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## THE ORIGINAL HOME OF FIRM AND FAST

**W**e are in the midst of championship golf season with my favorite – The Open Championship – to be contested at the home of golf, the Old Course at St. Andrews. To visit, walk and play this mystical place is a must for any student of the game.

From Tom Morris Senior to the current director of greenkeeping, Gordon Moir, many special people have cared for the birthplace of the game. Gordon is entering his 20th year working at St. Andrews, beginning in 1991 as the course manager for the Eden Course and has been in overall charge of all seven courses including the Old Course since 2000, managing more than 100 staff. Between bites of his lunchtime sandwich I caught up with Gordon as he readied for his fifth Open Championship.

**Q** With world politics and courses being open to the public, are there any special needs and requirements that are unusual to The Open?

**A** We try to keep things as normal as possible, but as you would understand, security issues are always at the forefront. With 50,000 spectators arriving daily, the security screening is intense. This year The Royal and Ancient (R&A), who run the tournament, have employed the x-ray devices used at the major European airports to see through and detect any non-conforming devices. Mobile phones, PDA's, computers and the like will be removed from guests as they arrive and returned when they leave. Past Champions Day (Wednesday), will be busy as it is still an official practice day, therefore cameras will be allowed. It is a small field and 30,000 spectators are all trying to watch in a limited space. The Old Course is difficult for fans because golf is only viewable from

outside edges because the holes run parallel and there are double greens. We have accommodated spectators with 22,000 grandstand seats.

**Q** For the U.S. Open the host golf course superintendent usually receives thousands of requests from people wishing to volunteer. Does this hold true for you and The Open?

**A** It does and it is tough to turn people down, but we do not use any volunteers. We have a staff of

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**“Our speed goal is 10.5 feet. Any faster, with the normal wind blowing, and balls begin to move and will roll off the greens.”**

— Gordon Moir, director of green keeping, St. Andrews

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around 100 who work hard for us all year long and working on The Open at the Old Course is their reward. This crew performs the various chores needed for daily preparation and management of the championship. I have five past employees coming to volunteer – that's all.

**Q** How much influence and guidance do R&A have with you, your staff and the course?

**A** Peter Dawson, R&A chief executive, is involved with every aspect of the Open Championship. He will spend an inordinate amount of time on the course walking and reviewing the notes made from the previous event's de-briefing. Grant Moir (no relation) is the golf course set-up man who works with Gordon McKie,

my course manager on the Old, for on-course preparation and set up. The turfgrass work is reviewed by Richard Windows of the Sports Turf Research Institute for additional turfgrass support. The annual Dunhill Cup serves as a barometer to monitor the players' abilities and how they affect the golf course. Between the five of us, we should get most things correct!

**Q** With the putting greens so vital to the golf course what should those of us watching on television look for?

**A** There are several items that make our greens special:

- They will be firm due to wind, climate and rolling practices that will make it tough for players to spin and stop their golf balls, especially out of the rough grass;
- We will closely monitor any irrigation so the firmness remains stable for all 18 surfaces. This will allow players to bounce, run and roll the ball to the hole rather than fly into a soft surface;
- With a slower green speed due to anticipated winds The R&A will be able to choose a more challenging hole location, bringing rough and bunkers more into play. Watch our par three, 11th hole during The Open; and
- The wind, if it blows 15 to 20 mph, will place a premium on shot accuracy and force players to think more.

**Q** Any words of advice for those who have an event?

**A** For us preparation is the key. We are lucky to have The Dunhill Cup as a practice run. Even with the extra tournament activity we still execute our “dummy run” prior to the championship to be 100 percent on cue. We must be organized with our maintenance so there is no criticism of the golf course and do the best we can in our preparations. After that it is up to the player. **GCI**





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## EDITOR'S NOTE:

# A TALE OF TWO COURSES

The times have not been particularly kind to the golf course industry.

Whether a casualty of excessive development or a result of the recent economic downturn, you don't have to drive very far before you happen upon a fallow course, its fairways and greens overgrown and its once lily-white bunkers breeding grounds for weeds.

But this dire outcome doesn't always have to be the end result. While investigating what happens to failed golf courses when they no longer serve up tee times we were surprised to learn that many of these abandoned properties receive a second lease on life. And contrary to popular belief, many aren't destined to become the foundations for new housing developments, but rather they're resurrected as viable golf courses and continue to serve their communities as parks and nature preserves.

If you know of other examples, please forward them to us at [gci@gie.net](mailto:gci@gie.net). We'd like to share them with you in upcoming issues of the magazine and online.

Mike Zawacki, editor

# A COMMUNITY ASSET

Unable to meet the demands of running a nine-hole course, the Grant family, with their local government, converted their facility into a community park. *By John Torsiello*



A 100-foot steel bridge still spans a creek at the former Veronica Valley Golf Course in Leelanau, Mich. Today, the facility serves as a community park.

For 14 years, Veronica Valley Golf Course in Leelanau, Mich., was a fairway of dreams for William and Diane Grant and their extended family.

Dedicated to William Grant's late grandmother, Veronica Schaub-Peplinski, a woman who liked to make dreams come true, the course – a true mom-and-pop operation – opened in 1991 and for nearly a decade and a half delighted visitors with its challenge and whimsy.

"We purchased the property with help from grandma and grew strawberries on it for several seasons," Diane Grant says. "When the bottom dropped out of the market we started to wonder what else we could do with the land. We looked into creating a camp-

ground, but there were already two popular campgrounds in the area. One day, one of the guys from the conservation service told us the property would make a beautiful golf course. A couple of hours later Bill was out in the field and a guy went by with golf clubs in the back of his car. That was another hint and we thought, 'let's build a golf course.'"

Which the couple began to do with some trepidation in 1989, first clearing the land, and then seeding the course in 1990 and opening the nine-hole, 3,203-yard par-35 layout in the spring of 1991.

Diane Grant admits she and her husband didn't know what a tee was when they set out to create their course. "Really, we had no clue what we were doing. Nobody in the



family was a golfer, but we worked hard and got lots of help from neighbors, friends and family members,” she says.

She recalls her children driving four-wheel off-road vehicles with old bed springs attached to the rear to level dirt to create fairways and greens, and neighbors donating trees to plant on the property.

“We worked from five in the morning to dark in-season taking care of the course and running the business,” she says. “Our kids would work there eight hours a day. We could never really turn enough rounds to justify hiring a professional for the pro shop and lessons.”

But the public responded and the course was hopping April through October. A few celebrities vacationing in the area – located close to Lake Michigan in the upper northwest corner of the lower peninsula of the state – dropped by after hearing of the eclectic and scenic course run by a friendly couple.

“We made it a family golf course,” Diane says. “Each year we would put new things out on the course. We had a 100-foot steel bridge going over a creek, covered bridges, carved wooden statues, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves characters, a bear that roared at you when you came around a corner, and Rapunzel’s castle. Some people didn’t like it because they felt it distracted them. But most enjoyed what we did and the kids loved it.”

In 2002, William was diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease and the couple had decisions to make. William could no longer keep up with the dawn-to-dark, 24-7 demands of caring for a golf course. The couple’s children had grown up and did not express a desire to follow in their parent’s footsteps, although they did spend plenty of time helping manage the layout during its decade-plus of operation.

The Grants reviewed their options during the next two years, getting several offers from developers, although none seemed interested in maintaining the 93-acre parcel as a golf course.

“I think people saw how hard we worked and what we went through to keep the course open and weren’t interested in that lifestyle,” says Diane Grant. “Some of the people we talked to wanted to change the land to something other than a place where people could come to enjoy themselves, which had always been the intent of buying the land and then managing it.”

What occurred next was sweet happenstance, she says.

“We saw a story in the paper about a family



Only faint traces of the former nine-hole course remains today.

that had sold land to create soccer fields and we thought that might be a way to go,” she says. “We said to ourselves, ‘What if we made the golf course into a park and our kids, grand kids and others could come and enjoy the land. We approached the county (Leelanau) about perhaps selling the course to them for passive recreational use and they got the ball rolling. Turning it into a park was in keeping with grandma’s initial desires for the land.”

Greg Julian, a Leelanau County parks and recreation commissioner, says the offer by the Grants to sell the land to the county was serendipitous.

“We were looking for land to create a park in the eastern part of the county where the golf course was located. We looked at several pieces of land, but the Grants’ parcel was ideal for our purposes. There was a little back and forth and we applied for a grant to help buy the property.”

The former golf course, located in Bingham Township, about a 20-minute drive from Traverse City, was eventually sold in 2008 for around \$800,000, with the county obtaining a \$525,000 grant from the Michigan

Natural Resources Trust Fund to assist in the purchase. The Grant family stipulated in the purchase agreement that the land must be used for recreational purposes – hiking, picnicking, fishing and hunting and other such pursuits. Local civic organizations, including the Traverse City Rotary, contributed funds toward the purchase.

About one third of the former course consists of wetlands, while the remainder is mostly open meadows with some wooded areas. A trout stream runs through the property. Because of the pathways and roads that were built for the golf course, the land is quite accessible and somewhat easy to maintain, county officials say.

The county received advice on how best to proceed with the purchase of the land, and resulting establishment of the park, from the Leelanau Nature Conservancy, Julian says.

“They do land purchases for a living and we aren’t experts in the field. We did use them as a resource and their input was helpful throughout the process,” he says.

The park’s upkeep and future develop-  
(continued on page 74)





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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.

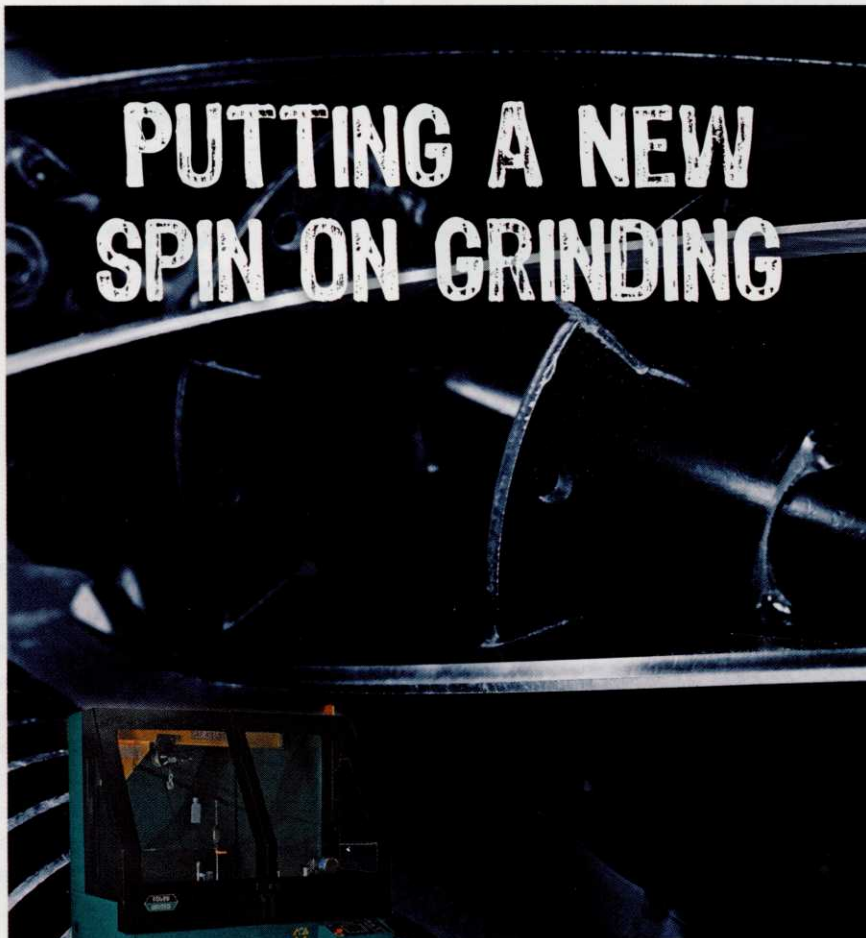
After the initial work in 2008, Superintendent Mike Greenwood was hired in 2009 to finish the job and get the course open in decent playing shape. Greenwood, who has been a greenkeeper for 14 years, came to Maplewood from Della Hunt Golf and Country Club a small private club 90 minutes outside Winnipeg.

"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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