

Rees' opening act earns him marquee value

By Mark Leslie

It's getting to be an Open-and-shut case: If your golf course is hosting an upcoming U.S. Open, commission Rees Jones to modernize and beautify it—sort of like hiring Vidal Sassoon for an aging lead actress.

Baltusrol Golf Course in Springfield, N.J., is the latest Open course in a growing list to hire Jones. First there was the Country Club at Brookline (Mass.) in 1988, then Hazeltine National in Chaska, Minn., in 1990, then Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md., in 1991, and now Baltusrol's Lower

Course in 1993.

Jones feels getting the Brookline job—and winning accolades for it—led to Hazeltine ... and the rest is history. "I've just been very lucky," he says.

"We decided to go with Rees because he has a good reputation of being able to work on courses and keeping integrity as far as the original design is concerned. We wanted to keep it as close to what (A.W.) Tillinghast had intended as possible," said Dick Miller of Harding Township, N.J., Baltusrol vice president and general chairman of the 1993 Open.

Miller added that the club would have modernized the course regardless of the Open even though the U.S. Golf Association did not ask for changes.

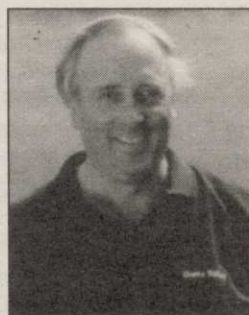
Jones said: "When you change an old course—especially a renowned course—you're subject to more criticism than if you rebuild a new one.

"Then, when people come and view what you did—the players, press and officials—and all give you kudos, the word spreads that you have sensitivity in working with older golf courses. It's a major risk for any club to make any change to a course like Baltusrol, so they want to hire someone they know is not going to try to reinvent the wheel."

Jones, a hands-on designer who visited Brookline 17 times during its restoration, said: "Clubs like the Brooklines, Hazeltines, Baltusrols or Congressionals hire you because they want a lot of attention because they're very special places to play to begin with."

Jones terms the Baltusrol work a modernization, while Brookline is a restoration. An entire summer was spent on Brookline, rebuilding a lot of greens and most tees, adding pin positions to most greens, and repositioning many bunkers further down the fairways.

Baltusrol's relatively quick modernization, which should be complete in February, is, for the most part, lengthening holes "to come into the modern strategies and implements of the game ... so the course will play pretty much as Tillinghast envisioned," Jones said.



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Built by Tillinghast in 1922, Baltusrol has not been changed since Rees' father, Robert Trent Jones Sr., prepared it for the 1954 U.S. Open.

"It is a fantastically well built and designed and conceived golf course," Rees Jones said. "It has low-profile, fairly large greens; interesting contours on the greens that are not too pronounced nor real subtle, but there are a lot of subtleties in parts of the greens. They are fairly large targets. We're trying to have the golf course play—on the holes where we can take the tees back—as Tillinghast originally conceived them as playing. They have not been because the implements of the game and conditioning of the players have changed so much."

The changes involve:

- On the 3rd—taking the tees back 20 to 25 yards, "which means players will not necessarily reach the crest of the hill and kick the ball down to the bottom and leave themselves with a short iron."

- On the 5th—moving the tee back to bring the fairway bunkers into play as Tillinghast envisioned them.

- On the 7th—adding a third fairway bunker "because the first two are now a little short."

- On the 8th—adding another bunker on the left side, which will tighten up the landing area.

- On the 9th—moving the tee to the right to have the green play more as a Redan and providing a smaller target. ("You have to hit the correct part of the green," Jones said.)

- On the 10th—adding a pin position to the left to bring the left-side bunker more into

play.

- On the 12th—moving the tee to the right to bring the bunkers on the right more into play

- On the 13th—moving the tee back so players can't hit the ball over the trees and cut the corner on the dogleg right.

- On the 14th—taking the tee back and repositioning the front bunker right up to the green to close off the front pin position.

"When you have a Brookline or Baltusrol which has been around most of the century and have had major championships, changes have to be well thought out and in keeping with the original design," Jones said.

"I'm a strong advocate of Tillinghast. He built the courses he designed. He had his own people build them. He didn't take on an abundance of jobs. He put in the detail. I think his bunkering is the original creative bunkering—the noses, the mounds, the sculpturing. It is very appealing to the eye and very effective playability-wise."

"I worked a lot with club officials," Jones said. "Ultimately this is their golf course and it will be theirs to play until the next Open. Most of these changes won't affect member play much because they are going to play from the forward tees."

Baltusrol's Miller said he thinks his club's 500 proprietary members "are going to be pleased with what they see" when they play it.

"We think Rees certainly has been true to Tillinghast. We didn't want any radical changes. We're proud of what we have here."

What's next on Jones' agenda? Perhaps running a check on the 1994 and 1995 U.S. Open sites would provide a clue.

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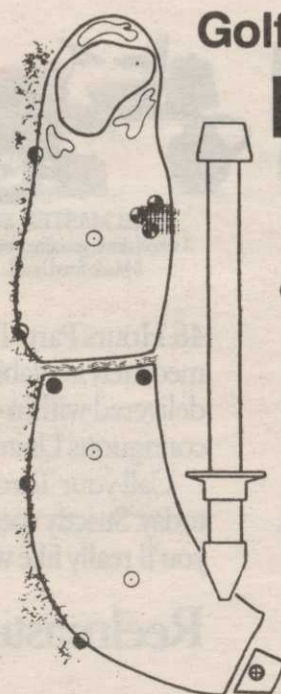
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