



Bethpage State Park's
renaissance proves
a run-down public golf course
can be revitalized – and host
a U.S. Open

Black's Magic

STORY & PHOTOS BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD
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After entering the Bethpage State Park golf course complex, visitors are teased with two signs reminding them the U.S. Open will be staged there next year. Making your way through the parking lot, you feel the energy of the five-course complex and remodeled clubhouse. The improved facilities, the upgraded golf courses and the general enthusiasm of golfers changing shoes in the massive parking lot bring to mind the hundreds of public golf facilities in

America that are not on such an upswing.

A first-time visitor to Bethpage sees what the economic and architectural renaissance has done for a place once known for being the quintessential run-down public course. But you're left to wonder: Can this type of revival only happen when a facility is awarded a U.S. Open?

You also ask yourself: Are millions of dollars in corporate tent revenue and merchandise sales the only enticement for a local or state government to take serious interest in one of its historically important facilities? Is an approaching tournament the only way for a bureaucratically controlled facility to employ quality golf course maintenance personnel?

The Bethpage State Park renaissance proves that a U.S. Open or a major tournament is the best recipe to receive the financing necessary to restore and sustain a popular public facility. But a closer look at Bethpage also reveals that with common sense, quality personnel, hard work and a strong foundation created by architects from a previous era, similar projects can happen throughout the country. Not only would

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▲ Bethpage State Park used the U.S. Golf Association's money to return design integrity to A.W. Tillinghast's classic layout.

► Signs of the facility's resurgence, emblematic of the energy created by the influx of funds, are everywhere.



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such projects create more jobs for superintendents and apprentices, they would also create a long-term golfing environment breeding devoted customers — something the golf business is having a difficult time sustaining these days.

The USGA kick

The Bethpage story has been told several times, but key facts are worth repeating. The U.S. Golf Association's staff joined forces with New York's state government to restore the park's A.W. Tillinghast-designed Black Course. With the USGA's pledge of \$2.7 million and the pro-bono advice of architect Rees Jones, the state upgraded the facility to receive the 2002 U.S. Open.



Head superintendent Craig Currier (left), who oversees all Bethpage courses, fields a question from a golfer.

Naturally, the USGA gets a cut of the revenues, expected to be astronomically high thanks to Bethpage's space for corporate tents and parking. A special routing that combines holes from the other Bethpage courses will be used during U.S. Open week. Corporate tent buyers have first priority to play and are expected to pay lavishly for the privilege to tee it up within yards of the world's best.

The reason for Bethpage's success started and continues with strong governmental support, followed by the hiring of energetic and highly qualified golf course maintenance personnel. Led by Governor George Pataki and Parks Commissioner Bernadette Castro, New York provided Bethpage Park Supervisor Dave Catalano the support necessary to sustain the USGA's initial investment. In turn, Catalano has supported the efforts of superintendent Craig Currier, who oversees the maintenance of the four courses.

"Dave Catalano has worked in the park system since 1966 and understands what equipment we need," says Garrett Boddington, superintendent of the Black Course. Boddington worked at Augusta National, Meadow Brook GC and Garden City GC before coming to Bethpage.

"Dave knows the ins and outs of state government politics, particularly the state bid system," Boddington says. "We get great prices on equipment and have the chance to try out whatever we need."

Bethpage continues to roll with a new maintenance strategy and a common-sense approach to government policy — not only in the improvement of the Black Course, but in the entire facility.

Maintenance renaissance

Bethpage was legendary in the Long Island region for shoddy maintenance practices. Local superintendents laugh about stories of pickup trucks towing gang mowers to cut roughs — and even fairways.

That's a far cry from today. It's common to see Carrier operating heavy machinery to rebuild tees and restore bunkers on the Red, Blue and Yellow courses. Maintenance crew members are scattered throughout the property, latching on to whatever jobs need to get done. On average, Boddington supervises about 24 crew members on the Black Course, with anywhere from six to 10 drifting over to other courses to help out on various daily tasks.

"We knew this investment would have to transcend the Black Course for it to be a true success," Catalano says. "We had the good fortune of hiring Currier, who has a lot of talent. We have a well-motivated crew. The government's support means we're doing a lot of the work at a substantially lower cost."

Currier and his staff have made further improvements since the USGA's initial investment. New tee boxes were constructed on key holes and tees were resurfaced on par 3s prone to rapid wear and tear. Subtle incorporation of fescue grasses, extensive tree removal on the eighth hole and the overall attention to detail have improved the Black Course substantially. It's in such good shape that, instead of the course closing for the entire spring of 2002 leading up to the U.S. Open, it will only be closed for two weeks prior to the event.

The legacy

As Carrier drives around the other Bethpage courses and surveys upcoming in-house projects, he stops to field questions from golfers. The rejuvenation of the Tillinghast-designed Red Course, which has largely been an in-house job despite campaigns from several architects who hoped to get the job to gain free publicity, is threatening to make the Red more popular than the Black. The Red arguably contains more of the character of an authentic Tillinghast design. It also features Carrier's low-profile bunker restoration work and detailed finish work by the Bethpage crew.

Extensive post-Open work is planned for the Devereaux Emmet-designed Green course, as well as work on several holes of the Blue and Yellow courses.

No matter what the USGA decides about future U.S. Opens on the Black Course, the combination of its support and new maintenance standards has made Bethpage State Park a case study in what all municipalities should strive to do. You can use a major tournament to

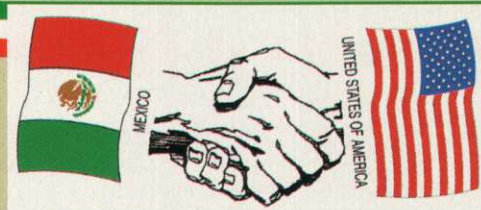


gain USGA's money and spend it wisely to hire top-notch talent — and ultimately give customers a better facility for years to come.

"It's a fabulous legacy," Catalano says. "An investment was made by USGA for a specific purpose, but you are going to have a facility that will be restored to its previous grandeur for the everyday golfer. That's the beauty of the whole thing." ■

After renovations are made to the Red Course, it threatens to become more popular than the Black Course.

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