

FEATURE I

Billy Sharp, *Chicago Highlands Club*



From Landfill to Landmark: Chicago Highlands Club

Nearly a decade ago, all one could see from I-294 & Cermak Road was a flat, over-grown native area that happened to be one of the area's largest landfills of the 20th century. The average person would have never imagined that the area would be transformed into one of "Golf Digest's Top New Courses in 2010," or that the spectacular ninth hole would be named "Golf Digest's Hole of the Year" that same year. At present, anyone driving on I-294 is not able to see any of the golf course because Earth Inc. is in the final stages of completing a giant berm to block out all traffic noise from the busy highway. Even when driving on 31st street, one can barely make out the beginning of the 1st hole because of the giant fescue hills that "ebb and flow" throughout the Scottish-Links style course in Westchester, IL.

The entire project started back in 2003 when Arthur Hills was hired to help design the course. Hills was retained by John Baxter, Tom Healy, and Joe Hills, the owners and managing partners of Chicago Highlands. Together, they had a vision to create a family oriented country club with a golf course that was unlike any other in the area, let alone in the Midwest.

With a preliminary plan in place, they broke ground and began clearing all of the vegetation that covered the ground. After that, the trucks started to roll and still have not stopped. To date, nearly 1.4 million cubic feet of soil has been trucked in to the property. This created the drastic and scenic 95-foot elevation change on the course. The highest point is the 9th

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green and the lowest point is 31st street. The amount of fill that has been brought in is astounding; a standard semi-truck holds approximately 10 cubic yards of soil. All this equated to nearly 125,000 trucks that have dumped on the property, and it is estimated another 30,000 loads will be required to complete the berm along I-294. After the course was shaped, seeding took place with A-1 bentgrass on greens and Authority bentgrass on tees and fairways. Native areas were seeded with a mixture of Chewings, Hard, and Rescue fescue species and varieties. After grow in, the course opened in the Spring of 2010.

In the present state of our industry, many new courses are not being built and renovations to older courses are scarce. As we slowly recover from the recession, the facility is slowly emerging as envisioned by its backers. Chicago Highlands has been a surprise to many, both by design and the timing in which it was constructed. Being a “zero-debt” club, it is still in the process of building the membership to 250 before construction begins on the clubhouse. Though the club is still in its infancy stage, the growing reputation has

caught the eye of many golf fanatics in the Chicagoland area.

Coming from Wynstone Golf Club, a high-end private club and gated community located in North Barrington, I was used to the traditional upkeep of a “parkland” style course. I never had experience on a “Scottish links” style course. I knew I was in for a bit of a culture shock but didn’t realize how much until I really began working at Chicago Highlands. During the tour I was given for my interview, I was completely overwhelmed by the immensity of the layout. Though the greens were covered and there was a bit of snow on the course (the bit that we actually got this past winter), I was still able to decipher the difficulty of the course and could only imagine what it would be like during the peak season. After I accepted the Assistant Superintendent position this past April, I knew I had to adjust to a new role and new environment simultaneously.

The first real difference I noticed as the course emerged from winter was the fact there are no trees, except for a small natural area between holes 5 and 12. Not only does this help with air circulation and increasing sunlight, but also provides

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spectacular views of the course and Chicago skyline. I've come from heavily wooded courses with giant Oak trees that prohibited sunlight and air movement. These trees were beautiful to frame the golf holes but also created maintenance nightmares after a severe storm and during the autumn season.

Another difference I realized as we started to maintain the bunkers. In my previous experiences bunkers were primarily edged every 2-3 weeks and a consistent lip was maintained for the sharp, crisp look to go along with the white angular sand that contrasted the green turf well. I was surprised to learn that we only edge bunkers once in the spring to rid the excess sand that has built up on the edges, and crisp lines are a thing of the past. This jumbled look gives the bunkers a natural, scruffy appearance found on links courses.

Managing large fescue areas is also new to me. These areas have become popular lately, as out of play or low maintenance areas at many courses that are aesthetically pleasing. Superintendents are using fescue areas with the intention

of "less input, more output." Often the only maintenance that happens is a complete mowing down at the end of the season and the pre/post herbicides applied in the spring.

The biggest change I've had to face is the wind. Yes I realize we are the "Windy City. But when the wind gets up to 30+ mph with gusts upwards of 40+, you'd better hang on for dear life. This is especially true when trying to putt on the 9th green.

Being a newer club in the area, I'm sure there is a lot of curiosity and questions about everything from turf variety to design and layout. Next time you're driving along I-294 and happen to look over at the giant fescue berm, you'll know that there is actually a golf course behind it. **-OC**

[Ed note: MAGCS Arrangements and Golf Committee has been talking with Superintendent Michael Heustis about hosting a meeting in the near future, stay tuned].

