

# Raynor Course Rejuvenated

A superintendent's startling discovery and an architect's candid criticism led to a course restoration at Yeamans Hall Club • **BY LARRY AYLWARD, MANAGING EDITOR**

**Y**eamans Hall Club superintendent Jim Yonce was rummaging around his golf course's clubhouse attic on a rainy summer day in 1986 when he uncovered a rare and exciting find from yesteryear.

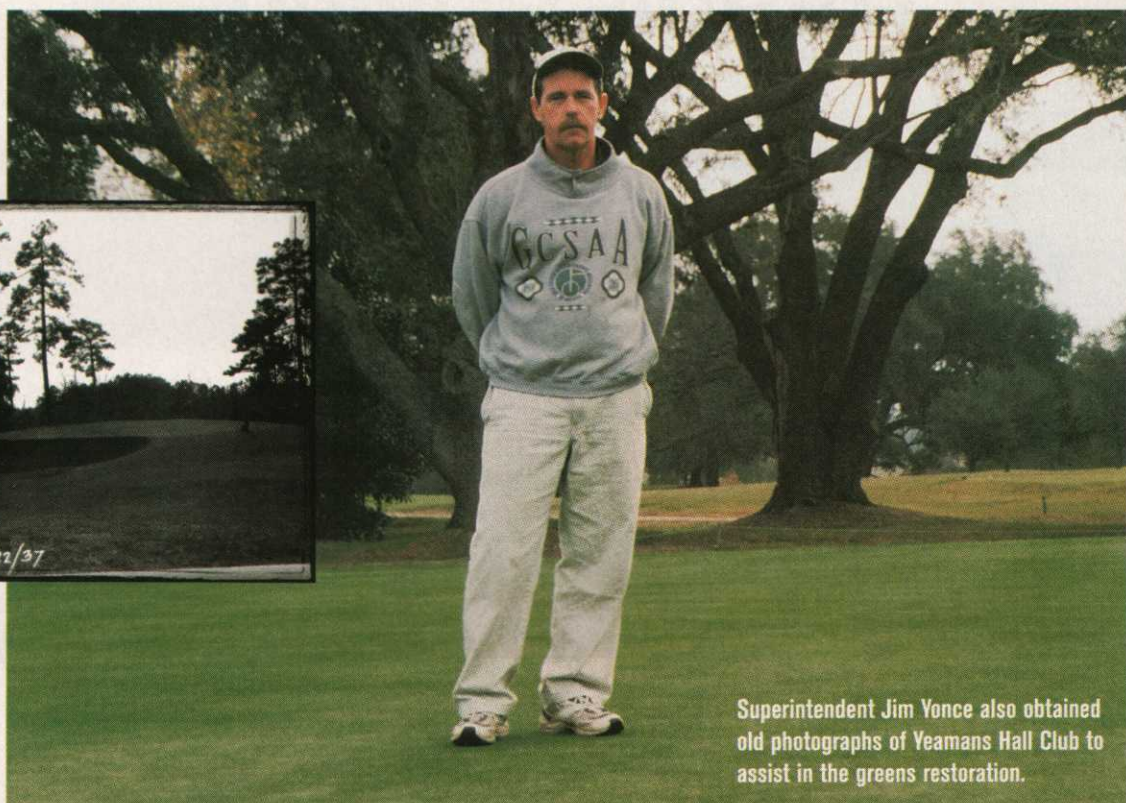
Yonce was looking through an old cabinet when he came across a blueprint — a vintage blueprint — that read, "Original golf course as designed by Seth J. Raynor."

That is, golf course as designed by Seth J. Raynor in 1925.

"I about fainted," Yonce recalls of his discovery. "Luckily, somebody saved it."

Luckily, somebody saved *them*. Yonce found several more blueprints in the next three months, including original specifications for green contours and a topographic map of the entire course.

Not long after Yonce's find, golf course architect



Superintendent Jim Yonce also obtained old photographs of Yeamans Hall Club to assist in the greens restoration.

Tom Doak, who's well-schooled in Raynor's design style, visited Yeamans Hall Club in Charleston, S.C., to play 18. Doak was in the midst of research for his book, "The Confidential Guide to Golf Courses," a self-published book released in 1988 that's labeled as a "no-holds-barred rating" of courses Doak has played.

Doak was not kind to Yeamans Hall.

"I thought it was one of the neatest places I'd ever been, but it was all messed up because the greens had shrunk to half of their original designs," Doak says.

On the upside, Doak's critique — and Yonce's discovery — set in motion the plans for a major course restoration at Yeamans Hall, although it would take nearly 10 years to get started. But in the end, those "messed-up" greens would be greatly enhanced in size and structure, and Yeamans Hall would become a more challenging course. A few greens would more than triple in size and their rolling contours would demand more tactical putting.

### Lobbying effort

Interestingly, around the time of Yonce's find, a group of Yeamans Hall members formed a group called the Friends of Seth Raynor to raise funds to restore the course to its near original design.

And when word spread that Yonce found the original blueprints, old black-and-white photographs were also uncovered. The son of the previous superintendent found photos and gave them to Yonce. So did a former employee's grandson.

In an effort to convince members that a greens restoration was needed, Yonce and his crew mended the No. 1 green as close to Raynor's specs as possible. Still, it took time and tremendous lobbying to convince members of a coursewide greens renovation.

Then, about four years ago, Doak received a phone call from Henry Terrie, the green chairman and leader of Friends of Seth Raynor. He had read Doak's book and comments about Yeamans Hall, and Terrie extended an invitation to Doak to visit the course and discuss a greens renovation.

Terrie knew Doak had consulted at other Raynor-designed courses, including the Camargo Club in Cincinnati and the Creek Club in Locust Valley, N.Y. Doak rebuilt the 13th

green at Yeamans Hall in another attempt to convince members that a restoration was needed. This time, the members agreed to raise money for the project.

When he played Yeamans Hall, the one thing Doak noticed was the course's bermudagrass greens were a far cry from the greens Raynor had designed more than 60 years earlier. In that time, however, the country endured the Depression and World War II. Money was tight and fuel was scarce. As a result, the greens weren't properly maintained.

"Nobody was paying attention to what the design was supposed to be," Doak says.

And after years of topdressing, the shrinking greens gained large and noticeable crowns and lost their contours.

"The part of the greens that were topdressed were about a foot higher than the rest of the old greens," Doak says. "They were very odd looking, like big mushrooms growing out."

### Easier? Yeah, right

The original plans had been discovered, old photographs had been found, and a top young designer who knew Raynor had been consulted. Just as important, the money had been raised. Finally, in the spring of 1998, the greens renovation began.

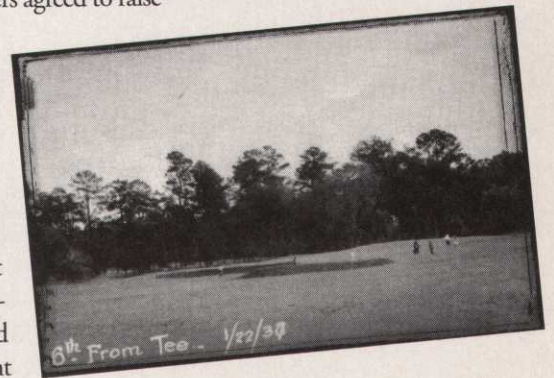
Yeamans Hall, whose main golf season runs from November through April, closed from May through September for the renovation.

"I walked the green committee through what we were going to do," Doak says. "Obviously, the committee's biggest reluctance was that we were going to make the greens easier. I told them the greens would be different, but not easier."

Doak, Yonce and others involved in the project studied the maps and old photographs intensely while renovating the greens.

"We had a map that showed where there were ridges in the greens," Doak says. "It didn't show us how high the ridges were, but it gave us some idea."

Yonce knew little about Raynor when he came to Yeamans Hall in 1982. But after he discovered the blueprints and after it was de-



**After years of topdressing, the shrinking greens gained large and noticeable crowns and lost their contours.**

*Continued on page 62*

## Raynor Course



RENAISSANCE GOLF DESIGN

**If you play Yeamans Hall today, you'll experience fast greens with steep contours. It's a better test of golf, but not an agonizing experience.**

*Continued from page 59*

cided the course would renovate its greens, he played other Raynor courses. "I wanted to get a feel for them," he says.

Because Doak and Yonce had played Raynor's other courses and because of the holes' similar designs, they had a good idea about contours, although they realized an exact match was impossible. Jim Urbina, Doak's on-site design associate, was in charge of reshaping the greens.

"I've taken Urbina to a many Raynor courses over the years, and he probably could have done this without me," Doak says.

In 25 days, Urbina, Doak, Yonce and their crew redid 16 greens. They stripped the old green areas, took the material that had been built up over the years, spread it and formed contours similar to the original greens. Then the greens were floated and grassed with Champion dwarf bermudagrass.

### **Fast times**

If you play Yeamans Hall today, you'll experience large, fast-rolling greens with steep contours.

"The strategy used to be that you hit the ball to the fairway, hit it on the green, and you had a birdie putt," Yonce says. "Now it may be easier to land the ball on the green, but you might have to three putt."

Yonce says Yeamans Hall is a better test of golf, but not a punishing experience. Some members say the course is three or four shots more difficult because of the new greens and their tricky contours, he notes.

"We have some good golfers and not-so-good golfers," Yonce adds. "But putting on these greens is the equalizer."

"Once you get on the greens, that's the puzzle. That's what the course had lost over the years — that strategy."

The total square footage of greens grew from 80,000 feet to 144,000 feet. The 2nd green grew from 3,000 square feet to 10,000 square feet; the 8th green from 4,500 square feet to 10,000 square feet.

Because of their daring contours, the greens would be nearly unplayable if they weren't enlarged. And because Champion bermudagrass plays firm and fast, a golfer often has to land his ball in front of a green and run it up, rather than play for the middle of a green.

"The greens are marvelous," says Terrie, who plays the course twice a week and credits Yonce for spearheading Yeamans Hall's overall improvements. "I just wish I could go back to school and learn how to putt on them," he adds with a laugh.

Doak, who has seen more than half the near 100 courses that Raynor designed, says Raynor's style is formal and predictable. Raynor often tried to recreate holes from course to course.

"It was interesting for me to compare the par 3s at Yeamans Hall to the par 3s at Camargo Club and the Creek Club, and figure out which holes were better and why," Doak says. "Raynor was trying to do the same things on different pieces of land."

In December, Doak and his crew returned to Yeamans Hall Club and played the course

*Continued on page 64*

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*Continued from page 62*

for the first time since its renovation.

"I was very pleased," Doak says. "I knew we got the shaping done the way we wanted to, so I expected it to turn out well."

*Golf Magazine* thought the renovation turned out well, too. The magazine recently

ranked Yeamans Hall Club as the 64th top course in the country.

"We had never been ranked before," Yonce says. "I'm gratified we accomplished this and spent only about \$200,000."

Now Yeamans Hall and its Southern charm — including bunches of towering live oak trees draped with Spanish moss, and distinguished unirrigated and unfertilized natural bermuda-grass rough — has generated talk in golfing circles.

"The place has always had a low profile, and you never heard much talk about it," Doak says. "Now it's attracting a lot more attention. I know what we did was a big improvement, but I'm surprised at all of the attention."

Yonce says Yeamans Hall members have no plans to lobby for a U.S. Open. They may like the attention, but they don't want the course, which also had many of its bunkers restored, to become overexposed. Yeamans Hall endures only about 1,700 rounds a year, and members would like to keep it that way.

"They aren't interested in it becoming a well-traveled resort," Yonce says.

The challenge for Yonce and his crew is to maintain the greens to their current state so history doesn't repeat itself. They will do that partly by walk-mowing the greens to better cut undulations and contours.

"We're trying to upgrade our maintenance over time to make sure this doesn't happen again," Yonce adds.

Yeamans Hall isn't the only course to go back in time. In fact, it has become fashionable for older courses to renovate greens in hopes to return them to yesterday's original designs. But if your 1920s course was "modernized" in the 1960s or 1970s, forget it.

"We never got modernized," Yonce says with a sigh of relief. "Luckily, we didn't have that middle architect come in, which would have destroyed the original design."

Yonce still marvels at his find. Some of those old blueprints are now framed and hanging in his home, located on the golf course.

Standing in his family room, Yonce sips a cup of coffee and stares at Raynor's original map of the golf course. He talks enthusiastically about the project. It's obvious he's proud to be part of Yeamans Hall yore. ■

### A Kodak Moment

Biltmore Forest CC is a Donald Ross design sporting a new lease on life, thanks to a meticulous restoration by architect Brian Silva who used vintage photographs to restore all 18 putting surfaces.

"The genius of Biltmore Forest can be found in how Ross routed the holes: They lay so very naturally on the rolling terrain," says Silva, a partner with Uxbridge, Mass.-based Cornish, Silva and Mungeam. "There isn't an uncomfortable golf hole out there."

Biltmore Forest opened for play during the summer of 1921. Nearly seven decades later, when Silva was hired to assess the club's long-range renovation needs, he found a golf course that had slowly drifted away from Ross' original concept. Yet Silva also found an enormous cache of photographs which clearly showed every green, fairway and bunker just as they had been when Ross finished his work at the Asheville, N.C.-based course.

Using this photographic record, Silva restored all 18 putting surfaces to their original configurations, reinstated dozens of original Ross bunkers and eliminated those which came afterward. Silva also directed a substantial tree-trimming campaign and rebuilt all 18 tee complexes in a rectangular style typical of 1920s design. The architect finished his work in 1995.

"The photos were an enormous resource, yet one can also develop an eye for Ross' tendencies and style by studying his huge body of work," says Silva, whose Ross renovation portfolio includes Seminole GC in North Palm Beach, Fla.; Riviera CC in Miami; The Country Club of Orlando; Gulfstream GC in Delray Beach, Fla.; Plymouth (Mass.) CC;

Rolling Rock Club in Ligonier, Pa.; Whitinsville (Mass.) GC; and Charlotte (N.C.) CC. "I've read where some architects claim they can walk in the shoes of Ross, think what he was thinking and base their renovation work on this sort of channeling. I'm not sure that's possible. In general, I like to steer clear of the paranormal design experience."



Architect Brian Silva used vintage photos like this to restore greens, fairways and bunkers.



The holes at Biltmore Forest lay naturally on the rolling terrain, Silva says.