

“A pleasurable golf course is not necessarily one that appeals at first sight, but rather one that grows on the player like good music, a good painting or good anything else ...”

– Dr. Alistair MacKenzie



The redesigned bunkers feature high sand lines and thin or lacy grass fingers.
Photos: Windfall Golf



Capturing the essence of the past



The OSU Scarlet Course renovation reflects Alistair MacKenzie's intentions

By David McPherson

Dr. Alistair MacKenzie – the mastermind behind Augusta National and Cypress Point and known as the “course doctor,” – died in 1934 before seeing his vision for the Ohio State University Scarlet Course in Columbus come to fruition. He completed the original drawings and supervised the work of contouring the greens, but what the course eventually became didn't feature his distinct design traits. The famed architect from the Golden Age of golf course architecture would be pleased with what the Scarlet Course has become, especially after it underwent a considerable renovation in 2006. Thanks to a renovation lead by Nicklaus Design, the Scarlet Course is now, more than ever, a pleasurable course that grows on players like fine art.

The renovation plan was discussed first in the late 1990s, but nothing was done until 2004 when Nicklaus Design was chosen to redesign the course. The \$4.2-million facelift was paid



Developing the bunkers correctly was challenging because of the “bull nose” look and the high, steep faces. Photo: Windfall Golf

for by the Al and Martha Phipps Ohio State Golf Course Improvements Fund established by an OSU alumnus.

“This is a dream come true for me,” says OSU men’s golf coach Jim Brown, who has been at the helm of the university’s golf program for 35 years. “I have so much passion and love for the Scarlet Course that I’m elated to see what Jack Nicklaus has done. We now truly have a MacKenzie course, complete with his greens and bunkering.”

Jack Nicklaus and his team of designers worked collaboratively with Brown and his staff to restore the course to the way they believed MacKenzie originally intended it to play.

“They kept us involved with what they were doing and wanted us to approve everything that was going to happen,” Brown says.

One of the key things Nicklaus Design wanted from the outset was input from coach Brown.

“He was interested in being able to have the top collegiate course in the country,” Nicklaus says. “Ohio State has always had a reputation of being a strong venue for the NCAA and other events, and coach Brown was interested in making sure the golf course had as much spice in it as it could.”

Because MacKenzie left little of his design on paper, recapturing his vision was one of the

Nicklaus design team’s biggest challenges during the restoration.

“We had an initial routing plan to reference, but no working drawings,” Nicklaus says. “Our team studied MacKenzie’s work throughout the world, and our staff even visited certain courses to gain a better knowledge and sense of his design philosophy. Then, we tried to take what he would have envisioned, apply it to the design that was already there and work from it.”

To get a better understanding of a possible bunker style that MacKenzie might have devel-

oped, Genesis Golf Builders’ lead shaper Steve Page went on a tour of the remaining West Coast golf courses that still show the MacKenzie influence. During that tour the “what would MacKenzie have done” or the new Scarlet bunker style was developed, says Ron Freund, president of Genesis.

CLASSIC BUNKER DESIGNS

First, the bunkers were redesigned to appear more like classic MacKenzie bunkering designs at his other championship courses, which typically feature high sand lines and thin or lacy grass fingers.

“The bunkering at Scarlet changed over the years to be the fairly simple, round or oblong bunkers you see on many golf courses today,” Nicklaus says.

The position of the bunkers also was altered to modernize the course.

“Previously, the fairway strategy was a bit dated, and the bunkers were easily carried by today’s long hitters,” Nicklaus says. “The bunkers we did as part of the restoration were placed more in line with today’s carries.”

The biggest challenge (besides meeting the May 2006 opening after starting in May 2005) was recreating MacKenzie’s bunkers – more specifically, the bunker edge or lip – says con-

AT A GLANCE

The Ohio State University Scarlet Course

Web site: [www.ohiostatebuckeyes.com/
fls/17300/golfcourse/index.html](http://www.ohiostatebuckeyes.com/fls/17300/golfcourse/index.html)

Location: Columbus, Ohio

Type of project: Renovation

Cost: \$ 4.2 million

Construction started: May 2005

Construction finished: May 2006

Architectural firm: Nicklaus Design

Builder: Genesis Golf Builders

Superintendents: Mike McBride (consulting
agronomist) and Dennis Bowsher

Owner representative: Jim Brown

sulting agronomist Mike McBride, president of On Course Management.

"These lips have a particular rounded or what we called a 'bull nose' look," he says. "This bull nose lip, along with the high, steep bunker faces, presented a problem to develop correctly and ensure they could be maintained properly. We knew the bunkers were going to be high maintenance, so ProAngle sand and an over-engineered drainage system were required. We also installed SandMat bunker liners on all the faces to eliminate clay and soil contamination from the subgrade."

Then the question became how to form and maintain the bull nose lip around the bunkers.

"It actually protruded out over the bunker face a little," McBride says. "At first, we tried a fabric tube sock that set in a V-groove around the bunker. This became impractical because of the time it took to fill the sock with soil and the weight of the sock to place it around the bunker edge."

Genesis Golf Builder's project superintendent Bill Sanders and McBride finally figured out a way to form this detailed edge by shaping

it by hand, taking the SandMat bunker liner up the bunker face around the bull nose and underneath the Kentucky Bluegrass sod. This method stabilized the bull nose and protected the sand flash at the same time. It all became one unit – the roots of the Kentucky Bluegrass knitted through the SandMat and the problem was solved, McBride says.

Brown can't say enough about how the bunkers turned out.

"They're fabulous," he says. "They look like MacKenzie bunkers, and when we took the sand out of the old ones, we could see the original design. The bunkers are more MacKenzie-like now than they were before, and the course is much more difficult. All the fairway bunkers are from 285 to 315 yards out, which has tightened the driving area. The greenside bunkers are very deep, and some have two to three levels."

Gary Rasor was the golf course superintendent during the restoration, but he left at the tail end of the project and was replaced with the superintendent Dennis Bowsher. Bowsher's first day on the job was eight days before the official rededication of the course by Nicklaus and

nine days before the NCAA Women's National Championships. Yet Bowsher agrees with Brown that the bunkering has recaptured Mackenzie's vision and made the course what it is today.

"They are very big and dramatic, and the ProAngle sand allows for a very firm bottom with minimal erosion," Bowsher says. "There's also a geofabric liner on the slopes to help prevent erosion."

While the bunkering has beautified the course, it's also made the Scarlet Course more difficult for players and added increased labor and maintenance costs to Bowsher's department.

"Because they're so deep, there's a great deal of difficulty when playing," he says. "This also makes it difficult for some of our elderly members to physically walk into and out of the bunkers."

The bunker maintenance is labor intensive because the slopes are mowed with Flymo hover mowers and the clippings have to be removed from the sand. Mowing them once a week, trimming the edges, then blowing and raking them requires about 120 man-hours, Bowsher says.

"There's a tremendous amount of labor to maintain the bunkers," he says. "A minimal touch-up requires at least 32 man-hours," he says. "There's also an added labor cost to irrigation. The slopes and crowns around the bunker demand precision hand-watering with a hose. We also try to enhance the water infiltration by using wetting agents."

A BETTER DEFINED HOLE

Aside from the bunkers, new green contours, tree removal and course lengthening were the other considerable changes Nicklaus Design and Genesis Golf Builders made to the Scarlet Course. The course was lengthened from 7,115 to 7,455 yards, and par went from 72 to 71. The driving range also was enlarged, and a short-game practice area was built for both varsity golf teams and another practice area for club members.

The rerouting of the fourth hole, in which the green was moved about 100 yards to the right, was another considerable change.

"We changed the hole to make it a par 5, and it's now a completely new hole," Nicklaus says. "We were trying to think what Mackenzie might have wanted to do there."

The hole features a large lake Nicklaus believed wasn't being used.

"The hole was really another par 4, if you

What the judges said

"Genesis did an outstanding job with a very difficult situation: a total change in scope about half way through the project that required them to adapt very quickly and work through the winter in a pretty tough climate. The results look outstanding. It must have been fun to try to anticipate what Alister MacKenzie would've done. I've seen a lot of MacKenzie courses, and it looks like they accomplished that. Ohio State accomplished the goal of being the No. 1 college course in the country."

– Walt Lankau, president, Stow Acres Country Club in Stow, Mass.

"Genesis employed 'a what would MacKenzie do' concept. As a result, they sent their lead shaper to visit some MacKenzie golf courses to become accustomed to the design style to show they really did their homework. Dealing with the university's prevailing wage and the state of Ohio for funding always adds some challenges."

– Jim Roney, director of golf courses and grounds at Saucon Valley Country Club in Bethlehem, Pa.

"Genesis had many challenges to meet on the project. The first one was four months into a six-month project. The scope increased 40 percent, and they had to regroup and get the job done on time and on schedule to allow for the NCAA Women's Championship to be played the following month. They met these challenges. They provided value engineering to get around the difficulties that were presented to them. They were trying to bring back the vintage MacKenzie bunkering, and they captured that. They spent time researching to get that done, working closely with the architect, who didn't give them the proper scope to begin with. They had to regroup and work those things out."

– Rex VanHoose, senior v.p./managing architect, Jacobsen Hardy Golf Course Design

looked at where the previous green was, and jammed against out of bounds and houses," he says. "I felt to take the golf hole off of the houses and into an area not being used at the time, and then utilize the lake to get a par-5 length out of it was the right thing to do.

"Not only did the previous hole play very short, the new hole is more interesting because the second shot plays over water to the second landing area and the green complex has bunkers adjacent to the water," Nicklaus adds. "Definitionwise, it's the best new hole out there."

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

McBride, who is responsible for design calls in the field for Nicklaus Design, was in charge of the cost implications and grow-in strategy. The course was set to host the women's NCAA Championship in May 2006, so a drop-dead date set the tone for some of the key decisions.

"Everything had to start with that tournament and work backwards to make sure it would meet the standards for the event," McBride says. "The project had to shut down sometime in mid-December 2005 for about six to eight weeks. That's not that unusual for Ohio, but with many change orders in the summer and fall, we needed all the quality days we could get. Because of this, much more Kentucky Bluegrass sodding was done in the rough areas rather than the original plan to seed the rough areas."

"Somewhere within the university a decision was made after construction had begun to host the Women's NCAA Golf Championship the following spring," Freund says. "Under most circumstances, this is just another day in golf course renovation work, but in this case, we were to have originally seeded all of the disturbed fairway and rough areas. But because of the decision to hold an NCAA tournament in the spring, seed-

ing had to be changed to sodding. Unfortunately, the university's budget only allowed for half an acre of sod when 30-plus acres were needed and winter was just around the corner."

Despite the added labor costs and difficulty, since opening in the spring of 2006, the rejuvenated Scarlet Course has received rave reviews from amateurs and professionals alike.

"Only one man truly knows if we hit the mark or not, and he's no longer around," Freund says of MacKenzie. "Regardless, we're proud to have been given the opportunity to be involved in such an honorable restoration."

Brown couldn't be happier with the results of the renovation.

"My players love it," he says. "They feel it plays about two to three shots harder, and it's much more difficult to get it up and down, especially out of the bunkers. It also has helped recruiting. This course teaches you how to play." **GCI**

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