

Not only was Frontier Golf restricted to nine holes each season, the holes were grouped by proximity rather than by sequence.



Precision and strategy

Frontier Golf sculpted Donald Ross's original vision to recreate the characteristics of Army Navy Country Club when it was first laid out in 1924.

BY TRENT BOUTS

Given a site so steeped in history as Army Navy Country Club in Arlington, Va., a desire to restore the golf course to a showpiece of the game's golden era makes perfect sense. Presidents have played here. Some, like Eisenhower, Nixon and Kennedy, were members along with icons of the nation's military — think LeJeune, Nimitz and Bradley.

The same soil also bore the footfall of Union soldiers bringing wounded to a hospital from the Battle of Bull Run. Convinced

of a long campaign ahead, which we know as the Civil War, Lincoln ordered the land, boasting some of the highest ground outside the capital, be fortified. Today, only sparse remnants of Fort Richardson's parapets and ditches remain.

The broad sweep of that past surely resonates with the veterans and members of the armed forces who enjoy the Arlington facility's 27 holes. But while it factored little into how Frontier Golf went about renovating the golf course, it is fair to say that the complex nature of the project very much demanded military precision and a general's command of strategy.

From 2007 to 2009, Frontier would have — from mobilization

to grassing — just two months each summer to complete nine holes. That left 18 holes open each season which was doubtless welcomed by members but a major constraint on how and when Frontier moved about the property. The nine holes they could work on each year were not sequential, either. Rather, they were in clumps chosen more for their proximity to each other.

That meant Frontier worked like a Hollywood director shooting scenes by location instead of the narrative. The trick then is making sure that the jumble that's been created fits and flows seamlessly once order is imposed. Nuance and tone matter as a story unfolds just as they do on a golf course, particularly one



With a heavily varied history, the golf course hid underground mazes of old irrigation lines, power cables and terra-cotta piping, complicating infrastructure renovation.

designed by Donald Ross.

At Army Navy, the goal was to recreate the characteristics of the course when it was first laid out in 1924 in the midst of what is often referred to as the Golden Age of golf course design. The club retained Pinehurst, N.C.-based architect Richard Mandell for the project, which suited Frontier just fine given that they had worked extensively and successfully together in the past.

"The logistics were a real challenge for them," he says of the hurdles Frontier had to overcome this time around. "The budget was tight but the real challenge was being so limited in where you could move and how little disturbance was allowed." Mandell likened the myriad constraints to "working in a straightjacket."

"And you're working on pieces of different nines at the same time," he says. "But then to float everything together so well, like they did, they just did a wonderful job."

Some of the straps on that straightjacket included the fact that golfers were always playing nearby and the rest of the club continued to function as normal. That limited what

traffic could move where, when and at what speed. Residential neighbors also meant the golf course was subject to restrictions on noise and working hours.

But perhaps the most visible restraints came in the form of erosion fences. The Arlington facility – Army Navy also has 27 holes in nearby Fairfax – sits astride a stream that runs through the base of a valley. Pretty much every hole drains towards the stream. Some points are as much as 140 feet higher, which meant Frontier had to work with earthmoving's version of kid gloves and devote considerable resources to maintaining that fencing. "It had the makings of an erosion control nightmare," says Frontier's president and CEO, Nick Scigliano.

Nowhere near as obvious but just as constricting was the fact that the irrigation system had to remain operational throughout, even while it was completely replaced. Scigliano believes his company's ability to piece together that jigsaw itself was critical. Indeed, he says, their ability to handle every aspect of the work in-house was a major reason for finishing on time and in line with the \$5 million budget.

Legacy Award Breakdown

BUILDER: Frontier Golf

PROJECT: Army Navy Country Club, Arlington, Va.

COST: \$5 million

TERM: Summer 2007 to June 2010

ARCHITECT: Richard Mandell, ASGCA

SUPERINTENDENT: Bob Wilbur

NOTABLE NOTES: Faced with a number of restrictions and challenges, the builder split the project into three phases, kept the course open throughout the duration of the project and finished according to the original timetable.

"We had tremendous autonomy all along because we didn't have to rely on contractors," he says. "It was a total renovation, most everything was touched but we did everything, from grading to sodding, to asphalt paving and drainage up to storm drains as big as 48 inches. But the biggest one, I think, was being able to do our own irrigation. We could be very flexible where we focused our resources. If we had a wet day, and that last year we had a lot of rain, we could move onto something else."

In such tight windows of operation each year there was minimal room for lost productivity, although there was plenty of opportunity for it. Built so long ago and tinkered



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with ever since, the golf course also served as a kind of graveyard for old irrigation lines, power cables and terra-cotta piping, none of which were ever recorded on any as-built map. That was where the tenure of golf course superintendent, Bob Wilbur, and frequent site visits by Mandell proved invaluable.

Wilbur has been at Army Navy for 32 years, the last 22 as superintendent. With that experience he was able to help Frontier's crew make sense of infrastructure they "discovered" as they went. With Mandell on site weekly, Scigliano says, "We were able to quickly make decisions and get approval to move forward and remedy situations without delays. Richard would make decisions right then, there was no, 'Oh, let me think about it.' He knew what he wanted and he'd make the call."

Scigliano also credits Frontier's project construction superintendent, Doug Show, who was also the main man on the Olympic and Bedford Springs projects. "He's our top guy," Scigliano says of Show. "We've done a lot of work with (Mandell) before, so Doug's very familiar with his processes and that helped us make up some ground on the greens where we probably underestimated the amount of work involved with the erosion control."

Another reason why no hiccups ever became full-blown indigestion was that, as is his habit, Scigliano talked up grim along with the glowing before a speck of dirt was even moved. "I always get the 'what ifs' out there on the table so no one is surprised," he says. "We talked at great length before we put a shovel in the ground and I painted a more

difficult picture than we were probably going to encounter. People always tend to look at me after those meetings and think of me as really pessimistic and negative. In my experience, every project that doesn't go well is the project when the clients are met with surprises. In this work I think too much information is a good thing."

There was a lot to talk about. On top everything cited above, the project also called for Frontier to:

- Install new drainage for all 27 holes;
- Reroute and redo cart paths;
- Replace turfgrass in out-of-play areas with native; vegetation in no-mow zones;
- Demolish and rebuild existing bridges;
- Replace the old pump station;
- Remove a number of hardwood trees;
- Regrass the entire course and
- Rebuild every bunker.

That last element was a big one. The scalloped or jagged edging Mandell called for to elicit that feel of an older time required "a lot of pick and shovel" work, Scigliano says. "It was simply too intricate to use any kind of machine and Richard was very particular about how he wanted those bunkers to look."

Another aspect of the project that could have caused some frayed edges of its own was the personnel rotation on Frontier's end. With the volatile nature of the industry over the past few years, Frontier used three different crews in each year of the renovation. Smaller crews in 2007 and 2008 were replaced by a much larger crew of about 50 people under Show's command in 2009. That workforce enabled

Show to complete the final stage and also attend to the kind of detail necessary to blend everything that had been done previously.

Army Navy was able to provide valuable constants in superintendent Wilbur and director of golf, Greg Scott. Mandell says Scott's work communicating with members over the course of the renovation was "fantastic."

"Greg did some value engineering on his side too, and if not for him working so well with the members to explain the rebuild, the project might never have gotten off the ground," he says.

Scigliano says there were times when it felt as Wilbur was on Frontier's staff. "He was so tremendously helpful," Scigliano says. "Sometimes you run up against a situation when something comes up and the attitude from the club side is, 'Hey, this is your job, it's your contract, it's your problem.' If you start with that kind of approach, where both sides start guarding their territory and their dollars, then you can become isolated very quickly. Not in this case. Bob was great to work with. He was a real problem solver. He seemed like he was having fun and our guys enjoyed working with him."

After so long tending the property, it would have been reasonable to expect Wilbur to almost resent these outsiders coming in to tear up what he regarded as a "really nice old course" — especially when they were going to be moving in and out over three years. Today, Wilbur admits to having some "apprehension" at the time. He just as readily admits his fears were ill-founded. "It was a great experience and it seemed like their people got better and better each year," he says. "We just worked great together. There were no hidden agendas, no head-butting, no egos involved. If we had concerns we just worked it out. Nick (Scigliano) and Doug (Show) were very open and willing to resolve and issue and there was never any nickel and diming."

The end product has delighted the Army Navy membership numbering about 2,400 across the Arlington and Fairfax facilities. Although with families included, the number of golfers is closer to the 4,000 bag tags the club distributes. By Wilbur's measure, the Arlington golf course is every bit the facility to do justice to a new \$50 million clubhouse currently under construction.

"The golfers love it. They absolutely love it," he says. "I never thought I could feel any better about this golf course than I did before but, wow, it is really something special now." GCI