

BY DAVID OWEN

RELIVING THE TRAUMA OF MY ROUND AT OAKMONT

21 YEARS LATER, I'M STILL DEMORALISED

As the US Open approaches, Oakmont Country Club begins to bring its greens into compliance with the exacting championship standards of the United States Golf Association – by slowing them down. That's what the club's members mean when they say that if you want to see the course when it's truly challenging, you have to visit not during the Open but during the men's member-guest. I believe them. I've played Oakmont just once, in 1995, and I don't care if I never play it again. "We like to punish the members and traumatise the guests," the club's president said 15 years later, when I was still recovering from my round.

Shortly before I played Oakmont, I watched highlights from the previous year's Open, which Ernie Els had won.

The fairways during that tournament were so firm that tee shots seemed to run for miles, and I was looking forward to hitting a few boomers of my own.

But rain fell steadily for days before my visit, and on the few occasions when I hit a fairway my ball either splashed or plugged.

The rough was like kelp, and the club's notorious drainage ditches, whose apparent purpose is to turn not completely terrible drives into disasters, were worse.

Surprisingly, the drenching seemed not to have affected the greens. Pitch shots ricocheted, like bullets bouncing off Superman's chest, and I never got used to the speed.

On one hole, my caddie told me to stroke a very slightly downhill 30-foot putt "like a three-footer" – by which he meant a one-footer on a normal course.

I gave my ball the feeblest of taps and watched it roll 10 feet past the hole.

"Good putt," he said. I made one miraculous birdie (on the 17th, a very short par 4) but no pars, and hardly even any bogeys.

Most of my hole scores were like the undead demons in "Game of Thrones": dreaded Others.

William C. Fownes, whose father created Oakmont in 1903, once famously said, "A shot poorly played should be a shot irrevocably lost."

The Fowneses' goal was to build a course that would demoralise nearly everyone who played it, and successive generations of members have embraced that principle.

The US Open has been played at Oakmont more often than on any other course, and it's easy to understand why, because the masochism of the club's greens committees has been a good match for the sadism of the USGA.

The last time the Open was played at Oakmont, in 2007, there were just eight rounds under par – and two of those were shot by the eventual winner, Angel Cabrera, who finished at five over.

In the minds of some players, exasperating difficulty is the highest goal in golf architecture; indeed, this magazine's "100 Greatest" list began as the "200 Toughest."

A leading counterexample, among the world's best courses, is Augusta National, because Alister MacKenzie and Bobby Jones, who designed it, believed that even a major-tournament venue ought to be fun for civilians to play.

Their shared ideal – which was inspired largely by the Old Course at St. Andrews, and might be



thought of as anti-Oakmontism – was "the most enjoyment for the greatest number".

MacKenzie and Jones believed that, in high-level competition, excessively punitive golf holes also obscured the difference between great golfers and merely good ones, by reducing opportunities for the kinds of thrilling escapes that only brilliant players can pull off.

Giving nightmares to superstars is probably part of the fun of being a member of Oakmont, but it doesn't usually make for exciting tournament viewing.

Near the top of almost any golf fan's highlight list from recent years would be Phil Mickelson's shot to the green from the pine straw on the 13th hole in the final round of the 2010 Masters, and Bubba Watson's looping recovery from the trees on the 10th hole during sudden-death in the same tournament two years later.

After comparable misses during an Open at Oakmont, both players would have been forced to hit the same shot that you or I would have: a sideways slash back into play. And, if they had, we wouldn't be thinking about those shots now. **G**