

# Oakhurst Links

## 'Real golf' as it used to be played

*Writer's Note: The dictionary gives a meaning of "real" as "being authentic," and this is how I use the term to explain my feeling as I played Oakhurst Links, built in the early 1880s that has a Challenge Medal dating back to 1888. As you read this article you will find a number of times I use the words "not found here" to describe conditions of play at Oakhurst Links. These are the conditions making it a "real" game of golf.*

By PALMER MAPLES JR.

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — We have this area's medicinal sulphur springs to thank for drawing the builder and other Scotsmen to this part of the country, in 1876, to eventually build Oakhurst Links golf course here.

Arriving at the course early in the morning, with the sun rising and a mist hanging over the creek down by the lower

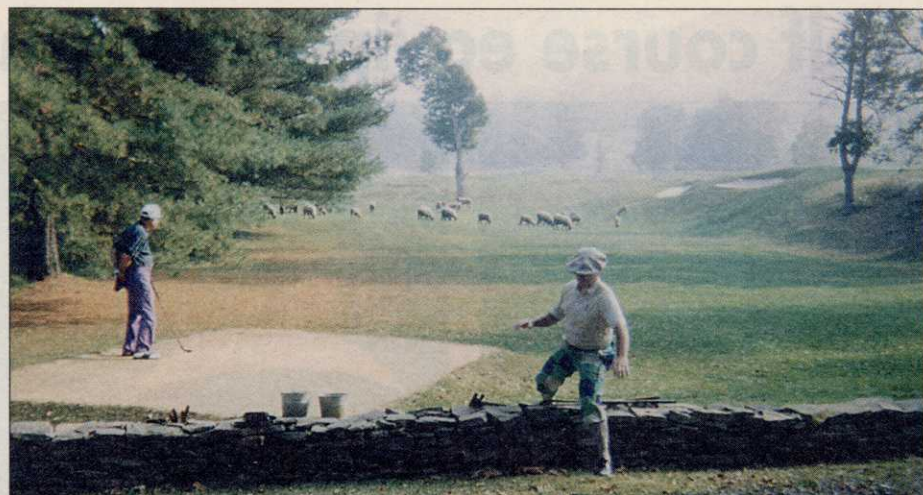
holes, you don't hear the hum of a fuel pump, or the cranking of motors for mowing equipment. What you do hear at the course maintenance building is the creaking of the gate as opens and the pattering of many feet as the two dozen sheep head out for their day of grazing.

There are no lines of golf cars ready with top, sand jugs, score cards, tees, small drink coolers, double-wide golf bag storage, and a GAD measure of distance.

You select four, yes four, clubs to play with and they are carried by hand, no golf bags. Arriving at the 1st tee, there is not the usual tossing of golf tees to determine the sides, for there are no golf tees to be had, not in the 1880s. And it is the 1880s to which you have retreated.

The bucket of water and sand on the tee are not for cleaning balls or repairing divots, for the entire 8-by-8-foot tee is all sand. The water and sand are used to make your tee for the ball by placing a small handful of water in the sand, and then using the wet sand to form a small mound on which to place your ball. Real golf.

The clubs have wooden shafts, two with wood heads and two with metal heads. These are the clubs before the niblick or mashie: a driving wood, a driving or long iron, a short iron, and a putting wood. There is the choice of a "rut iron" if you wish. And with only four



At Oakhurst Links' 2nd teebox former GCSAA President Bob Mitchell prepares to drive —perhaps considering how he will hit between the grazing sheep in the landing area. In the foreground is Adam Maples.

clubs, who needs a bag or a caddie?

Now with my driving wood in hand and my mound of sand in place (oh yes, there are no tee markers), I am ready to place my ball for play. No fancy number of dimples, or layers of materials, or indications of expected flight — just a molded gutta percha composition ball with a lattice mesh pattern. Now we are set to play.

The course, length is about 2,300 yards and is divided into one one-shot hole, six two-shot holes, and two three-shot holes. There are but three rules listed on the card and you will not see "USGA" named anywhere. It had not been organized in 1880.

- Rule I. The stymie is used for play.
- Rule II. If ball breaks, finish hole with larger piece.
- Rule III. Free drop from sheep castings.

To be at such a place and to play golf under these conditions is pure pleasure. Having grown up around golf, playing at Pinehurst, St. Andrews and other famous courses, working on courses with sand greens and changing them to grass, being a part of the chemical and mechanical revolution of golf course maintenance, and seeing the technology of golf equip-

ment in this modern day, the thrill of golf as it was in the 1880s cannot be adequately described.

This is where you really play the course as you find it and the ball as it lies. No Stimpmeter here, for sure. No cart paths. No distance markers or sprinkler-head numbers. Just hit the ball, go find the ball, and hit the ball until you sink your putt. Real golf.

In 1960 Lewis Keller Sr. bought the land and in 1990-1992 re-established the course. He supplied the clubs and balls made to the standards of 1884. As you play a few holes, you soon learn the power swing is out and the smooth swing is the only way to keep the ball in play. There is a bit of timing with the wood shaft clubs and a feel that needs to be developed to get the best shots. There are uphill holes, downhill holes, dogleg holes, creeks, ponds and bunkers.

By the time you come to the finishing holes — a three-shot hole and a two-shot hole — you are overtaken by the sense of playing golf as in the days of old. Walking along slowly, talking to your partners, enjoying the view, watching out for sheep castings, and realizing from this beginning how much golf has grown over the 120 years since 1880.

I, for one, thank the good Lord for allowing me to be in this business. To be a third-generation "golf man," it meant a lot to play Oakhurst Links.

There's no huge locker room, no long bar, no cart to park or caddie to pay. You just turn in your four clubs and sit around the table, sip hot tea with gingersnaps for a treat and discuss and replay each hole, trying not to forget one moment and hating the thought of having to leave. "You do remember that second shot..."

The evening cool starts to come, the sun is going behind the mountain, and the sheep are gathering at the barn door ready to come in for the night. The car winds down the drive and you say, "It was good to have been here, if only for a day."

As one man said: "When in the course of human events it became necessary to bring golf to the colonies, a course was devised and a century later, at Oakhurst Links you can still play the game as it used to be played. Real Golf."

I'll be back next year.

*Palmer Maples is a former president and acting executive director of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. He retired two years ago.*



At Oakhurst Links, golfers play with four clubs manufactured in England — from front to back, the short iron, driving wood (nicknamed The Long Neck), long iron and putting club.

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