

STORIED GOLF COURSE trees

Mark Twain infamously called golf “a good walk spoiled.” Maybe his course never had any trees. If Twain had tried one with tree-lined fairways, he’d have heard more than his share of stories – and how could the American fiction master have resisted that?

Because, for the layout with trees, or ones that used to have a few, or even those with one lonesome pine (or oak, cypress or willow), a tale of how they got there, how they’re cared for or how they went the way of all flesh are as common as the weekend duffer dreaming of the Amen Corner or the bonnie links o’ Scotland.

Twain might have especially liked the one about the putter that fell to earth. So read on for a variety of tales at some sweet layouts. The real story of trees on golf courses is, well – the trees.

**WITH GOLF COURSE
TREES, THERE’S A STORY
IN EVERY BRANCH – AND
SOMETIMES A PUTTER.**

By Paul Hughes

PRESIDENTIAL PRIVILEGE

Augusta National, Augusta, Ga.



Augusta's Big Oak



Augusta's 17th hole, Eisenhower Pine

Augusta National Golf Club is arguably the most storied, exclusive and tree-story-laden golf course in the world. The permanent home of The Masters tournament begins and ends in tree lore.

Augusta opened in 1933, reportedly built on grounds formerly housing a tree farm. Each of the 18 holes is named according to a tree or shrub. Since The Masters is played in the spring, these are often fully flowered during the event.

A tree known simply as "the big oak" stands near the clubhouse, and is approximately 150 years old.

But perhaps the most famous tree is the "Eisenhower Pine," a loblolly pine on hole 17, some 200 yards from the tee box. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who often played and stayed at Augusta, hit into the tree almost as often, and the pine has long been called in his honor.

There is also a pond, named Ike's Pond, in honor of Eisenhower. Ike reportedly told Augusta Chairman Clifford Roberts he'd found the ideal spot for a dam, if the club would like a fish pond. The dam was immediately built, and the pond was born.

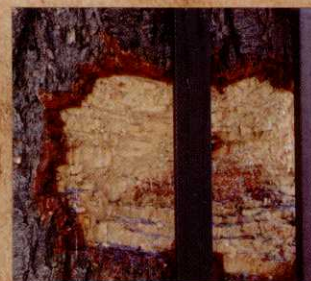
Augusta is reportedly getting more tree-like recently as well – news reports noted that as of 2007 the course had added more than 250 trees, to create new angles on shots and make some holes more difficult.

ICONIC GRANDEUR (OR THE "CHARLIE BROWN")

Chambers Bay, University Place, Wash.



Chambers Bay's Lone Fir



Vandalism at Chambers Bay

For 110 years it was a sand and gravel pit – reportedly the most productive one in the country in the 1970s – so you wouldn't expect many trees in the area. Now a top-flight golf course called Chambers Bay, there still aren't many trees. In fact, there's one. Folks around there are growing fond of it, too.

"During construction the golf course architect loved it and threatened the lives of any worker who damaged it," says David Wienecke, director of golf course management at the course. "It's not a specimen tree. I call it the 'Charlie Brown' tree."

The Douglas fir is upward of 40 feet tall, Wienecke figures, growing in a hilly dune section on the Puget Sound side of the course, behind the 15th green. It's become an icon for the golf course itself.

"It's in the ads and articles, and almost every photo has that tree," he says. "That tree has become the image of the course in everyone's mind."

But not everyone likes it. Or perhaps some people are just jerks. In April 2008 vandals hacked portions of the trunk with an axe.

Wienecke says people have significant access to the area because a public walking trail runs through the course.

"We are in the public eye," he says. "It makes security hard."

In the aftermath of the attack, he received e-mails, calls and even letters advising him how to care for the tree. He brought in an arborist, putting in braces to support the tree but opting against a fence to prevent access. "The wounds weren't life-threatening, and we didn't want to harm the aesthetics," he says.

Instead, there is now an 8-foot-tall, black, cyclone-fence wrapping padlocked to the tree. Wienecke can unlock it to care for it, but it is invisible to the eye from a distance.

"It's near the championship tees on the 16th," he says. "You won't even know it's wrapped."

Wienecke figures the fir is only 50 to 75 years old – but may not have many years left. It grows where trees don't, and it's been attacked.

"The growth rings are compact so we know it's been stressed," he says. "There's a lot of cone production – so it might be saying it won't be around much longer."

TWO TREES (OR "RETURN TO HISTORY")

Oakmont Country Club, Oakmont, Pa.



Oakmont's No.14 before



Oakmont's No. 14 after

“They started planting trees here in the 1960s and 1970s,” John Zimmers says. He’s superintendent at Oakmont Country Club, which, beginning in the 1990s, started removing those same trees.

He figures plantings began as part of a “beautify America” program following the post-WWII building boom that saw functional but ugly buildings thrown up all over the country to accommodate the fast-growing population. Further impetus came from club members to “beautify Oakmont” – and the club added several thousand trees – some 40 years ago.

They were indeed beautiful trees, and it was a nice, shady course. But it was wrong for the golf course long-term.

“It was way overgrown,” Zimmers says. “There were more than 5,000 trees on the course. It affected how it looked and how it played.”

The trees had been a big problem for the greens, he says.

“Trees and grass don’t grow well together,” Zimmers says. It also wasn’t true to Oakmont history. Henry Fownes drew it in 1903 as a links-style course with windswept greens and grasses – no trees. “We were trying to restore the golf course to its original design.”

Oakmont started removing evergreens in the mid-1990s, he says, just to “clear some space.” As work progressed, they got more aggressive.

“They realized, ‘The more we open it, the better it looks and plays,’” Zimmers says.

Because the membership at the time liked the trees, a lot of the work had to be done in the early morning or late at night.

“At the beginning, it was a sensitive issue,” Zimmers says. “Now if you surveyed the membership, 98 to 99 percent would approve.”

Trees that had overgrown bunkers and greens – gone. Trees for an idea, someone’s idea, of beauty – gone. Nearly all the trees – gone. By 2005, they were done.

“It was a big undertaking,” he says. “Now the course is restored.”

So much so, that Oakmont hosted the U.S. Open in 2007. The course, brand new and wonderfully old at the same time, wowed the observers, players and attendees who came to the Open – with an estimated 10,000 more of the latter able to come because removing the trees added so much room. Oakmont’s revivalist return to tradition raised the club into the top echelons of Golf Digest’s Top 100 courses, and the USGA advised golf courses that were considering tree removal and course restoration to visit Oakmont to see how it’s done.

Only two trees remain: at the third tee and near the 4th and 5th holes.

“They’re staying for now,” Zimmers says.

A SHORT CUT (OR “NO SLOW GROWTH”)

Inverness Club, Toledo, Ohio

Designed in 1903 by Donald Ross, it was 75 years later that Inverness became known for “the Hinkle tree.”

Courses are often changed and improved in various ways prior to major golf events; all are spruced up, dressed to the nines, to accommodate excellent golfers, galleries of spectators and television cameras. In 1979, Inverness hosted the U.S. Open, and something one golfer did is remembered today.

Lon Hinkle studied the course intently during a practice round, and noticed the 8th had been changed from a long par-three to a par-five, to make room for spectators. He saw that by playing the 17th fairway instead (it ran next to the 8th), he’d get a 50-yard shortcut.

It wasn’t against any Rules of Golf, and the fairway in question was clear of golfers, so during the first round he nailed his shot just that way. He birdied the hole, gaining a stroke on his competition.

Overnight, the USGA fixed his caddy wagon. They planted a 25-foot spruce to block the route.

Several golfers that second day, including Hinkle, nonetheless tried the same strategy as before. Some didn’t make it over the tree, some did, and one did – only to land in the ravine opposite. Hinkle found the green in two that second round – another good performance.

In the final two rounds Hinkle played the 8th the conventional way. The tree still stands.

Conventional images of Oklahoma suggest the place where God decided to collect all the dust from creating the world. In fact, the state is heavily forested – not to mention mountained and laked – and very little is the “Dust Bowl” of old.

“This is green country,” says Russ Myers, CGCS, former superintendent at Southern Hills Country Club.

It’s a native oak area, he notes, along with sycamore, and the private club has a full-time horticulturist on staff.

In fact, Southern Hills has some 4,000 trees on its 27 holes. It’s a far cry from the two dozen first planted near five greens – for shade – when the course was built in 1936.

Occasionally, the trees cause trouble. A state champion American elm on the second green was one of them. About 150 years old, Myers had to remove it in February 2007.

“It was either the largest or the oldest in the state,” he says. “But we battled with that green for years.”

TREES GROW IN OKLAHOMA
Southern Hills Country Club, Tulsa, Okla.



Tree removal at Southern Hills

Myers worked with a tree care company to survey the course, mapping each tree in a shade analysis study to find which ones were causing problems. He found the green in question was getting less than an hour of sun per day.

The choices were to move the green, accept the poor grass or remove the tree.

“The membership did not want the tree removed,” Myers says. “It was a whole mind-set to go through, and it truly took facts and data to show them the need.”

When they took it down – the elm was at least 5 feet in diameter – Myers learned the tree was almost entirely hollow inside from disease.

The result since its removal? “It turned that green into one of our strongest,” he says.

Myers also lost about 100 trees to an ice storm in winter 2007-2008, and has replaced many. In fact, the club, with just fewer than a thousand members, is working on its vision of what the course will look like for the next 30 years.

People usually throw their clubs into the lake. James Ward, golf manager for the Los Angeles department of parks and recreation, was managing one of the city’s golf courses, Wilson, in 1997. A popular layout at Griffith Park, Wilson Golf Course plays more than 90,000 rounds a year. After one of those rounds, Ward says, a golfer came up to the starter with an odd request.

“He said, ‘I need your help recovering a putter,’” recalls Ward.

At the par-5 15th, the golfer had quarreled with the foursome playing behind him. Golf balls were tapped out of the way, tempers flared – and a player in the foursome threw the man’s putter into a eucalyptus globulus (blue gum).

“It was 80 or 90 feet tall,” Ward says of the tree. “The putter was 30 feet up.”

The golfer explained the putter – a BullsEye, with a brass blade – had been his father’s; he needed it back.

He left his name and number, and the next day, a tree crew knocked a putter out of the tree: a BullsEye with a brass blade. “We called him, he came down, looked at it, and said, ‘This is not my putter.’”

Yes, when the crew went back into the tree, they found another putter – a BullsEye with a brass blade. “One tree on one hole had two putters in it,” Ward says. “Nothing that crazy has happened since.”

The man retrieved his dad’s putter. But, Ward says, “I still have the other one.”

MEASURE ONCE, PUTT TWICE
Wilson Golf Course, Los Angeles

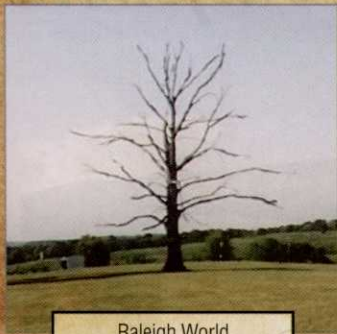


Blue gum trees at Wilson



THE OLD OAK TREE (OR "IF YOU BUILD IT – DON'T TOUCH THE TREE")

Raleigh World Golf Course, Norwood, Iowa



Raleigh World

Raleigh Dunston has spent the better part of 20 years building his golf course. He started it in 1990, opened it in 2002, and improves it a little bit every day.

"I'm trying to make it a full-time thing, but it's not yet," he says.

But Raleigh World is more than just "pasture golf," with a few holes in a field and a box to collect greens fees on the honor system. Dunston has a full 18 holes, flags, rental golf cars, a 3,000-square-foot clubhouse (a converted barn) – even advertising. The greensmower goes out every day.

"The only difference is I don't have bentgrass," he says. "So it's more like early golf."

It plays about 5,000 to 8,000 rounds a year – he's not quite sure, since it's more a labor of love than a labor of economics and spreadsheets. But his wife loves the tree.

It was there, on his family's land, when he was 5 years old; it was there when he was building the golf course and it's there now, right on the 14th green.

"That tree has been standing for about a hundred years," Dunston says. "My wife kind of adopted it when I was working on the course, and she wouldn't let me cut it down."

An old oak tree, sans yellow ribbon, it doesn't bloom or grow or die.

"It doesn't do anything," Dunston says. "It just stands there."

Right in the middle of play.

"That just makes it a little bit more fun," he says. "We put up a sign that says if you hit the tree, it's a three-stroke penalty."

This article originally appeared in Tree Care Industry Magazine. It's reprinted here with permission from the Tree Care Industry Association.

TREE HUGGER

Abington Country Club, Jenkintown, Pa.



The willow tree at Abington's 5th hole

You can't miss it, much as they'd like to. The 5th hole at Abington has a willow tree on it – right on it. The tree, about 40 feet tall, is smack dab in front of the green. It blocks at least one-third of the landing area at the hole, making viewing it – let alone access to it – a challenge, to say the least.

"It's a par 3," says Timothy Walker, superintendent. So, on such a short hole, "You have to go over it or around it. And, in the evening the hole plays right into the sun."

The owner won't cut it down, he says.

"He's not into cutting trees down," Walker notes nonchalantly. "He just likes trees."

The course was built in 1913 and Walker believes the tree was there at that time, though he's not sure of the history of the tree itself. Complicating matters is that the course owner is actually long-term leasing the land from a Pennsylvania Quaker group, he says.

"It's the Abington Friends," Walker says. "Maybe we can't actually do anything with the tree."

It's a nice looking tree, he notes, that presents a practical problem.

"It's funny to have it there," Walker says. "Golfers actually like the tree; I have no idea why." **GCI**