

# Process Makes Perfect



The Meadow Club married historical research with careful planning to make the restoration of its MacKenzie-designed greens a success

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

**T**hanks to Rees Jones' well-publicized project at The Country Club at Brookline (Mass.) 15 years ago, "restoration" became a modern-day buzzword in golf. Unfortunately, the meaning of restoring an old golf course has been distorted. While examples abound of projects that are universally adored, just as many were sidetracked by absentee architects, nutty committeemen, stubborn contractors and ill-prepared maintenance operations.

That's why the in-progress restoration of the Meadow Club, the 75-year-old Alister MacKenzie-designed course located in Fairfax, Calif., provides a refreshing case study. All of those involved in the restoration project have adhered to simple values and the same goals.

The club's leaders reviewed quality historical research, constantly communicated with a skeptical membership about the project, hired an architect who revered the original design, and allowed a talented superintendent to mix art and science to solve interesting agronomic dilemmas.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MEADOW CLUB

## Meadow Club



**Meadow Club's members decided to pursue a pure restoration of the greens – one at a time and beginning with the fifth hole.**

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The idea of restoring the Meadow Club started when the Alister MacKenzie Society first met in 1987 at the course with an uncertain mission. Inspired by architecture writer Ron Whitten, who was trying to research MacKenzie's work, Meadow Club members realized how much their treasured course had changed over the years.

With the help of the society, which joins members at all the remaining MacKenzie-designed courses, members from Meadow Club were inspired to research and celebrate their course's original design. However, it took about 10 years for them to collect the information.

“We decided around 1997 that we had collected enough information to proceed with a

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THERE'D BE NO  
BROWN  
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few holes," says Gary Nelson, a founder of the Alister MacKenzie Society and a Meadow Club member, who has researched MacKenzie's work extensively. "We decided it was going to be a pure restoration, and there would be no changes to the course."

Meadow opened in 1927, and the ode to St. Andrew's layout featured few trees, wide fairways, huge greens and jagged bunker edges.

Within three years, however, the course suffered from the effects of the Great Depression and much of MacKenzie's revolutionary design was lost.

"When members fled and money was scarce, they apparently decided to reduce the greens by having one guy stand in the center of a green, always the flattest area," Nelson

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Michigan architect Mike DeVries, a student of MacKenzie's designs, was hired to restore the intricate contours of the greens.

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## Meadow Club



The restored fifth green was well-received by most Meadow Club members.

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says. "Where he could reach with a hose, that became the green."

Though the course had undergone several renovations that eliminated much of MacKenzie's distinctive style, no major work had been done to the green complexes, meaning the intricate contours still existed. Restoring the contours, however, required patience from a mem-

bership that had grown accustomed to small, simple greens. Finally, in 2000, members decided to hire Traverse City-based architect Mike DeVries, a northern Michigan native who grew up studying MacKenzie's Crystal Downs co-design with Perry Maxwell, to handle the renovations.

Known for his well-crafted bunkers and meticulous hands-on approach to planning and



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construction, DeVries guided the club and long-time certified superintendent Dave Sexton through a master plan that tackled one hole at a time and kept the work in-house. Building on Sexton's expertise in project work, the club formed a plan to reclaim the greens.

"When people reclaim these areas, it's not always clear what was green and what wasn't, even if you have photos," says DeVries, whose research was vindicated once the sod was lifted. Intricate bumps were found that needed to be preserved to maintain the subtle flair of MacKenzie's work.

### Preparing for the restoration

Sexton created a step-by-step program for restoring the greens, which was carried about by a special yearly project crew. It was simple and nearly perfect, as illustrated by the first green they chose to restore, the par 3 No. 5.

## The original MacKenzie No. 5 design featured a green double the size of the 5,000-square-foot version the members had grown to know.

Based loosely on the Eden hole at St. Andrews, the original MacKenzie No. 5 design featured a green double the size of the 5,000-square-foot version the members had grown to know. MacKenzie's original sketch was also available, making it one of the better-documented greens on the course.

The first thing DeVries did before he started the renovation was mark where the restored green surface would be located. A local backhoe operator with a soft touch then removed 6 inches of the native soil where green was to be re-

stored. DeVries made a few minor adjustments in the surface to accommodate lost pin placements due to modern green speeds.

Then Sexton and his crew installed drainage and added 6 inches of a special mix of native soil and sand created by Sexton and tested by Hummel & Co., a Trumansburg, N.Y.-based soil testing

lab. Irrigation heads were then moved. (During later green renovations at the course, Sexton moved this step to the front because he discovered that renovation goes more smoothly when irrigation heads are moved first.)

After the greens mix was added, DeVries and the crew hand-raked the surface.  
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face and tied in all contours as close to the original as possible before sod was laid.

**The verdict**

“After we had it done, we put out a questionnaire to the members,” Nelson says. “Some were negative across the board, but over 80 percent were in favor of the work. Like any club, the older guys didn’t like it because they preferred the course as it was, but most considered the work a huge success.”

Three more green complexes were renovated successfully in 2000. The most ambitious work is taking place this year — five of the club’s holes will play to temporary greens while Sexton, DeVries and the project crew repeat their tightly honed process.

Any complications associated with the renovations have been minor. Crews have been able to mow the newly sodded greens at normal height within three months.

Nelson points to Sexton’s crew as being “absolutely vital” to any club undertaking

work in-house. He also strongly recommends the pre-project town hall meetings held with DeVries in attendance, which give golfers the chance to pose questions and better understand why the work will improve the course.

The Meadow Club project is a classic but all-too-rare case of various parties setting aside their egos and working together for a common goal. That goal starts with a solid committee that puts an emphasis on research and communication. It also includes an architect who’s willing to spend the time and energy to handle details and talk to members. Last but not least, there’s an extremely organized superintendent who’s able to keep golfers’ needs in perspective while supervising many facets of the project.

The most admirable thing is that each component of the engine credits the other for success. Is it any wonder the work to date has been such a triumph? ■

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