



14th Hole

The \$2.9-million overhaul of the South Course at Olympia Fields hasn't erased the course's classic style. Above: The 14th hole in 1923. Right: The renovated 14th hole. Photos: Olympia Fields



POLISHING AN OLD GEM

By MARK LESLIE

A RESTORATION AT OLYMPIA FIELDS REFINES THE SOUTH COURSE

History is embedded in the walls of the clubhouse and locker room at Olympia Fields Country Club in Illinois. But, with the unveiling of the South Course restoration, a new chapter begins.

Even before Walter Hagen defeated Bill Mehlhorn, 6 and 5, in the 1925 PGA Championship, Olympia Fields was making news. The darling of Chicago, featuring 18 holes designed by Willie Park Jr., 36 by Tom Bendelow and 18 by Willie Watson, Olympia Fields became a venue of choice soon after it opened in 1916. Western Open officials chose it for their tournament in 1920, and the Western Junior event followed two years later.

But Hagen and the PGA made it prime time in 1925, and thereafter, championships piled upon championships:

- The 1928 U.S. Open when Bobby Jones lost a 36-hole playoff by a stroke to Johnny Farrell.
- The Chicago Open won by Sam Snead in 1938.
- Another PGA Championship in 1961 when Jerry Barber defeated Don January in a playoff.
- The U.S. Senior Open in 1997 won by Graham Marsh.
- Another U.S. Open in 2003 won by Jim Furyk.
- A couple of NCAA Championships along the way.
- A half dozen more Western Opens, including Jack Nicklaus' victory in 1968 and Bruce Crampton's in 1971.
- Four Women's Western Amateurs.

The famed Chick Evans once said, "For good golf – and lots of it – no more delightful place can be found than Olympia Fields Country Club."

Most of this hullabaloo took place on the Park-designed North Course. But Bendelow's South Course – often called the hidden gem of the south suburbs, with its yawning, tree-lined fairways and twisting, challenging greens – has now undergone a considerable makeover

by Steve Smyers and lead architect Patrick Andrews.

Smyers, a lover of classic design and the first golf course architect on the U.S. Golf Association's executive board in 70 years, has restored the South Course to the degree that some club members fear it will equal or even surpass its more famous brother on the north end of the property.

"I can't say it will rival the North Course, but it will make the South Course competitive for the next four decades," Smyers says.

Leading up to the opening, anticipation is high, says club manager Russell Ruscigno.

"More of our members have walked the course, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive," Ruscigno says. "Steve and Patrick have vision that's pretty incredible."

director of grounds, overhauled and modernized the South Course. It was an extensive project that cost \$2.9 million. Olympia Fields officials, including South Course restoration committee chairman Jeff Goldman, faced many much-needed improvements:

- An antiquated irrigation system.
- Inadequate tee space.
- Putting surfaces that had shrunk by 20 to 30 percent throughout the years.
- Bunkers with little character or contour.

"There was no one thing more important than the other," says MacKenzie, a 1983 Michigan State graduate who joined the Olympia Fields staff in March 2006 after 11 years as superintendent at Broadmoor Country Club in Indianapolis. "When you have a 90-year-old house, you need to change the carpet and put in a new heating system. That's kind of what we did here. It was long overdue."

A bold step was needed, and Smyers thought

AT A GLANCE
Olympia Fields Country Club

Location: Olympia Fields, Ill.

Web site: www.ofcc.info

Project type: Restoration

Cost: \$2.9 million

Architects: Steve Smyers and Patrick Andrews

Builder: Wadsworth Golf Construction

Director of grounds: Sam MacKenzie, CGCS

Project started: July 2007

Project completed: October 2007

A BOLD STEP

Smyers, Andrews and Sam MacKenzie, CGCS,



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the South Course needed updating for a modern golf game in which golf balls are driven far past the imaginings of Tom Bendelow or others of that era.

"The South Course was sound when it was built, but not now," Smyers says. "Changes that were made throughout the years caused elements that were integral to the design to be lost. So, we reread the land, moved the championship tees back to restore the historical landing areas, and adjusted and added bunkering to return the original shot values."

MacKenzie provided old aerial photos and design plans that Smyers and Andrews used to recreate the shapes and patterns of the South Course's classic bunker style. This was crucial to the process.

Of the club's original four golf courses, Bendelow designed Course 1 (now the South Course), Park designed Course 4 (now the North Course), and Bendelow and Watson tag-teamed on the design for Courses 2 and 3. But in 1945, Courses 2 and 3 were sold to developers, with the first and 18th holes from Course 2 becoming the eighth and ninth holes on Course 1. Since then, the North Course has become the favored son, while the South Course has been, largely, the members' course and hasn't received the care the North Course has, MacKenzie says.

"But the members absolutely love the South Course," he says.

The club's leadership agreed with Smyers that they would love the South Course even more if it played the way it was meant to be played and if its agronomic deficiencies were addressed.

One of the chief problems was that the third green sat in the flood plain of Butterfield Creek and any significant flooding put the front half of the green underwater. Smyers rerouted the hole that played from east to west. Now it plays northeast to southeast, and the new green complex is relocated on a wooded hillside. Crews from Wadsworth Golf Construction removed 1.5 acres of timber and cut a 10-foot wedge out of the hillside to build the green.

Meanwhile, the 13th fairway was rerouted, turning a straightaway hole into a slight dogleg. Smyers also designed a new creek that now wraps around a pond on the hole, which is now an irrigation source. This maneuver also pleased local environmental authorities. Runoff from U.S. 30 and neighborhoods south of the golf course was causing water-quality issues with the pond. But now the creek diverts that drainage



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water around the pond while creating a feature on the 13th hole.

"The green was left untouched, but the rest of the hole was completely rebuilt," MacKenzie says.

Crews also undertook a significant drainage project on the 17th hole, recontouring to help with the drainage issue.

MUCH-NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

Throughout the South Course, bunkers, tees and greens have a new face. Yet there are some improvements MacKenzie cherishes that golfers won't even notice. Forty-nine bunkers – mostly greenside – were restored, repositioned or added to develop strategy, interact with the landscape and to highlight target areas. Tees were renovated and others added to lengthen the course by 700 yards to almost 7,200 while maintaining the 6,500-yard distance for member play. And greens that had shrunk significantly through the years were expanded an average of 1,450 square feet to their original size and shape.

The ground game is a critical part of play on the South Course and almost every green is open in the front so golfers can run the ball up onto the putting surfaces. MacKenzie points to regrassing the tees and fairways with a blend of Penneagle II and PennLinks II.

"This blend gives us a wide range of adaptation across the spectrum of the various microclimates on the course," he says. "The National Turfgrass Evaluation Program studies in Chicago showed they were good with wear and drought and heat tolerance and had good resistance to brown patch and dollar spot. If there's a reason to regrass, there are a lot of new cultivars that can help you."

The old irrigation – a single-row system with a mix of Toro, Rain Bird and Hunter heads with Rain Bird controllers – was replaced with Toro's newest, the Network VP, a satellite system with Site-Pro software.

The existing Flowtronex pump station, installed in 1999 and capable of pumping 3,600 gallons per minute, was retained. But everything else was replaced. MacKenzie is thrilled with the 1,200-head, triple-row system with two outside rows in the rough and perimeter watering around all the greens.

"The idea is to have single-head control, as opposed to two and three heads paired together before," MacKenzie says. "Now we have much

tighter head-to-head coverage across the playing surface. I can dial in individual heads and manage water better in specific areas that are wetter or in shade, so the playing area is a lot more consistent."

The single-row system meant fairways were wet in the middle and dry on the outside. Now MacKenzie has the ability to run less water to the center row so he can make the middle of the fairway firmer.

Drainage is an issue MacKenzie believes never ends on any course. But now, at least, the South Course is a drier layout in many ways. Drainage on the old bunkers was hit or miss, and a third of the bunkers didn't drain properly. Now it's all new, just as it is on all other parts of the course that underwent construction or needed improvement.

Another important new element of the course is the practice range, which sits on the first and 18th holes of the original Course 3 and was languishing without turf, a vestige of the 2003 U.S. Open. Prior to the restoration, the range had been functioning as a parking lot and was in disrepair for the past five years. But Andrews spent an extraordinary amount of time shaping the target greens on the range, and MacKenzie opened the range with practice pads in early May.

ELEVATED STATURE

By building new tees and bunkers, changing the grass lines and expanding the putting surfaces, the golf course is dramatically different. So, which course is the better of the two? It's debatable.

"One reason the North Course got more attention is that it's a slightly better piece of ground, and the South Course can be wetter," MacKenzie says. "We corrected a lot of those problems. We'll go back next year and significantly upgrade some of the old drainage that needs to be replaced."

Some folks think the South Course will overtake the North Course, MacKenzie says.

"The North will always be a great test of golf and one of the top golf courses in the nation," he says. "We've elevated the South Course's stature without any question. But we'd have to have something besides the club championship on it before we could say it has overtaken the North Course. The South Course is definitely dramatically improved. It's night and day from what it was." **GCI**

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