



New bentgrass sod was installed around an oak tree on the fairway of the 14th hole, which now offers members multiple shot options off each tee. Photo: Flossmoor Country Club

BACK TO ITS ROOTS

FLOSSMOOR
RECAPTURES ITS
CLASSIC PAST BY
RESTORING ITS
GOLF COURSE

BY MARK LESLIE

Etched in the history books with indelible connections to venerable golf icons Bobby Jones and Chick Evans, 105-year-old Flossmoor Country Club is in the midst of a remodeling project that's expected to return it to its heyday.

Before 1962, Flossmoor hosted major events including five Western Opens, five Western Amateur Championships, two USGA National Amateur Championships and one PGA Championship. Members want to rekindle that glory and prepare the course for the future without tearing it up, says green chairman Mark Egge.

To meet that objective, the club engaged Holland, Mich.-based golf course architect Raymond Hearn, an expert in classical golf

course architecture who has restored a number of courses built during what's known as the Golden Era of golf course design.

"None of the members were interested in getting a modern marvel," says club president Nick Zagotta. "They're happy to retain the classic character of the golf course. That's one of the reasons this plan was approved overwhelmingly – because we went back to our roots instead of trying to become something we're not.

"We're in one of the oldest suburbs in Chicago, one of the oldest golf courses in Chicago and one of the greatest properties in metro Chicago," he adds. "We wanted to embrace that."

Connecting to Flossmoor's history through this project, it was fitting that:

- Charles "Chick" Evans, Chicago's favorite son in the early 1900s and one of golf's great amateurs, won his first national U.S. Amateur Championship at Flossmoor in 1916.

- The club has been a strong supporter of the Evans Scholars Program.

- Hearn happens to be one of the only two practicing golf course architects who's an Evans Scholar, receiving a full four-year college scholarship from the program.

- Bobby Jones' then club-record 67 was broken in 1996 by Egge.

- Having hosted some of the great amateur events many years ago, Flossmoor remains committed to the amateur game by welcoming a U.S. Open qualifier last year.

Hearn, who teaches a golf course architecture class overseas each year and has an appreciation of traditional design, holds this project dear to his heart, and for more reasons than his and Flossmoor's connection to Evans.

"There's something magical about Flossmoor," he says. "Just entering the property is surreal. It has such a rich history and tradition, and they're so humble about it. I visit a hundred golf courses every year, and what I normally see are courses that have so many inherent problems that you will look like a hero no matter what you do to them. Then, once in a while, you find a course that's so good you tell members, 'Let's preserve what we've got.'

"Very, very seldom do you run into a place

The restoration project includes a new greenside bunker on the 14th hole. Photo: Flossmoor Country Club





Golf course architect Raymond Hearn and golf course superintendent Robert Lively examine construction plans and a new bunker liner before sand is installed. Photo: Flossmoor Country Club

that's already very, very good, but yet there are opportunities to take it to the next level two to three notches up," he adds. "Flossmoor blew me away. Never in 22 years in the business have I met a membership like this that's so committed to this project – bar none. My hat's off to them for agreeing to such subtle changes. This is off the charts for me."

A CLASSIC LOOK

Flossmoor's members are interested in, for the most part, classic golf course design and obviously because of the overwhelming vote, they wanted to return to that, Hearn says.

This is no typical restoration of a famous old golf course. Hearn has used limited original sketches by architect H.J. Tweedie, a Briton who

designed a dozen golf courses in Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin until his death in 1921.

But Hearn isn't restoring all things Tweedie.

"He was good at routing and shot value, and his greens were very good, but bunkers were not a strong part of his palette," he says. "He was probably influenced by Willie Park Jr., C.B. Macdonald, Harry Colt and C.H. Alison. He was definitely not influenced by A.W. Tillinghast, Donald Ross or Alister Mackenzie."

Hearn's goal is to restore a classical look and flair that has been lost over time because of tree plantings, greens that mowing patterns have made smaller and rounder causing pin placements to vanish, bunkers that have lost their shape and other course changes.

"The greens are the heart and soul of the golf

course," Hearn says. "Lose that relationship, and you lose the relation of the green concept with the adjacent bunkers and the approach contours. Equally as important is restoring lost shot values and playability. We've been able to restore many of the old options that have disappeared over the years and created many more."

Working with golf course builder Jerry Deemer of Traverse City, Mich.-based Country Golf, Hearn is placing bunkers perpendicular to fairway edges and undoing years of well-intended but poorly placed tree plantings by cutting down a number of trees. Because the course isn't landlocked and has plenty of interior acreage, he's also able to expand and create multiple attack angles and shot options on several holes that will test the ingenuity and shot-making of the best golfers, while adding uniqueness and variety for others.

He also has blown up the stereotypical bunker-bunker in front of greens, allowing the bump-and-run game, and added 80- to 100-foot bentgrass areas behind the greens.

Aiding the work is Flossmoor golf course superintendent Bob Lively who, Hearn says, is incredible and an advocate of the old school

of firm and true fairways, greens and bunkers. That fits perfectly with Hearn's desire to revive the classic feel and bump-and-run play of the original golf course.

"We wanted an architect who wouldn't turn up a lot of dirt," Lively says. "Ray has a lay-of-the-land approach to his projects and is the perfect architect for us. His bunker styles are like landforms. They're gorgeous and unique.

"He's changing a lot of contours in the fairways, especially where he's doing the bunkering," he adds. "I'm impressed."

PHASE IT IN

Phase I of the project comprises restoring holes 14 through 18. Phase II, including restoring holes one through three and 10 through 13, will begin this fall. Phase III includes restoring holes four through nine and will be carried out in 2008.

Lively won't have to alter any of his maintenance practices, and there won't be a need for special mowers because of banks or bunkers.

Meanwhile, because of the club's age, the turfgrass on the golf course is a mix of bentgrass and *Poa annua*, including all kinds of mutations from

AT A GLANCE

Flossmoor Country Club

Location: Flossmoor, Ill.

Type of project: Restoration (three phases)

Cost: \$1.8 million

Phase I: Six holes started and completed in fall 2006

Phase II: Six holes to be started and completed in fall of 2007

Phase III: Six holes to be started and completed in November 2008

Architect: Raymond Hearn

Builder: Country Golf

Golf course superintendent: Bob Lively

Turfgrass: Bentgrass and *Poa annua*

Length: 7,139 yards



Raymond Hearn and Robert Lively examine construction plans and a new sand bunker lip. Photo: Flossmoor Country Club



The restoration project includes new fairway sand bunkers on the 18th hole. Photo: Flossmoor Country Club

tee to green, Lively says. Because the course isn't being closed during the restoration, regrassing the greens is impossible. Besides, members are pleased with the conditions of the greens and don't want them touched, Lively says.

Therefore, the only new greens will be on holes eight and 13, which will be built to USGA specifications and seeded with a mix of Penn-A bentgrasses. The existing 13th hole is a 118-yard downhill par-3 whose 4,800-square-foot green explodes from top right to bottom left with a 6.5-degree slope and contains only 1,000 square



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feet of pinnable space.

"It's a terrible green, and when greens got faster in the 1980s and '90s, it became especially unfair," Lively says.

As part of Phase II this year, Hearn is moving the entire 13th hole left into a wooded area where it will become a 145-yard hole with bunkering on the right side, giving it bump-and-run possibilities.

As part of Phase III, the eighth hole, a 305- to 425-yard par 4, will be transformed. Two small ponds built 40 years ago will, by necessity, remain in play on the hole. But Hearn will lengthen the hole 40 yards and give the green a lower profile like the others but with a better relationship with the water and a bump-and-run feeding into the green from the left.

Additionally, Egge, Zagotta and Lively reference the great lawn effect Hearn created in front of the clubhouse, where the large 16th, 17th and 18th fairways converge.

"It is a very nice aesthetic look, and it really opens up the view through the course from the veranda," Lively says.

DOING THE RIGHT THING

Already, club members are excited about Hearn's work.

"People are thrilled with the plan and look forward to finishing it," Zagotta says.

"When all this work is done, it's going to be phenomenal," Egge says. "It will be a lot more fun and challenging. We're adding some native grass areas that will create a memorable golf experience. The prestige associated with the club will be elevated within the Chicago Golf District. It's already a special place, but it will be better."

Zagotta gives credit to the hard work of the previous five club presidents – Tom Gillie, Dennis Gillie, Bob Blum, Taylor Cope and Greg Palumbo – who laid the groundwork to complete

the long-range plan.

"Anything at a golf course is like politics," Zagotta says. "You can't turn the Titanic around on a dime. All five men were integral in getting it done. They laid all the groundwork and got the members accustomed to the idea."

Although Bandon Dunes developer Mike Keiser wasn't involved with the Flossmoor resoration, Zagotta knows and respects Keiser, who influenced the Flossmoor project.

"Guys like him are pioneering the effort back to classic golf," Zagotta says. "His decision-making process and success and great vision played a role in us getting back to our traditional roots. If you want a model in 2007, you can't go wrong looking at that model. That's one of the reasons we know we've done the right thing." GCI

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