

Golfweek's ULTIMATE GUIDE

TO GOLF COURSE LIVING AND GREAT ESCAPES • 2025

*Destination Geneva National
Lake Geneva, WI
54 holes, onsite lodging, dining*



PASSION FOR PLAYABILITY

DAVID McLAY KIDD AND DESIGN PARTNER NICK SCHAAAN PUT THE PRINCIPLE TO THE TEST AT GRAYBULL AND SCARECROW, AND WITH A RENOVATION AT TRIBUTARY

BY JASON LUSK, NEBRASKA, IDAHO AND WASHINGTON

Playability lies in the eye of the beholder. All too often, it's a big lie. Ultimately, the playability of a golf course depends on the person who just plunked down possibly several hundred dollars to take on whatever challenges an architect has dreamt up for a particular plot of land. Playability is a widely used axiom with no clear parameters, all based on a player's skill, strength, swing speed – whatever metric you prefer to calculate that player's chances of not losing a \$4 golf ball on the next pass.

At its core, playability means a golfer can sometimes make a relatively poor swing and still find the ball. If the phrase "Hey, we're all human" was encapsulated in a golf swing, playability would be its custodian.

The term has evolved over time. Classic Scottish courses had to feature a fair bit of width and playability because strong winds could blow golf balls sideways. In the U.S., playability came to focus more on low-handicappers and pros from the 1960s through the early 2000s as a course's value proposition was often measured by its resistance to scoring,

weekend hackers be damned. In recent years the seesaw has in many cases tipped back toward providing a navigable tract for less-skilled players while still offering plenty of interest.

The whole concept is a high-wire act. "Losing golf ball after golf ball is shit, but so are boring golf holes," architect David McLay Kidd recently said in his engaging Scottish accent midway through an all-day skins game in Nebraska. "Why can't we have playability and interest?"

Kidd knows something about walking the line, having established himself as a leading advocate for what has become

Pictured: Scarecrow at Gamble Sands in Washington
JASON LUSK/GOLF WEEK



a modern trend in playability. His most famous efforts are on display at his first big design, the original Bandon Dunes layout that opened in 1999 at the now-famous Oregon resort that shares the course's name. He then followed with a few courses that were judged more harshly by some, with architecture critics questioning if he had lost his way. He has since come full circle with several of the most playable and interesting modern courses around the globe.

Perhaps most notable among them? That would be Gamble Sands in the state of Washington. Since

opening in 2014, Gamble Sands has been widely hailed as one of the most playable – and more importantly, fun – courses built this century. Wide with many beneficial bounces to keep a recreational golfer swinging, but with key strategic lines hidden within expansive fairways to attract the eye of a skilled player, Gamble Sands was intended from the start to offer something for everyone.

With Gamble Sands ranked by the Golfweek's Best rating program as the No. 1 public-access layout in the state of Washington and No. 20 on the 2025 list of elite resort courses (see page 68)

in the U.S., it's clear that Kidd stuck the landing.

With a major assist from business and design partner Nick Schaan, could the Scotsman do it again? This time next door to the original Gamble Sands layout on what might be even better but more stern topography?

Before we get to Kidd and Schaan's yet-to-open resort course that has been named Scarecrow and described as the twisted sister of the original Gamble Sands layout, first comes a look at Kidd and his design firm's evolution in playability. »

As a young and unknown designer, Kidd built Bandon Dunes under the direction of resort founder Mike Keiser with a focus on playability. Keiser speaks often of “retail golfers,” and the first course at Bandon Dunes Golf Resort needed to cater to amateurs in all kinds of weather atop cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Bandon Dunes kicked off a revolution in what has been termed remote destination golf, and also in playability.

A big part of that playability was the ground game that was in full effect at Bandon Dunes. Golf, particularly in the States, had largely become an aerial game. On true links courses in the United Kingdom and Ireland, however, players could still bounce and roll a ball past reasonable obstacles and onto a putting surface instead of being forced to fly it in.

After Bandon Dunes took off, the expectations were sky-high for Kidd. A couple of his new course builds after the turn of the century, however, didn't have that same focus on playability. In particular, Tetherow in Oregon and the Castle Course in St. Andrews, Scotland, proved polarizing with abundant obstacles and greens that wouldn't accept a bounced-in shot. Both courses

also have attracted their fans, but they weren't the same as Bandon Dunes, which has proved to be a ridiculously high measuring bar.

“Those courses got a lot of negative attention, some of it merited, some of it perhaps not so merited.” Kidd said during that skins game in Nebraska in the fall of 2024. “Anyways, I did a lot of soul-searching, I guess you could say, about what type of courses I wanted to build. And I landed on the fact that golf is a game, and it's supposed to be fun.”

With his focus on playability reinstated, the hits started rolling again. Besides Gamble Sands, Kidd's layout for Mammoth Dunes at Sand Valley Golf Resort in Wisconsin – opened in 2018 – has proved to be popular and ranks among the top 20 resort courses in the United States. His newer courses around the world have attracted an often younger breed of player looking for

something fresh in golf design.

Kidd's eponymous design firm has flourished. He flies his own airplane to ease the burden of travel – and because he just finds it very cool to take command in the pilot's seat – but there aren't enough days in the year to accept all the proposals he receives from developers around the world. This has allowed him to be appropriately picky.

“Not all jobs are created equal,” he said, “nor are all developers.”

Aside from the new course at Gamble Sands, two recent examples of his work have come under examination: the renovated Tributary in Idaho and the new GrayBull in Nebraska.

Nestled into an upscale, 1,500-acre residential development in Driggs, just west of the Teton mountain range, Kidd's layout at Tributary opened in 2009. The course has gathered much attention and is ranked No. 2 among all private

‘WHAT DOES PLAYABLE MEAN?
IT MEANS A PLACE TO MISS.
IT MEANS THE ABILITY TO HAVE
SOME CHANCE OF RECOVERY.’

– DAVID KIDD

Below: The new GrayBull in Nebraska
JASON LUSK/GOLFWEEK





Above: Scarecrow at Gamble Sands (shown during preview play without sand in the bunkers) opens in 2025.

JASON LUSK/GOLFWEEK

Perhaps no hole better exemplifies the marriage of challenge and playability — and even a bit of cheeky fun and random luck — better than No. 6 at the original Gamble Sands course. It's a par 3 that can be stretched all the way to 264 yards for the biggest of hitters, playing as a downhill carry over sand all the way to a wrinkly green. The direct route is a big ask for many recreational players.

Or ... golfers can play well out to the right, as far as 60 yards wide of the putting surface where a long hillside awaits to kick balls down to the left and onto the green. Schaan — a talented player — said good golfers might take dead aim at the flag, trying to remove the element of luck offered by the hillside. Less-skilled players are more prone to take their chances on the hillside, and they are frequently rewarded with shots that trickle down to the flag.

During a late-fall round with Schaan, he chose the rightward path off the hill. "Why wouldn't you? That's probably the most fun shot out here."

For the first time working with Kidd,

"WHEN YOU'RE BUILDING STUFF ... IF YOU'RE NOT PUSHING THE ENVELOPE TO THE POINT WHERE YOU MIGHT NEED TO PULL BACK A LITTLE BIT, YOU'RE NOT PUSHING HARD ENOUGH."

— NICK SCHAAN

it was Schaan's job as lead creative to make sure players enjoyed the shots on the new Scarecrow. Construction was completed in 2024 for the 18-hole course at the resort in Brewster, with a grand opening planned for August of 2025.

Schaan joined DMK Golf Design in 2006 and became a partner in the firm in 2019. He has become Kidd's trusted sounding board, instrumental in the layout and build of many of the courses that bear Kidd's name. But until Scarecrow, he has never taken over as lead creative. Kidd said the pair had long discussions about how to recreate the success of the original Gamble Sands

course without a rinse-and-repeat mindset that tried too hard to emulate the first course.

"How do we make sure the basic DNA is similar but different enough that people won't say, 'It's the same guys, they didn't try as hard on the second one,?'?" said Kidd, who was totally in control of the build of the first course. "I guess I can distill all the way down to the fact that Nick and I said, 'Hey, the best way we can exceed our own expectations is by creating internal competition.'"

"The second golf course, Nick was the guy on the ground all the time here. »

He literally lived here. And the shapers that were here were not all the same guys. ... And I just kept pushing, saying 'Yeah, you guys can do what you like, you're never going to beat that first course. You are on a track to nowhere. You can't beat the first one.' And of course, that was a red rag to a bull."

Schaan's crew had a great site on which to work. Across the entrance road from the clubhouse and on steeper, more jagged terrain than the first course at the resort, Scarecrow offers more frequent views across the Columbia River than does the first course. And like the Gamble Sands layout, Scarecrow sits on deep sand, perfect for fast and firm fescue golf that could compete with the first course for players' attention.

"Nick had no allegiance and no bias to the first course, and that was actually a super strength when it came time to build the second one," Kidd said. "We had set a bar, and all Nick knew was, there's a bar to beat. That was the challenge I gave him as his business partner."

One way Schaan's team changed the script – with Kidd egging them on – was to push holes closer to the edges of massive sandy valleys and washes than Kidd did on the original course. That means more risk for bold attempts, while the opposite and safer side of the greens are typically still relatively open for more cautious approach shots. Players choose the amount of risk they can stomach.

"There are not a lot of greens out there on the first course that are right on the edge," Schaan said. "A lot of them, the greens have been brought back in from the edge where there is room to miss. On the new course, there are a few of them that are right to the edge."

It's the same story in the fairways.

"There's maybe more reward for taking on a little bit of risk off some of the tees,

but there's still lots of room," Schaan said. "It's playable. You're still in a fairway if you miss it a little bit, you're just in a worse spot to be super aggressive on the next one. A lot of that was site- and topography-driven."

The result is a Scarecrow course that is similar in some ways but also very different than Gamble Sands. For his part, Kidd envisioned himself as the editor on the project, only weighing in if Schaan pushed too hard. And just as the pair envisioned, Schaan was trying his best to outdo his business partner.

"If you don't think you're achieving that, you're in the wrong game," Schaan said. "When you're building stuff – especially when you're shaping, and that's probably where it happens most – if you're not pushing the envelope to the point where you might need to pull back a little bit, you're not pushing hard enough."

"I love that in this relationship, almost 20 years with David, that I get to push that envelope. From the very first project we did together, I've been pushing hard."

So, the million-dollar question: Which course is better? Kidd and Schaan look at each other and laugh, recounting

various comparisons they have made. Kidd said he thinks better players might prefer some of the risk-reward aspects of Scarecrow while higher-handicappers might lean toward Gamble Sands. It's a win-win so long as people are having the discussion.

Key to any comparison is playability. Gamble Sands embodied that trend. Kidd and Schaan are betting that Scarecrow will continue it, similar but different.

"As the guy who carries the veto, I wanted to make sure that DNA transferred," Kidd said. "What are those things? The simplicity of it falling across the landscape. The ease of getting off the tee – you might not be in a scoring line, but you can get it into play."

"But lots of other things – the green shaping, the size of things, the aggressiveness of the bunkering, the contouring of the fairways – that's all different. There's a DNA transfer, but it's a bit like having kids. You can have two kids that are very different, but they share a bunch of DNA. That was our intention. ... We wanted to make sure they are siblings, not twins." **Gwk**



Above: Several greens at Scarecrow are pushed tight to steep drop-offs.

JASON LUSK/GOLF WEEK

