

“Castle Stuart might be the most perfectly conceived and executed design ever built.” — RON WHITTEN, ARCHITECTURE EDITOR, *GOLF DIGEST*

“Castle Stuart is, in my opinion, the best new course in Scotland since 1945. There is such attention to detail.” — BRIAN MORGAN, WORLD RENOWNED GOLF COURSE PHOTOGRAPHER

“Castle Stuart is destined to become one of the best courses in the world.” — GEORGE PEPPER, FORMER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, *GOLF MAGAZINE*

“Castle Stuart has already established itself as perhaps the finest golf experience in Scotland and I cannot commend it highly enough.” — COLIN DALGLEISH, A WALKER CUP CAPTAIN AND FOUNDING DIRECTOR, PERRYGOLF, LEADING INTERNATIONAL GOLF TOUR OPERATOR

“Mark Parsinen is a peerless visionary in the wide, wide, wide world of golf.” — MIKE KEISER, OWNER, BANDON DUNES

CASTLE STUART GOLF LINKS RADICAL OR THROWBACK A PLEASURE TO ALL

Located in the Highlands of Scotland, Castle Stuart is considered by many to be the best new links course in the British Isles in the 21st century.

By Mark Pazdur, Publisher

INVERNESS, SCOTLAND: Mark Parsinen, one of the rare breed of American golf course designer-developer-owners, has been frankly and bluntly critical of the direction American golf course architecture has taken in recent decades, and has chosen a path less traveled for Castle Stuart Golf Links in Scotland—a path he believes gets back to the roots of the game and its inherent charm.

“I think we’ve gotten very narrow minded,” Parsinen suggests, “in our view of what great golf and great golf courses are all about. Our view seems to have embraced ‘championship’ courses defined by length, narrow fairways, long rough, and an excessive use of bunkers. Difficulty seems to trump the interest and challenge of decision-making and the variety of issues encountered.

“We’ve turned golf into a very difficult sport,” claims Parsinen. “We’ve created visually stunning courses that are almost impossible for the average player to enjoy. One bad drive and your hopes



The majority of holes at Castle Stuart offer multiple solutions and lines of play from the tee. “Rumple” areas (small hillocks and hollows) and revetted bunkers are strategically placed around the course. A good drive is rewarded with a favorable angle to what then becomes a more receptive green.

“The land on which Castle Stuart sits has the ideal links topography for me. The site has the right mix of ‘slacks’ [valleys behind barrier dune ridges] and ‘escarpments’ [cliffs with unobstructed views from above and below]. Plus it enjoys a sense of place.” — MARK PARSINEN, MANAGING PARTNER, CASTLE STUART

are dashed with no real opportunity for redemption. It’s become a discouraging game and I’m afraid we’re losing that ‘loving feeling’ for it. As a friend says, ‘the penalty for a bad shot is all too often disproportionate to the offense.’

“The beginnings of the game did not have defined paths to the green—nor were there narrow fairways, step cuts, or brutally long roughs. Why? Because,” Parsinen laughs, “the sheep who grazed the course didn’t know where the fairways were. Furthermore, losing golf balls just wasn’t affordable. Courses were largely wide-open spaces with no defined thoroughfare to the green. You could define your own route.”

Parsinen turned philosophical. “The game was about thinking ahead. It was about the ‘leave’ as in billiards. The game allowed players of all skill levels to choose a path suitable for their game. There were multiple solutions to every hole. And, your ball was almost always in play. When compromised, there was always hope that something good might happen.

“I grew up in Minnesota and played courses where the trees were limbed up, the rough was short, and play areas were generous. When I hit a poor shot,” smiled Parsinen,

“I always knew I still had a chance—and how sweet it would be to come from behind and steal a hole—this was the charm of the game, not just for me but for all of us who loved to compete and hated being out of a hole.”

SCOTTISH GOLF ETHOS

“Scottish golf and American golf are very different. To Americans, the game is all about an individual’s score. To the Scots, it is all about partners and the better-ball match. To me, match play is in many regards liberating and much more engaging and fun than stroke play,” stated Parsinen.

“If you look at history of the Ryder Cup over the last couple of decades, you can see how the European and American cultures of golf differ. The Europeans excel in partner match play, whereas Americans prefer the individualistic stroke play format,” reported Parsinen.

“Even the procedures of how Americans and Scots determine handicaps are ‘poles apart.’ In the U.S., we must play by the rules and report a score accordingly.

“In Scotland, there is no parallel to this. Scots have ‘qualifiers’ or ‘medals’ [special stroke play competitions] from which handicaps are determined, and only four

qualifiers per year are required to maintain your handicap. This system has merit,” said Parsinen.

“First, your handicap is calculated on scores when you are ‘under the gun’ of competition, and this only has to happen four times per year. This allows the Scots to enjoy match play during their regular outings without ever having to produce an individual score.

“Second is the tremendous benefit of match play on the pace of play. When players are ‘out of a hole,’ in Scotland, it’s normal to ‘pick up’ and concede the hole or put their fate in their partner’s play. Without every player grinding over every shot on every hole, Scots typically make it around a course in three and one-half hours versus a typical four and one-half for Americans,” chided Parsinen.

CALVINISM AND GOLF IN SCOTLAND

Golf in Scotland reflects a Calvinist tenet that one’s fate is predestined. Golf, like life, is about learning to accept one’s fate however unfair its punishments. We are predestined to lose but the struggle is noble and reveals character.

Early American golf reflects the 18th century Enlightenment, and was more often about fairness of out-

come and a reflection of our American consciousness that man could indeed achieve a measure of perfection, while failure was merely an opportunity for redemption.

For some, American golf has become more Calvinistic and punishing, and for others, many Scottish links are not so Calvinistic. The Old Course is the best example, perhaps due to the influence of St Andrews University.

There are no predetermined paths to the greens at the Old Course. The golf experience there is full of hopefulness accompanied by choice, consequences, and opportunities for redemption while other Scottish courses can be brutally punishing and considered stern tests of golf—perhaps underpinning the Scottish golf saying that ‘no matter how you play, you are only two pints away from feeling pretty good about it.’

THE MACKENZIE INFLUENCE

Parsinen entered the golf development business in the early 1990s.

“I thought long and hard about what attracted me to the game in the first place, and what the essence of its charm was—for skilled and less skilled golfers alike.



“As the ‘three-point line’ in basketball mitigates the advantages of pure height, Castle Stuart’s width-of-play mitigates the advantages of length off the tee by offering different lines of play with advantages to players of lesser length.” — MARK PARSINEN, MANAGING PARTNER, CASTLE STUART

“Of everything I have read and heard, one perspective has stuck with me: ‘that there should be no single thoroughfare to the green’—a perspective that belongs to Alister MacKenzie who designed Cypress Point and Augusta National and who was a passionate devotee of the Old Course. He believed in choice and risk/reward options—where declining risk merely defers difficulty and he viewed long rough as an overused, annoying, and unworthy hazard,” expressed Parsinen.

“Friend and co-designer Gil Hanse, who I’m proud to say, was named ‘golf course architect of the year for 2009’ by *Golf Magazine*, embraces the MacKenzie perspective as much as I do.”

KINGSBARNs AND, NOW, CASTLE STUART

Mark Parsinen has developed two golf courses in Scotland that many regard among the very best Scotland has to offer. In 2000 he opened Kingsbarns, and last year, Castle Stuart was unveiled.

“I love the craft—the planning, the design, the construction, and the daily production of the golf experience—all of which should come together cohesively,”

explained Parsinen. “At Castle Stuart, the golf experience we sought was for all players to enjoy the course.

“As the ‘three-point line’ in basketball mitigates the advantages of pure height, Castle Stuart’s width-of-play mitigates the advantages of length off the tee by offering different lines of play with advantages to players of lesser length. Angles to the green, elevation differences, and uneven lies are key elements to achieving these advantages. If we’ve been successful, the ‘longer’ player will face decisions seducing him to ‘let it fly’ that are accompanied by match play risk versus shorter hitting players choosing different lines.

“The land on which Castle Stuart sits has the ideal links topography for me. The site has the right mix of ‘slacks’ [valleys behind barrier dune ridges] and ‘escarpments’ [cliffs with unobstructed views from above and below],” revealed Parsinen.

“Our team took its time at Castle Stuart positioning the course to embrace the views that define our ‘sense of place’ by putting them beyond the greens on approach-shot sightlines,” continued Parsinen.

“We focused on four landmarks to put in the shot-mak-



“We put your visual focus on the Kessock Bridge; Chanonry Lighthouse, built in 1846; Fort George, home of the Black Watch, the elite Scottish military; and Castle Stuart, completed in 1625 by James Stuart, now a four-star bed and breakfast.” — MARK PARSINEN, MANAGING PARTNER, CASTLE STUART

ing frame for players to ‘sight shots on.’ Instead of letting the rich history of the area be of peripheral visual interest, we put it where you can’t help but notice it—letting it aid recollection of holes you’ve played. We put your visual focus on the Kessock Bridge [as significant to Inverness and The Highlands as the Golden Gate Bridge is to San Francisco and Northern California]; Chanonry Lighthouse, built in 1846; Fort George [home of the Black Watch, the elite Scottish military equivalent of the Navy Seals]; and Castle Stuart, now a four-star bed and breakfast [completed in 1625 by James Stuart, 3rd Earl of Moray].

“Many of the fairways are 75 yards wide and offer multiple lines of attack, but line of play must be mindful of the ‘rumple’ [areas of small hillocks and hollows] and partially revetted bunkers strategically placed around the course as well as confounding certain approach angles to greens,” said Parsinen. “A wayward shot often finds thin wispy fescue and pockets of bare sand where your ball is easily found and recoveries manageable. A good drive is rewarded with a favorable angle to the green; an errant or less thoughtful tee shot may leave ‘fussy’ and sometimes confounding recovery options,” said Parsinen. “We want

our course to test your perceptual ability, decision making, and emotional poise. We want it to be more interesting and engaging than it is difficult.” ■

Getting to Castle Stuart in the Scottish Highlands: numerous direct flights from within the UK (London Gatwick and Luton, Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester); most Scottish golf tours emanate from Edinburgh or Glasgow; during season (April-Nov.), daily non-stop departures available from East Coast hubs to Edinburgh (EDI) and Glasgow (GLA); connecting through Heathrow (LHR) or Gatwick (LGW), leaves a one-hour flight to EDI or GLA, and from there a picturesque three-hour drive to Inverness and Castle Stuart.

Climate: Average is mid-60s during May-Sept.; the microclimate is somewhat arid, averaging 27 inches of rain/year. Nevertheless, bring outerwear and a waterproof vest for golf.

Where to stay: Top picks in Inverness: Culloden House and Kingsmills Hotel. For dinner: Rocpool for intimate dining.

For more information please visit castlestuartgolf.com.