

# A Hidden *River* Runs Through It

In designing Hidden River Golf & Casting Club,  
architect Bruce Matthews created  
an upscale course and  
preserved a pristine waterway

**BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR**

**T**he enchanting Maple River flows through the middle of the northern Michigan golf course for nearly a mile, its current moving unhurriedly over a rocky, jagged bed. The slender and shallow Maple River may not have the magnitude of the Mississippi, but it's still grand in these parts. Its sparkling clear water and calming sound can easily capture a person's senses.

So why is the Maple River, with all its grace, out of sight to players on the golf course? Who would design the course without highlighting the land's most impressive attribute?

Golf course architect W. Bruce Matthews III would and did. And he purposely designed the course, which opened in 1998, with the river obscured. Hence, they call Matthews' creation the Hidden River Golf & Casting Club.

In 1996, Matthews, co-president of East Lansing, Mich.-based Matthews & Nelhiebel, was asked by Roger Wilson, a Detroit entrepreneur, and his business partner, Darin



Philport, to design an upscale golf course on 240 acres of untouched land in Brutus, Mich. The land is known for its wildlife, including deer, bear, bobcat, elk, wild turkey as well as the native trout that swim in the uncorrupted Maple River.

Wilson and Philport, who leased the land from a local family that has owned it for more than 100 years, were thrilled about securing the property to build a golf course. They wanted the Maple River to play strategic and aesthetic roles on the course. They also planned to build bridges over the river at several junctions along the course. But when Matthews heard their plans, he cringed.

"I knew it was going to be an environmentally touchy situation," Matthews says. "I'm a native of Michigan, and I've done a lot of work in the state. I know the natural resource rules and constraints of golf course development."

The Brutus townspeople say that the Maple River, loaded with brook and brown trout, is a magnificent waterway with a rich history. They'll brag that it's a premier — if not *the* premier — trout stream to fish in the Wolverine state.

That's why the locals were livid when they learned of the plan to build a golf course near the river. About 400 citizens signed a petition to prevent the course from being built. "Any knowledgeable trout fisherman knows a trout stream is incompatible with a golf course," Brutus resident Gregory Czarnecki told the *Petoskey News-Review*, the town's newspaper, which also bashed the idea. "Maple River plan threatens state's best trout stream," a headline screamed.

At the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council in nearby Harbor Springs, Mich., Scott McEwen's phone rang constantly. McEwen, the water resource program director for the organization, which advocates clean water, was fielding calls from residents irate about the golf course.

"There was an immediate gut reaction," McEwen says. "The people who have lived here a long time have watched their landscape slowly change from a rural to a more suburban setting. They are resistant to that type of change."

Meanwhile, Wilson and Philport began to realize how important the Maple River was to the land. Wilson says he spoke with local fishermen, who lauded the river's role in the environment.

Matthews explained to Wilson and Philport why they shouldn't incorporate the river into their building plans. "I told them that we didn't want to cross the river with golf balls," Matthews says.

Matthews also warned Wilson and Philport that they could be facing lawsuits and time delays if they wanted to build the course their way. "The public's involvement will quickly slow down the development process," Matthews told them.

Wilson and Philport listened intently. "We  
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**Bruce Matthews, posing below with a fishing pole and a driver in the Hidden River clubhouse, has done a lot of work in Michigan. "I know the natural resource rules and constraints of golf course development," he says.**





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were uneducated on golf course design and how it affects natural resources," Philport says. "Bruce quickly educated us on what's good, what's not good and what's risky."

Wilson and Philport agreed with Matthews' plan not to have the river play a part on any holes. The only views of the river on the course are from the No. 9 tee and green and the clubhouse balcony.

Matthews, a former superintendent, believed it was important to meet with several environmental groups, including the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, Trout Unlimited and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, before seeking approval from the county's planning commission to build the course. Matthews wanted environmentalists to realize that the developers would work with them, not against them.

**From the No. 9 tee, you can see the Maple River in the distance. It's one of the few views of the river on the course.**



McEwen was pleased when he saw the routing of the course.

"There were no river crossings, and most holes had good setbacks from the river," he says, adding that he was also happy that natural vegetation along the river's was left undisturbed. "We were satisfied."

But many Brutus residents remained dissatisfied and didn't want the course to be built. McEwen told them there was nothing they could do to stop construction by filing a lawsuit or demanding an injunction because Matthews had submitted such an environmentally sensitive design.

Even though he was impressed with Matthews' initial design, McEwen didn't walk away from the project. He had suggestions to make Hidden River as environmentally sound as possible. McEwen said he was concerned about soil erosion control and fertilizer management. He was also worried that the design didn't include a storm-water management plan.

"The inadvertent introduction of sediment into a waterway can obliterate trout spawning habitat, scour the substrate of macro invertebrates and increase ambient water temperature," McEwen wrote in a letter to the chairman of the county's planning commission and Matthews. "Proper storm management is essential to ensure that trout habitat of the Maple River is protected."

McEwen was also concerned about the location of the No. 9 green, which he said was too close to the river. He recommended the green be moved back onto a bluff about 150 yards away.

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McEwen found that Matthews, Wilson and Philport were willing to listen to his concerns and implement plans to manage them. They compromised on the issue of the No. 9 green, which was built between the bluff and the river.

McEwen was impressed that the owners offered him an open invitation to visit the course while it was under construction, which he did mostly after it rained to monitor water run-off. "All the soils around here are very sandy, and sand can destroy trout streams," he explains.

McEwen was also pleased that Wilson and Philport hired a superintendent,

Steve Sump, who was known for his environmental prowess. Sump, who is well-schooled in storm-water management and erosion control, practices an integrated pest management program at Hidden River. Last year was the worst year for turf disease in several years, Sump says. Still, he was under budget for his chemical and fertilizer spending.

"I don't like spraying insecticides because of the river," Sump says. "But if I must spray, I'll use a chemical that has the lowest toxicity, and I'll spray it sparingly."

As part of Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council's agreement with Hidden River,

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### A Dream Job for Superintendent – Challenges And All

After a round of golf on a splendid October day at the Hidden River Golf & Casting Club, W. Bruce Matthews III, designer of the course, turned to Steve Sump, superintendent of the course, and said, "Steve, you're making me look good!"

Indeed, the golf course was in excellent

laden and pristine Maple River, which runs through the middle of the course. Sump, a certified superintendent, was hired by Hidden River owners Roger Wilson and Darin Philport in 1997 to maintain the course and protect the river.

"We wanted a superintendent that had the same game plan that we had as far as wanting a high-quality course – but not at the risk of the environment," Philport adds.

Sump joined Hidden River for the course's grow-in and faced an immediate challenge: protecting the Maple River from nitrogen applications of as much as 1 pound per thousand square feet a week.

Area environmentalists were concerned about erosion control at Hidden River. But Sump says he knows how important it is not to expose too much soil or remove too much natural vegetation. At Hidden River, Sump wanted to get the turf established quickly to decrease the chance of erosion from a hard rain. "The biggest problem any superintendent faces in a grow-in is rain erosion," he says.

Sump practices an integrated pest management program. There are no blanket applications of pesticides on the course. "I always scout for disease before spraying," he says.

Sump, a member of the Michigan Environmental Steward Program, is an avid outdoorsman. "I've dreamed of being a superintendent on property like this," he says.

– Larry Aylward, Editor



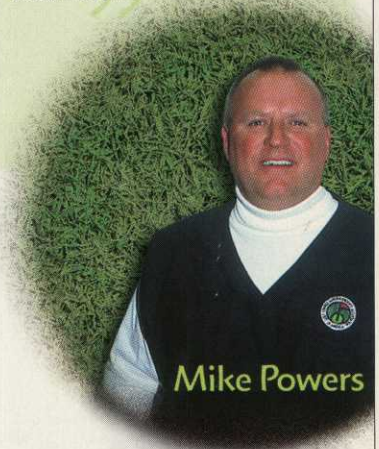
**Superintendent Steve Sump (left) was hired for his environmental prowess, says Darin Philport (right), one of the club's owners.**

condition, and Sump was appreciative of Matthew's compliment. But it's always a challenge for Sump to keep Hidden River looking lush because of its environmental distinction.

Matthews designed Hidden River, located in Brutus, Mich., to protect the trout-

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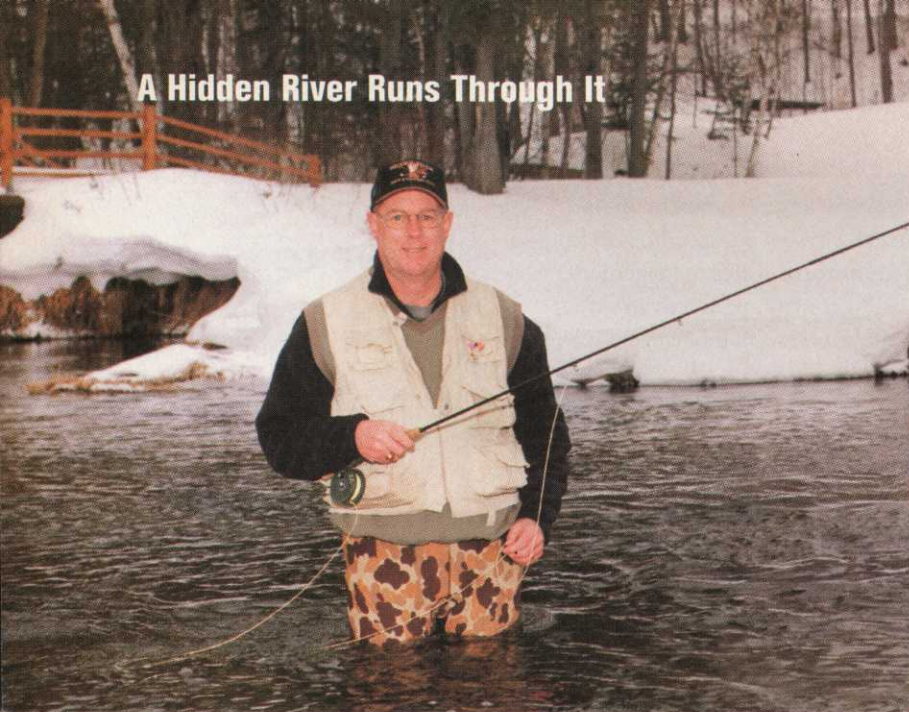


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## A Hidden River Runs Through It



**Bruce Matthews fishes the Maple River in late January. Matthews says it's his golden rule to consider the future impact a golf course that he designs will have on the environment.**

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McEwen monitors the Maple River annually for chemical contamination and sedimentation. "I've been monitoring the river for four years, and I've found that the golf course has had no negative impact on it," McEwen says.

Philport says most golfers understand the environmental approach the owners took in building the course and why there's only one view of the river. Still, they marvel at the look of the land, which is comprised of hardwood trees, pines and open grasslands. "They like that the course is not commercialized and that a lot of the land was left undisturbed," Philport says.

Most everyone is happy that the project didn't turn into a war between the developers and the environmentalists. McEwen says Matthews, Wilson and Philport were easy to work

with, and he didn't view them as adversaries.

"Things went well," Matthews says. "Everybody came out feeling good. It was very emotional for everyone."

McEwen, whose work is also his passion, still says "my heart is broken" because the course was built on virgin land. But he has accepted the outcome, and he's content with the final product.

"It's a well-designed course," he says. "There are enough woods and water that eagles and osprey still feel comfortable fishing the river."

Matthews, an avid outdoorsman, says McEwen and the Brutus residents had valid concerns about the course being built. "This river is different from a lot of other rivers because it's in such a natural state," he adds.

McEwen says responsible architects, like Matthews, are sensitive to water issues. Both men recall other golf course projects where architects encountered problems with erosion because they were not considerate of water issues.

Philport says he and Wilson are glad they listened to Matthews. They had the utmost confidence in his ability to design a course that was environmentally friendly and thrilling to play. "Bruce was able to balance both sides and, in our minds, create a masterpiece," Philport adds.

Ironically, while the Maple River is hidden on the course, it still plays a big part in the club's promotions. "First class golf, fly fishing and dining," a brochure reads.

"Originally, it wasn't going to be a casting club," Wilson says. "But the river has ended up playing an important role."

Even though he can't hit a golf ball over the river, Wilson is happy with the course. "It turned out better than I expected," he says, adding that Matthews was the only architect he interviewed for the job, despite proposals from others.

As an architect, Matthews says it's his golden rule to consider the future impact a golf course that he designs will have on the environment. "Designers need to know the full impact they're having on the environment — in the long run," Matthews stresses.

From the clubhouse, Matthews glances at the glimmering Maple River as it flows under a bridge, bends to the left and then to the right, and rushes into the woods before disappearing into the horizon. It's an awesome sight, a view that Matthews wants to preserve for many years — with or without a golf course. ■

ROGER BOETTCHER

### Maple River Protective Measures

**W**. Bruce Matthews III, architect of Hidden River Golf & Casting Club, integrated some of these environmental protective measures into the course's design to protect the Maple River.

- No holes are constructed across the river, insuring a larger buffer zone.
- No bridges are constructed over the river. The only pedestrian and vehicular crossing is at an existing bridge on the property.
- Design of the golf course, clubhouse and parking lot features surface water

discharge away from the river and wetlands into detention and retention basins.

- Soil erosion control plan insures no flow of surface water into the river or wetlands.
- Design of an irrigation system ensures maximum coverage of particular water management zones. The individual head control and lower-volume sprinkler heads protect the river from potential overwatering and surface water run off.
- No wetland fill.