



A new ownership group transformed the remnants of the Rat River Golf Club into Maplewood Golf Club.

# OUT OF LIMBO

A new ownership group resurrected the abandoned Rat River Golf Club by transforming fallow land into Maplewood Golf Club.

By David McPherson

You think the rough at your course is long, try hitting it out of two-foot high weeds. Or, better yet, try to sink a three-footer through these bothersome grasses. Had you wandered upon Maplewood Golf Club, just south of Winnipeg, Manitoba, a couple of years ago, that's what you would have encountered. The course was better suited for sheep to graze than for golfers to play. Now, thanks to a new ownership group, the once abandoned course has been resurrected, renamed, and is back to provide those in this rural community a good walk not spoiled.

Early in the 2000s, a soggy spring left the course in limbo. More flooding and bickering between multiple owners closed the course for

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good in 2006. The golf course was formally called Rat River Golf Club after the Red River tributary that meanders through the course; this waterway has always been the cause of perennial flooding – the nemesis of all the previous owners. There are no bunkers on the golf course as it is set up to require less maintenance. It's not an executive course, but it's shorter than most modern tracks at 5,500

from the blue tees and a par 70.

New owner Michael Guertin took over in 2008. He immediately addressed the river issues. All the protective dikes around the river were raised and repaired and incorporated more into the game. The bridges were also restored. Eventually the plan is to seed the dikes with some wild grasses to give them a more uniform and inclusive look on the course.

Three holes were rerouted on the back nine and five greens were completely renovated. Hole No. 11 over the river is now a 300 par 4 from the tips instead of the previous 470 yard monster down a narrow fairway. Several tee decks were also added on each hole, including a few tees on top of the dikes.

Guertin then hired a small crew to come in and start cutting back the grass to get it back into playing shape. Luke Wiebe, who had worked with Guertin in Winnipeg as a salesman for John Deere, was hired as the golf operations manager. With a limited advertising budget, he says one of the biggest struggles has been letting people know the course is reopened.

"We've struggled a little bit to get the old customers back, letting them know that we are open and also getting new customers," Wiebe says. "In Winnipeg, Manitoba, everyone wants deals. We are a price-driven province, so that makes it difficult."

A round at Maplewood costs \$35, and that even includes a cart. "We are the best value in Manitoba," jokes Wiebe.

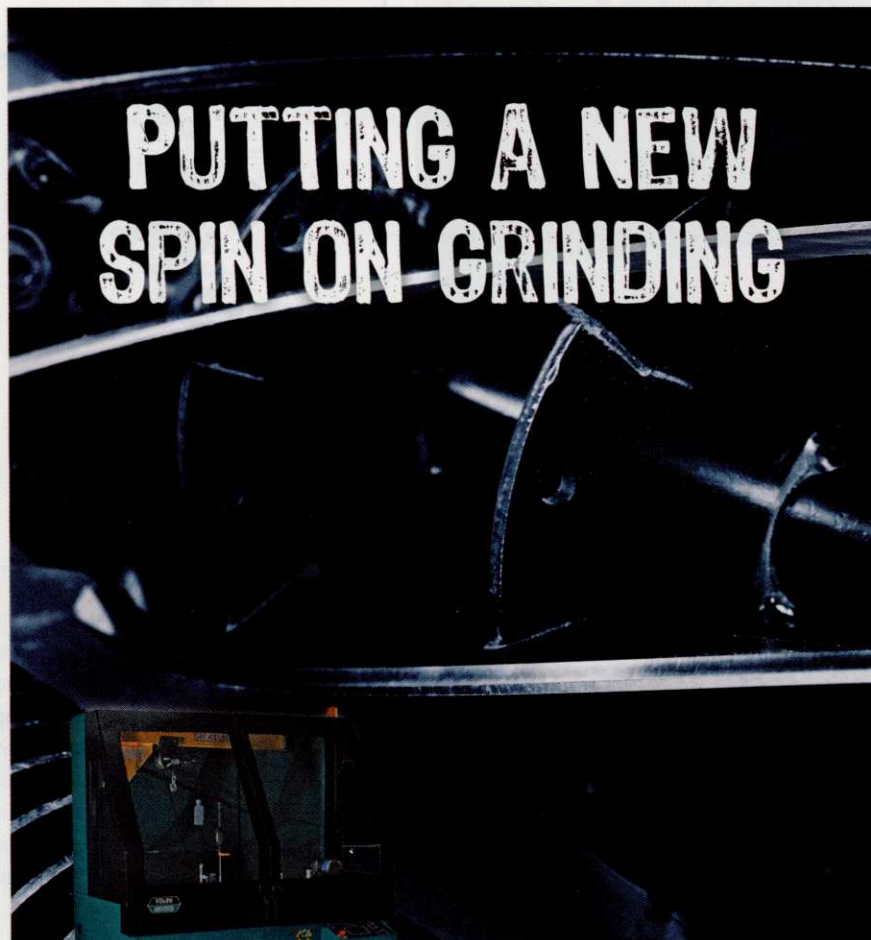
After the initial work in 2008, Superintendent Mike Greenwood was hired in 2009 to finish the job and get the course open in decent playing shape. Greenwood, who has been a greenkeeper for 14 years, came to Maplewood from Della Hunt Golf and Country Club a small private club 90 minutes outside Winnipeg.

"When I arrived, there had been no maintenance, absolutely nothing," says Greenwood. "The greens, tees... everything had been neglected. In 2008, the owner hired a small crew of four to five guys to come in before I came. They came in with large equipment and brush cutters and knocked everything down to four or five inches – that's how far gone it was. Literally, there were common burdocks and two-foot tall weeds on the greens and tees. It looked more like abandoned pasture land than a golf course."

Greenwood and his crew worked quickly to finish off the course renovation in early 2009, so the front nine was opened in mid June. The superintendent says that they basically had to start from scratch.

"All the greens had to be reworked and overseeded," he says. "We were able to salvage some of the turf that was there on a few greens, but the majority were resurfaced and reseeded."

Checking his calculator, Greenwood estimates they overseeded approximately



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100,000 square feet of green space throughout 2009. The greens were overseeded with an aggressive pro bentgrass while all the fairways were seeded with a variety of bluegrass. Maplewood also did an overhaul of its irrigation system.

Mother Nature sure didn't cooperate in 2009. Winnipeegers suffered through a

record-setting eight consecutive months of cooler-than-normal temperatures. Following a brutally cold winter, it was a soggy spring with a flood that was the second-worst in the past 100 years.

"We had major difficulties last season from the weather with tons of rain," Greenwood says. "It was a terrible year to try to grow in

a golf course, which didn't help at all. Some of the greens and fairways – even though we are now completely open – are still only six months old."

Thankfully, after a kinder Mother Nature in the fall of 2009 and spring of 2010, mid-way through this season, all 18 holes are now open, customers are coming out more, and the course is in decent shape. The goal is to get the greens in top-notch shape as soon as possible. "All things considered, I'm relatively happy with the conditioning of the course," adds Greenwood.

Regarding the dikes, there is always ongoing maintenance – patching up weak areas here or there, but most of the flooding problems have been addressed. "The last two years had they not been addressed we would never have been opened," Greenwood says. "If the repair work had not been done, we would be flooding right now. We are happy with how all the dike work has held up and hopefully it continues to do so."

The biggest challenge was to initially get the course back to playable conditions. "Getting everything knocked down to playable height and being able to manage all the weeds was initially the hardest part of getting this course re-established," he explains. "You can imagine the amount of weed seeds that were packed in the soil after being let go for two years. It's been a bit of a struggle to clean it up, keep it clean with the amount of debris that was left lying around and trying to re-establish normal cultural practices that had not been done for years."

Surprisingly there was little disease to battle. Getting the course back to playing shape from a pasture to pristine greens is an ongoing process, but Greenwood is pleased with the progress. There is work to do on the fairways, he says, but most locals are happy to have an 18-hole course back.

"It's been a learning experience for sure," Greenwood concludes. "I came from a 9-hole course in rural Manitoba and moved here not fully expecting the condition of what the course was in. I've learned a lot on my own ... it's difficult to pinpoint any exact situation. When you enter something completely different, every day is different... there are different problems – whether it's an irrigation problem or Mother Nature – you have to take them as they come and hope for the best." **GC**

*David McPherson is a freelance writer based in Toronto.*



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