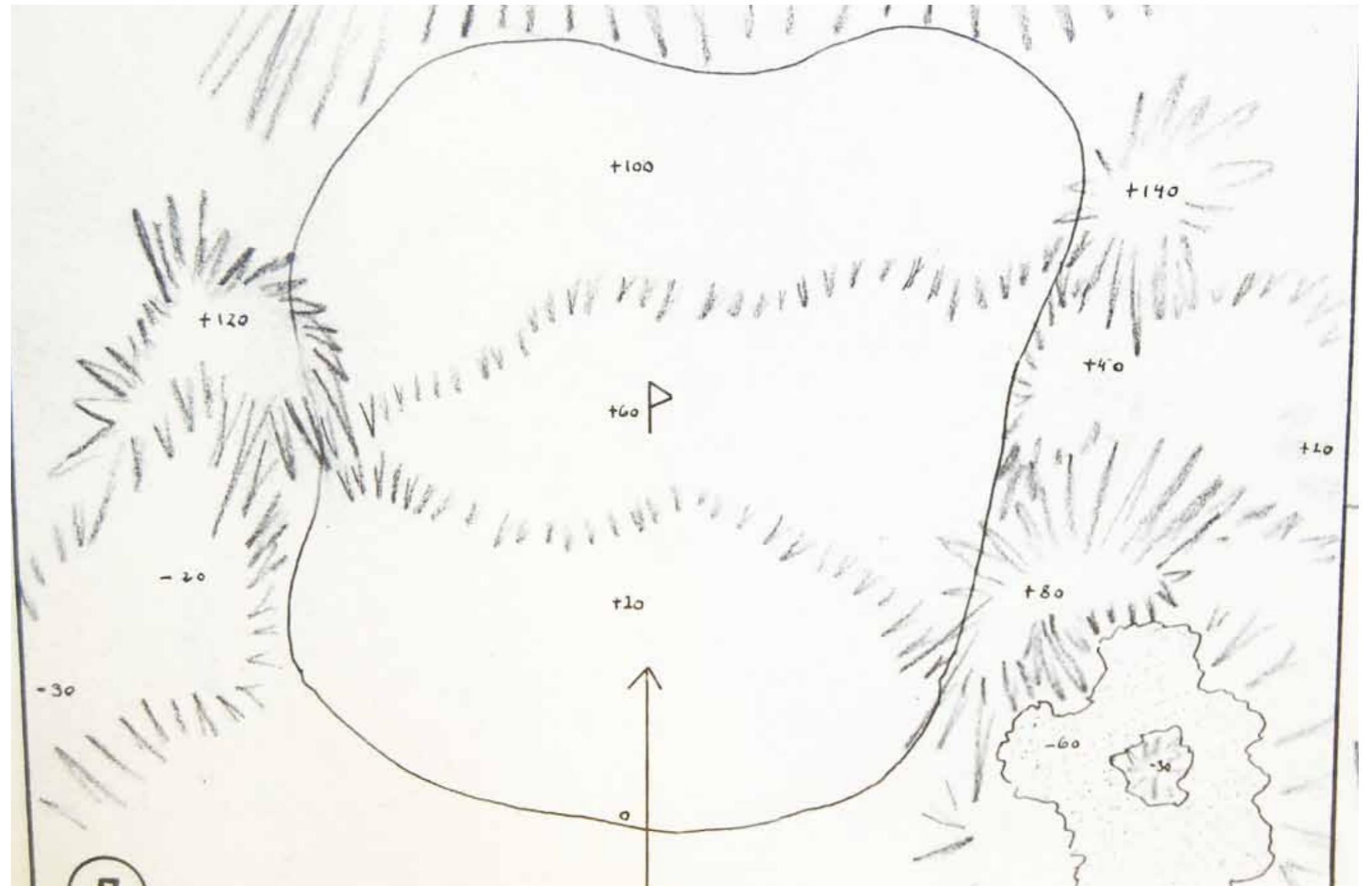
sustainable golf architecture as preached in the bibles of golf design written by men like Hunter, MacKenzie, Thomas and Simpson. In fact, he was more than a good disciple; he was a fervent and enthusiastic practitioner, unaffected by trends.

Wikipedia's German language page on von Limburger is a one stop shop, encapsulating the commonly accepted clichés about his work. It proclaims he was 'no friend of bunkers', trees were often used as a strategic hazard, his fairways were usually narrow, finished with small greens, and water hazards came regularly into play. A photo reveals his 'classic' bunker style as simple, clean, and without character. Had a private collector not given me access to hundreds of his plans, I would have accepted

the above summary of his work too, for his courses have evolved to reinforce these mischaracterisations.

So what do Limburger's plans reveal about the courses he designed compared to what they have become during the 30 years since his passing?

Limburger may not have designed tons of bunkers, but it is an absolute myth he abhorred them. The fairway bunkers he did introduce were regularly placed near the centre of the fairway, on the direct line of play to the hole. If he disliked bunkers, this surely isn't the place he would have put them! He clearly understood the value of the bunker and its role in driving strategy and interest; that's why they so often danced around the optimal line of attack.



A Limburger plan showing an 860 sq m green. The plan has fewer interior heights than most Limburger drew. He rarely included bunkers with islands in his plans

Unfortunately, almost all of von Limburger's clubs have eradicated this element over the years and with it a cornerstone of his thought provoking designs.

John Low's words from 1903 on the placement of bunkers would have been echoed by von Limburger. Low wrote: "The shortest, most direct line to the hole, even if it be the centre of the fairway, should be fraught with danger." Max Behr, rephrased it a couple of decades later, calling the direct line to the hole 'the line of instinct', and saying that, to make a good hole "you must break up that line in order to create the line of charm". Dr von Limburger's plans reveal he worshipped this element of strategic design. He may have used fewer bunkers than many of his contemporaries, but

every one counted. If there is a Limburger trademark, this was it!

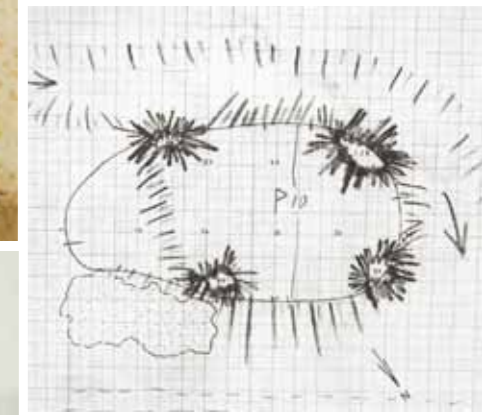
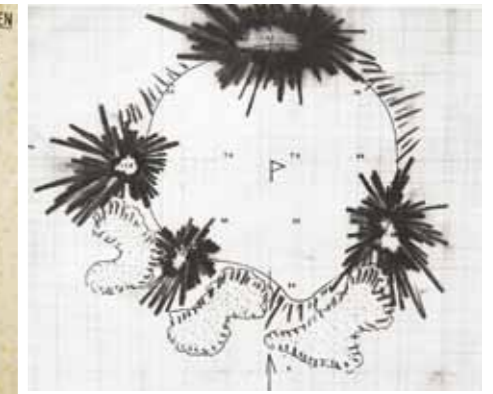
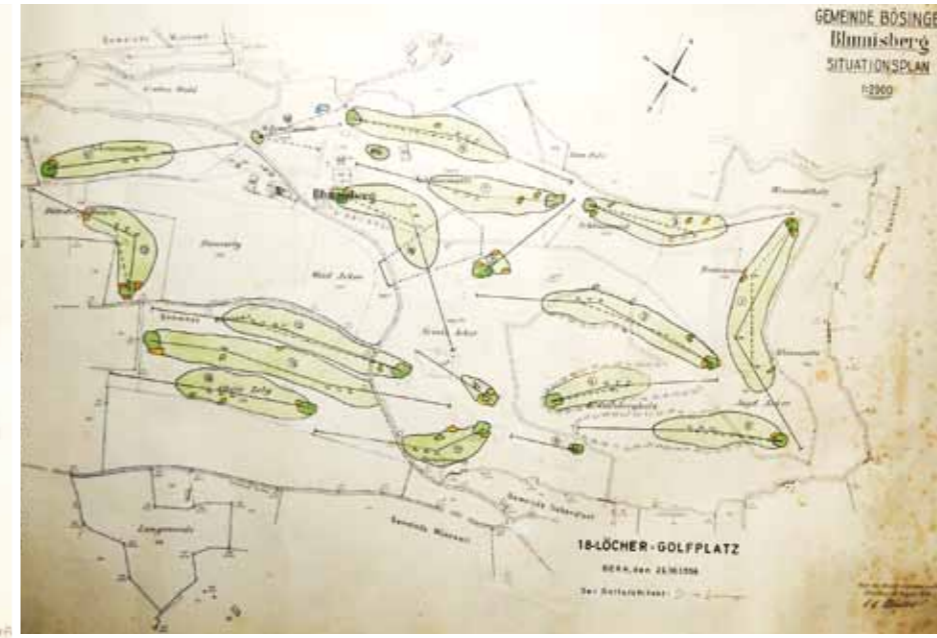
The hand drawn shapes of his bunkers are not clean, formal and boring ovals or ovals with one singular cape and bay as is commonly accepted. His are consistently illustrated as intricate, raw and natural, and elicit the artistic touches of Simpson, MacKenzie or Thomas.

His fairways were certainly not narrow! Because he regularly placed bunkers near the centre of the fairway, his fairways were wide, sometimes massive compared to what they have evolved to at most of his courses: to support his strategic design philosophy, they had to be. It makes sense if you think about his placing bunkers near the centreline of the hole. Width was necessary to allow

golfers to steer wide of them.

Wide fairways not only allowed for strategic choices, but are forgiving for the average golfer. The course remains fun when heavy winds appear, keeps the course fresh by giving golfers choices, and these choices change depending on the wind, daily hole location, and firmness of the ground. As fairways have been narrowed, the strategic and flexible element width provides has largely been eliminated from his courses.

Because von Limburger did not mass grade entire properties, as architects are apt to do today, there was no need to create large ponds to generate massive amounts of fill. On the rare occasion he did construct ponds, they are nothing like the nature defying amoeba shaped wonders one finds



Limburger's plans show his debt to the Golden Age masters, with wide fairways, central bunkers and many large greens. It's also remarkable to learn that he planned a course in Iran, at Namak Abroud

on modern courses. Not needing to generate massive amounts of fill for dirt works meant his designs fit effortlessly into the native landscape and were cost effective.

Though he did use trees strategically at times, it wasn't a regular practice. He certainly was not a proponent of claustrophobic, strategy killing planting schemes as found on many of his courses today. His plans clearly reveal the use of water and trees was never habitual, and the rare occasion where singular trees or water was used in the strategy of a hole, he usually created ample fairway to steer safely wide.

His greens were small? Far from it! Limburger produced a mix of green sizes. One course he designed had fourteen greens from 690-880 sq m and the smallest was 520 sq m! If that was used as a general example, you would have to say Limburger built some of the largest greens in the history of the game. The truth lies somewhere in the middle, and his greens varied in size from hole to hole and course to course depending on what he wanted to achieve.

A simple and common explanation for

the smaller size of some of his greens is they have shrunk during the years, and this shrinkage has been accepted as his standard by inexperienced eyes. Each pass of a mower changes the form of any green slightly, and the guy on the mower is less likely to get an earful from his boss if he mows a few millimetres inside the apron than if he scalps a narrow brown strip. These few millimetres add up over the decades, easily shrinking a green by a metre or more. That means a 700 sq m green becomes 600 sq m, and a 600 sq m green shrinks to just over 500 sq m. All of a sudden large greens become medium sized, and medium sized greens small. His greens had strong outer contours, and these rolls and ridges worked into the greens, with the interior of the greens tending to be flatter.

His bunkers simply did not sit removed from the greens so a mower could turn easily. No, von Limburger's bunkers ate into the greens, as greenside bunkers on many great Australian courses still do! In fact, some of his drawings do not define where the green starts in relation to the bunker!

With the widespread use of the triplex

mower, and the cost of labour, my guess is his greens were pulled away from his bunkers. A shame, as there are maintenance solutions for these situations.

Von Limburger's career ended before the (ab)use of heavy equipment to reshape entire properties became popular, even desirable. He left well enough alone, and because of this, his courses fit better in the landscape than any German architect's work I've seen. His courses bleed from the greens and fairways into the natural surrounding seamlessly. There are no mammary mounds between fairways that defy nature. In all the plans I've seen, only a couple have areas marked for fairway grading!

Dr von Limburger's own hand clearly reveals a set of principles that destroys the commonly accepted view of his design philosophy. So how can a man's life work become so misunderstood and misrepresented?

When golf architecture aficionados discover that Pine Valley, the often named number one golf course in the world, had an alternate island fairway on the seventeenth hole, no

small feature, now hidden in a swathe of forest, or most of Pinehurst Number 2's famous greens are not at all like the originals, such incidents reveal how perceptions can change drastically with time, even on courses that have had the eyes of experts on them for their entire existence. Change happens, and unless clearly documented, the old is forgotten and the new accepted as the norm. Add layers of this over decades and drastic physical and perceptual change can and does happen, frequently for the worse.

Often, it's not until decades after the architect's death that clubs realise what they have and begin to cherish the genius and value the original architect brings. Once a choice is made to resurrect the past they begin the challenging work of documenting the original state, and the changes required to peel away conscious and unconscious changes, just as many great North American courses have been doing for well over a decade.

Unfortunately for some of von Limburger's better efforts, restoring them is too late, as large machines and budgets have erased his

genius. The good news for many others, often clubs that lacked the resources to deface his work, is with great care and modest budgets they can return their courses to be model examples of his philosophy.

Honestly restored courses would provide a shining example of how Germany's foremost architect exploited rather than erased his sites' *genius loci*, creating golf courses that are cost effective to build, beautiful, fun, challenging, enduring, fit their native surroundings seamlessly and are sustainable. This would not only help resurrect Germany's foremost golf course architect but provide a valuable showcase for the principles he embraced, illustrating to German developers that they too can build timeless, world class golf courses in an environmentally sensitive manner, for Germany just may be the greatest country in the world to do so cost effectively. **GCA**

Tony Ristola is an American golf course architect, based in Germany. Together with golf historian Christoph Meister, he is writing a book on Dr von Limburger's life and work

“Honestly restored courses would provide a shining example of how Germany's foremost architect exploited, rather than erased, his sites' *genius loci*”