

A river runs through it

A stream dictates the restoration of a historic course in Pennsylvania *By John Torsiello*



The Old Course at Bedford Springs has featured the work of three notable architects: Spencer Oldham, A.W. Tillinghast and Donald Ross. Photo: Photographic Design

Like a Renoir or Monet painting that has had its beauty stolen by years of neglect and mishandling, the historic Old Course at Bedford Springs Resort in south central Pennsylvania was a sad sight just a few years ago.

Undermaintained and victim to the ravages of a stream run amok, this unique work of three notable architects – Spencer Oldham, A.W. Tillinghast and Donald Ross – retained only a visage of its former style and beauty.

The new owner of the resort, Bedford Resort Partners, decided something had to be done to save the masterpiece and to bring its property into the pantheon of great Northeast resorts. In the spring of 2005, it hired Ron Forse, a golf course renovation expert, to plot the rebirth of The Old Course. Now, the “new” Old Course at Bedford Springs Resort has reemerged with a remarkable luster and vitality.

“The course almost was in a comatose state when I was asked to look at it,” says Forse, who has reworked Salem Country Club in Peabody, Mass. (an original Donald Ross) and Newport Country Club in Newport, R.I. (an original A.W. Tillinghast). “I saw a course that was unkempt and old but one that was well loved by the people of the region. When I saw the features that were still there – the green complexes, bunkers and mounding – it was fascinating. It stoked our fires and got our creative juices flowing. It was a good opportunity to do something special.”

Forse collaborated on the restoration with Jim Nagle, a design associate with Hopwood, Pa.-based Forse Design.

The course’s architectural intrigue lied in the fact it was a merger of three classic styles: Oldham’s chocolate drops and geometric S-curved and donut bunkers; Tillinghast’s classic touches that included Tiny Tim, a storied par 3; and Ross’s classic springs course with small, raised greens. Oldham designed the original 18-hole course in 1895, and Tillinghast’s redesign changed the layout from 18 to nine holes in 1912. In 1923, Ross redesigned and expanded the course back to its original 18-hole layout. In 1984, the course was designated a National Register Historic District.

“We realized when we took over here that for us to be at a level where we wanted to be, in competition with The Greenbrier and The Homestead, we needed to have a golf course of the quality guests would appreciate,” says Keith Evans, managing partner of Bedford Resort



The stream project received fast-track approval from state and federal agencies because it enhanced and protected the natural environment of the property. Photo: Photographic Design

Partners. “Our objective was to celebrate the history of the golf course. We knew Ron Forse and his firm had done a lot of work on historic courses and he had a passion for it.”

A QUICK ONE

The owners spared little expense making their dream come true. About \$7 million was earmarked for the project, which started in June 2006. Because the owners wanted the course to be operational as quickly as possible for its guests, the project had a remarkably short time line. It had to be completed by October 2006 and be playable by July 2007 when the resort reopened.

“It was a quick completion date,” says Nick Mazzella, business manager of Jones Mill, Pa.-based Frontier Golf. “We had more than 100 employees working on site sometimes, and we worked two shifts. We did some cart path work under the lights, and it was nothing short of amazing how smoothly things went. We got a big break with the weather, which was good for the most part.”

RUN, SHOBER, RUN

A complete overhaul of the course was called for, from the irrigation system and drainage to fairways, greens, bunkers and tees. One of the

most vital components of the project was the restoration of Shobers Run, which dissects the course. The stream had become severely eroded and filled with sand and silt. It often flowed out of its banks during heavy rains and was causing considerable damage to the course, as well as making it almost impossible to keep the course open on days when it rained heavily.

“The project couldn’t work without the stream restoration being a major part of it,” Mazzella says. “It was absolutely the single greatest factor to finishing the golf course the way we wanted it finished.”

Every day, the stream was struggling to stabilize itself, Forse says. The erosion, silt and sand buildup raised the level of everything. Superintendent Dave Swartzel knew the stream was at the root of many of the course’s problems.

“Every time we received an inch of rain, the course had to be shut down,” Swartzel says. “Without doing the stream work, it didn’t make sense to put all that money into a renovation.”

Bedford Resort Partners called in Lititz, Pa.-based Land Studies, an environmental restoration and planning firm, to prepare an analysis of the stream and devise a game plan. It proposed to remove layers of silt and sand from 18 inches to 4-feet deep on the stream bed, as well as create an 80-foot buffer zone on each side of the

stream serving as wetland habitat for a variety of flora and fauna and helping to protect the course from flooding.

The stream work cost \$1 million and was spread out over 6,200 linear feet. The stream project, which included the building of several new bridges over Shobers Run, received fast-track approval from various state and federal agencies because it was seen as enhancing and protecting the natural environment of the property.

"Once the government agencies came to the site, and we explained exactly how it was going to work, how the water flow was going to be and the wetlands that were going to be created, they got on board," Evans says. "I remember walking out of the meeting we had about the issue and thinking what Land Studies wanted to do was pretty radical. There were going to be no retaining walls, and it was going to take the stream back to where it was 200 years ago. Now, we couldn't be more pleased. We have a gold medal trout stream where the native brook trout are returning in numbers, new wetlands and an unbelievable scenic ribbon of beauty passing through the course."

"We created 11 acres of wetland with the new flood plain, and we have all kinds of wildlife in there, from blue heron to deer," Swartzel says. "It's a big win for the environment, for us from a maintenance standpoint, and for the golfers with the way the stream comes into play on a number of holes and adds to the beauty of the course."

The only real surprise Mazzella's workers encountered during the project was new, natural springs they kept unearthing.

"Natural springs are littered throughout the course," Mazzella says. "What we did was chan-

AT A GLANCE

Old Course at Bedford Springs Resort

Web site: www.bedfordspringsresort.com

Location: Bedford, Pa.

Type of project: Restoration

Cost: \$4.3 million

Project started: June 2006

Project completed: October 2006

Course opened: July 2007

Architectural firm: Forse Design

Builder: Frontier Golf

Superintendent: Dave Swartzel

Owner: Bedford Resort Partners

What the judges said

"This project was successful primarily because of the creek restoration, which allowed them to recapture a capacity for storage during storms and to eliminate floods. It also gave them a place to drain the golf course features they were working on to make the project work. It was something they hadn't done before, but it was very well done. They were able to deal with the environmental compliance issues, especially those related to the fish that were saved. The problem-solving ability of the contractor and its ability to plan the work well and aggressively solve problems was important."

– Ray Davies, director of golf course maintenance and construction, CourseCo

"They had to deal with a creek that ran through the property, reconstructing that creek and creating a large, significant flood plain following that creek. They handled dealing with the environmental restrictions and the permits and approvals required for that very well. They made it all work. It sounds like the benefits of what they did turned out well in terms of aesthetics and being able to handle floods better."

– Chris Wilczynski, principal, Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates

"They did many creative things dealing with the creek that runs through the property. The work they did to restore the creek bed and create the flood plain runoff storage was an excellent thing to do. It looks like they learned on the job. The original subcontractor that was brought in did the first the first 100 feet, and Frontier did the rest of the 4,900 feet. It was an extensive piece of work, and they did a great job."

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

"Frontier increased the flood plain by restoring 5,000 linear feet of stream bank 80-feet wide, which increased the stream elevation. They also used all of the excavated material that deposited throughout the years of flooding as topsoil throughout the facility and didn't haul anything away."

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

"Frontier was able to handle some unforeseens on the project and was able to offer solutions, value engineer the situation and come up with positive solutions to get around the problem and make everything great at the end of the day."

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

nel the spring water into the stream corridor, which allows the golf course to function better from a drainage standpoint."

The stream work also influenced how Forse reworked some of the holes along Shober's Run. In some instances, the architects were able to dictate to Land Studies that the stream couldn't be moved because they didn't want to alter the original design intent. On holes seven and eight, the stream had to stay where it was because Forse and Nagle didn't want to deviate from what Ross created in 1923.

"On the second hole, there was no question the position of the stream left of the hole had to remain," Nagle says. "The second dates back to 1895. We didn't want to impact the layout of such a venerable old golf hole."

HISTORICAL INTEGRITY

A considerable benefit of the stream work was the excavation of about 65,000 tons of valuable fill for use on the golf course and driving range.

"We were able to raise almost every green using the footprint of what was there for historical integrity," Forse says. "Every green was sitting too low and had too much pitch for today's green speeds. We were also able to use the fill to build up some of the fairways as much as three feet."

The team chose A1 and A4 bentgrass for the greens, a mix of SR1119, MacKenzie and Southshore bentgrass on the fairways and tees, a blend of five types of Kentucky Bluegrasses for the rough, and various fescues for the second cut of rough and the native rough.

"We went with bent for the greens, fairways and tees because of its resistance to dollar spot, which is one of our biggest disease issues in the Northeast," Swartzel says.

A UNIFIED FEEL

One of the most significant commitments Forse made to the project was to create a course that, while reflecting the varied styles of the three original architects, had a unified feel.

"We wanted to retain the authenticity of the original designs but also create a state-of-the-art resort course," he says. "It was the kind of project you could really sink your teeth into. I would think about the design at all hours of the day and night. We have worked on more than 40 Ross courses and 10 Tillinghast courses but never one designed by Spencer Oldham, who was a pro from Baltimore. We were able to tie everything together through research and

great care."

Holes 17 and 18 were reinstated because when the practice range was constructed in the 1970s two finishing holes, a par 3 and a par 4, were removed, Noble says. Holes 16 and 17 were added, and the current 16th played as the 18th. Noble and Forse decided to bring back the 1923 course, which included the finishing holes as played today. The two holes were part of Tillinghast's work.

"One interesting thing we found was several of the greens at The Old Course, the eighth and the ninth, are mirror images of other holes Ross did around the same time," Forse says. "It was fascinating to see certain specific ideas that Ross had at the time and how he made them work."

Frontier Golf has worked with Forse a lot during the past 16 years, so it understood his style and what he wanted.

"When he said, 'I want to do on this hole what

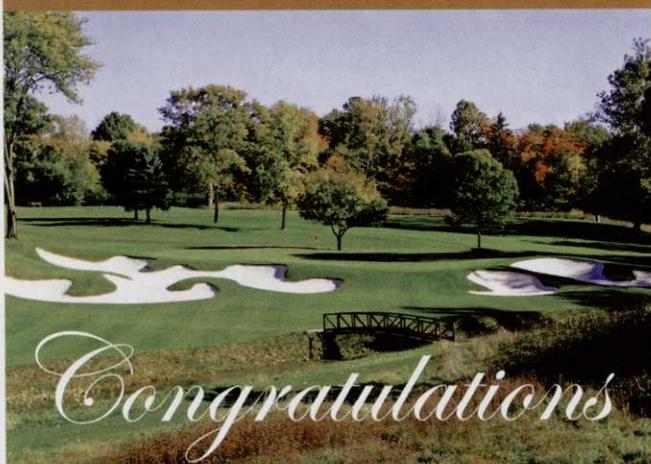
we did over at Sunnehanna (Country Club, a Tillinghast course in Johnston, Pa.),' or 'I'd like to see the same thing here as on that hole at Kahkwa (Club, a Ross course in Erie, Pa.),' we knew exactly what he meant," Mazzella says.

WHAT'S BEST

All involved in the restoration praised the teamwork of the various parties involved.

"Some owners might have been tempted to spend enough money on the course to say they did something, but not here," says Swartzel, who joined the staff two years ago as work was being planned. "We did everything the right way, and we addressed every issue as a team and with the thought of what was best for the golf course. It comes down to the new maintenance equipment, staffing and operations budget we have so that we can continue to maintain the course at a high level." **GCI**

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The Ohio State University Golf Club



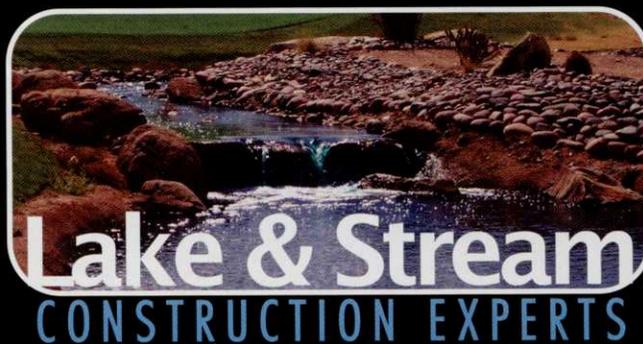
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