Belgrade's boulders: From pain to pleasing

By Mark Leslie

Belgrade Lakes, Maine — The glacier taketh away and the glacier giveth... That could be the motto at Belgrade Lakes Golf Course here, where boulders as large as a truck have turned construction from mundane to sometimes nightmarish but where, nevertheless, the pain has been transformed into a gain.

The actual site, with its vast views, and particularly the addition of the rock, I think, has been a major thrust of the interest of the golf course,” said British golf course architect Clive Clark.

“I prefer the traditional look but with features,” Clark said. And he got those “features” in spades and backhoes full, for that matter — at Belgrade Lakes.

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Mungeam hits stride in design

Like many young architects today, Mark Mungeam started his career in construction with Moore Golf, Inc. and Prince Contracting Co. before joining the Usbridge, Mass.-based design firm of Cornish and Silva in 1987. Eight years later, he was made a full partner. A member of the ASGCA, Mungeam’s design credits include the acclaimed Links at Hiawatha Landing near Cooperstown, N.Y., and Shaker Hills Golf Club in Harvard, Mass., named by Golf Digest as the second best public course.

Olivia Fields, and we didn’t know thereabouts. The reference was made to a Senior Open in the offing. After it was named the 1997 Open site, there was a little added pressure. Not much. Obviously, we would try to do as much as possible, regardless of the tournament makeovers. It added another level of interest but it didn’t change how we went about our work. First and foremost, we wanted to make it a more playable, attractive course for the membership.

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GCN: Was there added pressure knowing a Senior Open would be played there, on national television?

MM: Well, there wasn’t when we started in the early 1990s. We were retained to renovate the North and South courses at Olympia Fields, and we didn’t know there was a Senior Open in the offing. After it was named the 1997 Open site, there was a little added pressure. Not much. Obviously, we would try to do as much as possible, regardless of the tournament prospects. It added another level of interest but it didn’t change how we went about our work. First and foremost, we wanted to make it a more playable, attractive course for the membership.

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While engineers’ reports indicated they would find “surface rock” on the site, one of the partners, John Alford, said: “The running joke is, We didn’t realize ‘surface rock’ ran 10 to 15 feet deep. Where we dug out a pond on the 3rd and 6th holes, the boulders ran deeper than that.”

Clark and the construction crew piled the mountain of boulders into 6-, 12-, 20-foot-high walls edging the fairways, or undergirding tees, or banking ponds into visually stunning effects on the panoramic property.

The heavy equipment and man-hours necessary for dealing with the boulders will double or triple the cost of the 18-hole public course, which will open the first nine next summer. But Clark wouldn’t trade the site, “not as long as you have the budget to take care of it,” he said. “All in all, it’s an advantage.”

The aesthetics of the boulders help set it apart, he said.

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