



## De Turfvaert, The Netherlands: or how to pass Alister Mackenzie's test

Frank Pont



The Netherlands is a country that exhibits a split personality when it comes to golf. It is a country in which golf is relatively new, even though the sport has been played here for more than a hundred years. It is also a country that has several world-class courses, designed by classic golf architects such as Harry Colt and Frank Pennink. Unfortunately, it houses an abundance of rather mediocre golf courses—most, built in the last twenty years.

To be fair, the likes of Colt, and other early twentieth-century designers, had fantastic land to work with: Royal Hague and Kennemer lie in the spectacular dunes land bordering the North Sea, while De Pan and Eindhoven lie in heathland areas where the retreating glaciers of the last Ice Age deposited large amounts of pure sand. But, those areas are now completely off-limits when it comes to building new courses. Most

of these endeavours will have to make do with flat, agricultural land on clay or peat.

Golf in the Netherlands is growing at a sufficiently fast pace to ensure that most golfers are relative newcomers to the game. Many of these golfers have little understanding of the game's history, its nuances and course variety. Not surprisingly, many have never played on a really good golf course—be it in the Netherlands, or the British Isles.

Enter Turfvaert, a project I embarked upon several years ago to build a golf course in the south of the Netherlands. At first glance, the project's prospects screamed of low potential: the eighteen-hole course had to be built on just 125 acres of flat pasture land; the construction budget was rather tight; and the layout faced competition from ten existing courses in the area. The site, however, did have two very important assets: its sandy soil,

and the prevalence of large trees.

Another important asset was Ad Jacobs, the owner of the land and the developer of the course. Although he had no background in golf, he was willing to think 'outside the square' and make choices many of the more experienced golf developers would inherently shy away from. He understood clearly that the Netherlands needed a fresh approach to golf design, and management, to break the stalemate that had existed for the last twenty years. One of his key initiatives was a highly flexible club structure to accommodate the full spectrum—from full-time members, to green-fee players. He did this by introducing around twenty categories of membership, varying from full-time membership, monthly memberships, and various frequent-use green-fee models.

The De Turfvaert project was underpinned

**OPPOSITE**  
Turfvaert's back-nine commences with an interesting par-5 of 485 metres, being the second par-5 in the layout. While the tenth hole presents golfers with little concern from the tee, it demands, thereafter, sound golf to record a decent score. The green encompasses a wide range of available pin positions, including some that golfers find difficult and perplexing. A concealed water hazard waits behind the long, semi-'blind' green, so one mustn't overshoot the target. Photograph by Frank Pont.



At 139 metres, the thirteenth hole is not only one of Turfvaert's prettiest par-3s, but also one of its hardest holes. Primarily, this arises from the uncertainty in judging the distance to the green. Moreover, the predominance of a head-wind adds to the challenge. The safest tee-shot strategy is to aim for the open, left-side of the green, and then take your chances with the 'short' stick. Photograph by Frank Pont.

by two overarching goals: to introduce the average Dutch golfer to classic design elements and playing characteristics; and to ensure that the course had the fundamentals to become commercially successful. Both Ad Jacobs and I understood very well that to succeed we had to achieve the ultimate form of competitive advantage; namely, to create a better product with a lower cost base.

To achieve these ends, a decision was made early in the process to incorporate many of the design principles from the Golden Age of golf architecture. Specifically, I wanted to

create a strategic course that had the following elements.

#### Wide fairways, plus asymmetrical greens

Wide fairways can lull many players into a false sense of security; to score well at De Turfvaert you need to be in the right part of the fairway to attack when the pins are stuck in the difficult positions on the greens. Less-powerful players will always be able to avoid the hazards due to the wide fairways, although their detours will cost them strokes.

#### Limited length, a creative routing and great variety in the individual holes

The decision was made to design a course that wouldn't be long. Indeed, peeling back the years, the par-70 layout is just 5,900 yards. The dual focus lies in the approach shots to the green and short-game shots around it. This allowed me to utilise six par-3s, to create added variety and, ironically, orchestrate an enhanced challenge for the better players. It would force them to hit several longer irons into greens, something they don't often encounter on par-4s and 5s.

#### Moderately undulating greens, many backwards sloping, allowing both very difficult and easy pin positions

The greens are atypical when pitted against most of those built in recent years. Thirteen of them slope away from the usual approach directions, thereby necessitating the frequent use of bump-and-run shots rather than pitches to get the ball close to the pins. The greens have very gently undulations yielding difficult lines. This applies even on short puts and subtle double or triple breaks on longer puts.



Opinion is divided on which par-4 is the hardest on the course; but the 411-metre ninth hole is a sure contender. The hole has a relatively narrow fairway, which is guarded on its right side by a well-placed bunker. Indeed, most players are better served by treating this hole as a short par-5, especially with water stationed in front (and left) of the green. Clearly, a golfer's outward nine can easily come unstuck at Turfvaert. Photograph by Frank Pont.



**TOP:** Although short, the 115-metre second hole is a trickier proposition than its length may suggest. The assertion is made on two counts: the prevailing wind whistles at the players' back on the tee, while the putting surface falls away at its rear. These factors serve to scrutinise any golfer's control of distance and their nerves. Photograph by Frank Pont.

**BOTTOM:** Turfvaert's first hole, a 490-metre par-5, follows a storied Harry S Colt tradition: commence the round with a relatively easy and forgiving par-5, where the real challenge only starts with the shot into the green. Players should take advantage of the fact that this green is one of the few sloping towards them; however, they shouldn't be too aggressive on account of the OOB that lurks behind the green. Photograph by Frank Pont.

**RIGHT:** A relatively short par-4 of 322 metres, Turfvaert's fourth hole embodies fine risk-and-reward principles. Basically, there are two tee-shot strategies: adopt the 'safe' route over the right side of the fairway, or try to carry the large, menacing fairway bunker on the left. The green is saddle-shaped, and it accommodates some potentially tricky pin positions at the rear. Photograph by Frank Pont.





A view of Turfvaert's lengthy par-4 ninth hole, captured from the teeing ground. The large fairway bunkers guard the ideal spot for an approach to the green. Photograph by Frank Pont.

Generous areas of firm, short-cut grass before, around and behind the greens to stimulate the 'ground' game

The frequent use of grassy hollows behind, and next to, the greens creates a wide variety of short game shots that have to be addressed by players who have missed the greens on their approach. This element of the game is further amplified by cutting the grass of large areas before and around the greens to a height from which putting is possible.

#### Rough-edged bunkers, with highly visible flashed sand-faces

The bunker style adopted lies somewhere be-

tween that routinely used by Tom Simpson and Alister Mackenzie. The rough-edged design was chosen to avoid the need for high maintenance. The experience, to date, has shown that even though there are significant sand faces the number of wash-outs has been minimal.

#### A limited amount of water and no forced carries

On the basis of wanting the course to be playable for golfers of all skill levels, no forced carries over water are present. This design aspect, coupled to the wide fairways, explains why very few golf balls are lost during a round at De Turfvaert.

#### Focus on matchplay

De Turfvaert has been specifically set up as a matchplay course. Through their design, many of the holes give the shorter accurate player an even, or better, chance of beating the somewhat erratic long-hitter. Another classic matchplay element was having the holes, sixteenth through eighteenth, as a three-hole loop beginning and returning at the clubhouse. To paraphrase Harry S Colt, it is a course that would be a stern test for the scratch player, but at the same time sympathetic for the bogey shooter.

#### Minimal irrigation

To comply with the tight budget on the cost side, we chose to use minimal irrigation for the fairways, limit the number of bunkers and only use two to three tees per hole. A significant cost saving was achieved by keeping earthmoving to a bare minimum.

There was, however, a complicating factor: on slightly more than half the site no drainage was allowed. This was due to the golf course being situated next to a wetland nature preserve; the authorities, therefore,



were worried about the potential 'dry-out' effect drainage might have. This meant that all water had to be dealt with through surface drainage. In certain areas catchment areas, wetlands and basins had to be designed that would not overly hinder play during especially wet periods.

Minimising earth movement, while allowing for effective surface drainage and creating a pleasing landscape, was not easy given that

the original site literally had been absolutely flat cow fields. I am proud that in the end we only moved 80,000 cubic yards of soil on a site of 125 acres to create a natural and interesting-looking golf course. This was achieved through a variety of means: focusing on working with small-scale undulations; using the width of the fairways to create water runoff areas that would not be in play; using the existing borders with tree growth as a visual

backdrop; and creating ponds and wetlands in areas of natural depressions.

The two most popular holes stand out in my mind as good examples of our overall approach. Both holes are 'half-par' holes, in that they fall between the standard definitions of par. For instance, the second hole at just 260 yards is a driveable par-4. From the tee the view on the green is obscured by five large, rough-edged bunkers that confuse the

The 152-metre eleventh hole is often viewed as a potential 'breather'. Maybe so, but one underestimates this par-3 at their own peril, as OOB borders its left side. The green is defended by two bunkers to its left, while various short, mown grassy hollows lie behind and right of the green. Photograph by Frank Pont.



The fourteenth hole is a relatively short par-5 that measures 468 metres. Being a double-dogleg, it provides the longer-hitters an opportunity of reaching the green in two strokes. However, this strategy entails a water-carry of some 180 metres, where the shot is played towards a very narrow green that slopes away from the player. Deep, grassy hollows are located behind the green. Photograph by Frank Pont.

OPPOSITE:  
The 378-metre twelfth hole is far from straightforward. Adoption of the 'line of charm' from the tee is non-sensical, since the best angle to the green is attained from the fairway's far-right side. Additionally, the OOB fence, ominously sited just left of the green, has a way of impacting negatively on a golfer's frame of mind. Photograph by Frank Pont.

sense of distance the player has toward the green. Specifically, it leads golfers into the belief that the green is closer than it is. Many players will go for the green with a driver or three-metal, but untold danger lurks in the direct line to the flag. The smarter play might be a long-iron and a wedge; more often, this will produce a better score than the brash, former approach.

The fourteenth hole, a 515-yard, double-doglegging par-5, is another strong risk-and-reward hole. Adventurous players, via a

straight tee-to-green-line strategy, can reduce the hole's length to as little as 460 yards. This avenue is available by cutting the dogleg corner and then firing one's approach directly at the flag. However, a large area of wetlands in front of the green, a narrow green sloping away from the player and deep, unforgiving grassy hollows behind the green, make this a debatable strategy for a good score. Again, while the temptation is all too present, patience seems the advisable virtue on this hole.

Although still young, the course opened

in the summer of 2010. It has been very well received, both in golfers' perceptions and in magazine reviews. Pleasingly, on the economic front, it has performed far beyond expectations. Ad Jacob's vision, and the golf course, seems to have passed Alister Mackenzie's test: 'The real test of a good golf architect is the power of converting poor land into a good course, and not the power of fashioning excellent land into a mediocre one'.



With a length of 382 metres, Turfvaert's fifth hole is the first truly difficult assignment in the round, requiring a considered strategy on the tee to score well. The fifth green slopes away from the player, placing a premium on shotmaking accuracy from the fairway. Photograph by Frank Pont.



Negotiation of the seventeenth hole, a short par-3 of 124 metres, invariably hinges on the pin placement. Precise shotmaking is required to create a plausible birdie chance, as this large green is characterised by numerous subtle undulations. Photograph by Frank Pont.



A stern par-4 of 385 metres, the sixth hole doglegs vigorously to the left. The position of the flag on the green determines the ideal tee-shot, as so often is the case on this layout. It is wise, therefore, to check the hole's flagstick's position when on the fifth tee. On account of the slope to the right, it is commonplace to go over the green. Photograph by Frank Pont.

The second hole, a very short par-4 of just 238 metres, poses one of Turfvaert's most exciting risk-and-reward challenges. Here, any club from a driver to a short-iron can be selected on the tee. The flagstick's position on the green, plus the wind strength and its direction, help determine the tee-shot strategy. Beware of the five bunkers closely defending this hole, as they can easily turn a birdie chance into a bogie or worse. Photograph by Frank Pont.

OPPOSITE:  
Although the 496-metre par-5 sixteenth hole is usually played into the prevailing wind, it provides ample opportunity to score a much-needed birdie, or par, at the 'business end' of the round. The main examination takes place during the hole's final 120 metres, as this section of fairway is strewn with bunkers. Photograph by Frank Pont.





The eighth hole's rumpled fairway, with one of Turfvaert's largest bunkers flanking its left side. The front of the green is defended by a St Andrews-style hump, which, together with the fact that the green slopes backwards, makes the approach shot a lot more awkward than it appears on paper. Photograph by Frank Pont.

RIGHT: A view from the clubhouse terrace, looking back over Turfvaert's closing hole. A long par-4 of 378 metres, most players opt for a safety-first (three-shot) approach when tackling the eighteenth hole, in preference to the risky two-shot option. Already, many thrilling match-play scenarios have unfolded here. Photograph by Frank Pont.

