

Florida style on the **MAINE COAST**

A flat site with poor drainage presented *Old Marsh Country Club* the opportunity to bring a resort-style course to New England

Photos: Larry Lambrecht

The project team broke ground Jan. 2, 2007, and the last hole was seeded Oct. 9, 2007, a record most likely for course construction in the unforgiving Maine environment.

By Hal Phillips

If it weren't the only new golf course to open in New England in 2008, Old Marsh Country Club in Wells, Maine, probably would've stood out anyway. The course design is too strong, the development history too long and tortuous, the ultimate playing conditions too impressive and the concept too anomalous compared to other course fare on the Maine coast.

But the semiprivate club, developed by Bath, Maine-based Harris Golf, is the region's only new course this year – a year where far more facilities closed their doors, were dragged into receivership or were sold for alternate, more profitable use.

"The golf market is soft; there's no getting around that," says Jeff Harris, president of Harris Golf, owner and operator of Old Marsh, Sunday River Golf Club in Newry, and Boothbay Country Club and Penobscot Valley Country Club in Orono. "But quality

golf at the core of the right sort of development can be successful, and Old Marsh is proof of that.

"We're beginning to branch out across New England, but we got our start developing golf courses in Maine where the market has never been as strong as elsewhere," Harris adds. "We've been opportunistic in no small part because we've had to be. We've learned how to identify markets, develop products for those markets and build courses efficiently."

Old Marsh is evidence of all these traits because:

- It broke ground the day after New Year's 2007. The last hole was seeded Oct. 9, 2007, nine months later, a record most likely for course construction in the unforgiving Maine environment.
- York County, home to coastal Wells, is underserved in terms of golf, yet a popular vacation spot.

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COURSE CONSTRUCTION

• Golf had first been proposed for this property in the late 1980s, but a succession of developers failed to get past the permitting process. Harris Golf, the fifth owner of the property, acquired it for pennies on the dollar.

"Yeah, I don't know what Jeff Harris is talking about with all this nine-month construction business," says New Hampshire-based architect Brian Silva with a wry smile. "I flagged this course in 1987. So, as far as I'm concerned, it's taken more than 20 years to build."

Silva designed Old Marsh and had been retained, in one manner or another, by all five owners, including Harris Golf.

YEAR-ROUND SOILS

Harris spent more than \$5.5 million on course construction. Silva laid out the course, and Harris Golf built it with collaboration from Connecticut-based AgriScape. Course builders in Maine typically wait until spring before rolling in the heavy equipment, but Harris Golf called its crew to work at Old Marsh Jan. 2, under the direction of project superintendent Clayton Longfellow. The cuts and fills – all the rough shaping – on the first nine holes were done by the end of February, says Longfellow, who also serves as director of agronomy for all the Harris Golf facilities.

"It took us 2.5 years to build Sunday River," Longfellow says. "Old Marsh essentially was finished and entirely playable in 15 months. We schemed it well and worked efficiently, but the site at Old Marsh is completely different from anything we've ever worked on before – and that's a good thing."

Because Sunday River featured heavy, rocky soils and 200-foot elevations, Longfellow says the project team could never have worked there during the winter. However, the silty, gravelly, sandy soils at Old Marsh allowed crews to work all year-round.

"In fact, we were better off using the heavier equipment during the winter, on frozen ground," he says. "In the spring, it would've been difficult to deploy that equipment with the same efficiency."

At A Glance: Old Marsh Country Club

Location: Wells, Maine

Online: www.oldmarshcountryclub.com

Type: New construction

Cost: More than \$5.5 million

Architect: Brian Silva

Builder: Harris Golf and AgriScape

Project superintendent: Clayton Longfellow

Project started: January 2007

Course opened: June 2008

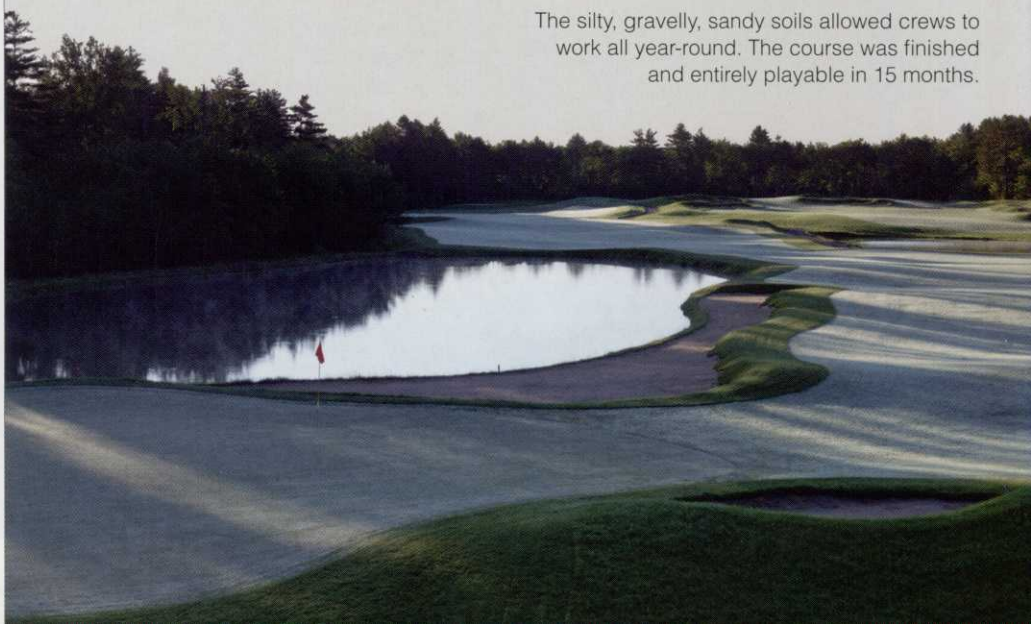
Course length: 6,800 yards

Greens: SR1119 bentgrass

Tees and fairways: SR1119 and Providence bentgrass

Immediate rough: a blend of bluegrass, ryegrass and fescue

Far rough: a straight mix of fescue



The silty, gravelly, sandy soils allowed crews to work all year-round. The course was finished and entirely playable in 15 months.

COURSE CONSTRUCTION



The only way to craft the course was to excavate ponds and use the material to raise and drain the land, Brian Silva says.

BACK TO LIFE

Harris Golf has made a habit of setting new precedents. Sunday River Golf Club was another project that sat dormant (for more than 10 years) and was presumed dead before Harris Golf swooped in. It opened all 18 holes in 2006.

Old Marsh is another back-from-the-dead project. Golf was proposed there first in 1985. Since then, four owners had been frustrated with their attempts to develop the piece of land, first known as Ocean 18, then Maine National. After 20 years, all manner of environmental restrictions, impact issues and permitting squabbles had presumably doomed the project forever. It wasn't until Harris Golf expressed an interest in the property 24 months ago the wheels started turning, again.

"There were all sorts of sticking points with

this project, but the environmental issues were paramount," Harris says. "There are a large amount of wetlands on site, but we learned you have to have the right consultants and engineers involved, so they can work their way through the issues and set the right course. There's give and take. In Wells, for example, we're creating and preserving about 280 acres of wetlands and wildlife habitat in return for the 14 acres we'll impact in building the golf course.

"Some developers fight with the state and federal agencies and say, 'This is my land; I can fill that wetland if I want,'" Harris adds. "Well, that's not how it works, and that sort of attitude just bogs down the process."

SUNSHINE STATE STYLE

At 6,800 yards, Old Marsh has no pretensions of

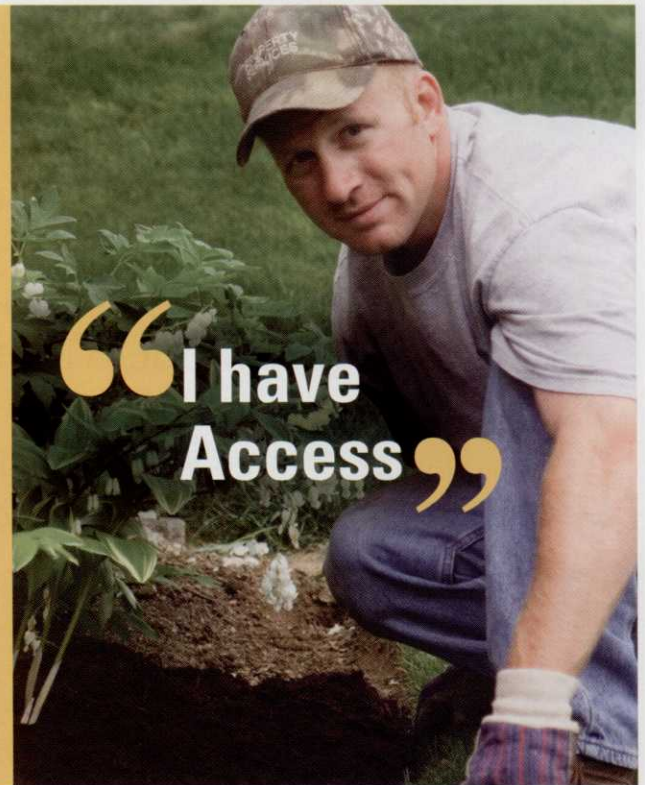
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The project team is creating and preserving about 280 acres of wetlands and wildlife habitat in return for the 14 acres impacted building the golf course.

hosting major championships. It's a resort track from the old school, a Florida-style course 1,500 miles north of anything quite like it. Sand-capped fairways and copious amounts of rain in August contributed to great playing conditions.

Many New England courses feature holes that are set low, and the natural terrain imparts their character for good and bad, says Silva, who has worked throughout New England and in Florida. At Old Marsh, the terrain was basically flat, and the site didn't drain well.

"The only way to craft the course was to excavate ponds and use that material to raise and drain the land, which is the way you build courses in Florida," Silva says.

Silva's formula depended on the amount of excavation the developer is willing to undertake, which is a function of spending.

"I give Jeff Harris credit for making

the necessary investment here because just clearing a few trees and pulling the stumps wouldn't have done the job on this particular piece of ground," he says. "We had to raise every square inch of the property to make sure the course was playable all season long. We needed to excavate an extraordinary amount, and that costs money. Jeff and his people gave me all the dirt I needed."

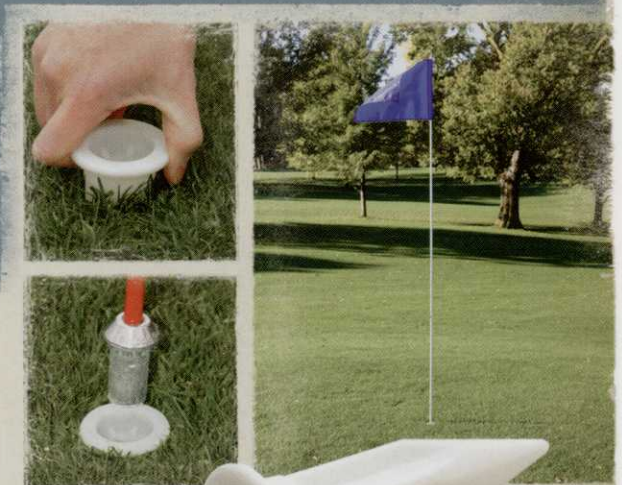
The architect used the excavation to his advantage, making the greens stand out. The first one, punctuating a 380-yard par-4, is sprawling and raised, pitched slightly to the right and incorporates four distinct lobes that fade into each other without seams.

Additionally, Longfellow was anxious about the amount of water this summer for the grow-in. The area was dry right up to early July. Nonetheless, the grow-in was

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satisfactory, he says.

"After much deliberation, we made the decision to pump from the pond on No. 10 over into the irrigation pond," he says. "Shortly after we made that decision and got everything set up and running, it started to rain for weeks. The only thing missing as far as this first year was rain. You can irrigate, and you can pump, but we all know it's rain that makes a grow-in happen."

The project team received many comments from golfers about how mature Old Marsh seems for its age compared to other grow-ins.

"A lot of newer superintendents are reluctant to stray from what they learned in school," Longfellow says. "My experience out in the field is that in a grow-in situation you have to fertilize, fertilize, fertilize. You've just got to slam turf with fertilizer. Old Marsh is a good example of the success of that strategy."

OLD WORLD MEETS NEW WORLD

Silva is familiar with interpreting classic designs. He's worked on dozens of Donald Ross designs, including Interlachen Country Club in Edina, Minn., and Penobscot Valley, restoring Ross' original intents. But Seth Raynor is Silva's true spiritual guide. Raynor's influence – deep, flat-bottomed bunkers; huge greens that fall off steeply into those bunkers; numerous, randomly placed bunkers that give fairways movement and contour – is everywhere at Old Marsh.

Raynor and his mentor, C.B. Macdonald, were known for taking famous Old World holes and adapting them to the New World courses they designed and built. Silva follows suit but with his personal twists.

On the par-4 second hole, Silva combines two Raynor standards – an Alps feature and a punch-bowl green. The Redan green on five sits at the terminus of a dogleg par-4. The Cape, another Raynor/Macdonald standard, is reprised several times at Old Marsh, including on 16, a long par-4 that bends around marshland.

Then there are the Silva originals. The par-5 13th is a seemingly horseshoe-shaped double cape that's reachable. The driveable par-4 14th finishes at a triangular shaped green flanked left by a sprawling, cavernous bunker and right by a giant kick-slope designed to help long drives.

The 210-yard, par-3 17th features another giant kick-slope, and the large lakeside green features a combination of swales and girth.

"The 17th is a good nutshell example of why Old Marsh works," Silva says. "There wasn't

originally going to be a lagoon beside that green. We created it to enable the shaping of an enormous, flamboyant green setting.

"When you're obliged to create so much of the playing contour, Florida style, you can create

any and all the angles and strategy you want," he adds. "I've always wondered why courses built like this in the Southeast aren't more interesting strategically. No one will ever level that charge at Old Marsh." GCI

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