

Gone, But Not Forgotten



Tom DeVaux, superintendent of Hunter GC in Meriden, Conn., peruses through turf from the greens of Canton Public GC.

Canton Public GC will live on – literally – through its donated greens Story and photos by Anthony Pioppi

The sky was blue. The turf was green. The air was delightfully warm and the companionship wonderful. It was one of the saddest days I've ever spent on a golf course.

After 68 years the Canton (Conn.) Public GC has closed. Conceived, built, maintained and run by the Lowell family, the decision was made to sell the valuable piece of property in this upscale Hartford suburb to a developer that will turn most of the land into a mall called The Shoppes at Farmington Valley.

On this day, I played the nine-hole course with Heather Lowell Garvin, the

third generation to be involved with Canton. She inherited the superintendent position from her father who stayed on as golf pro. We were not the only golfers that day. A few others were out as well — friends of the family and long-time men's club members who wanted one more round. The general public, though, had played its last.

Neighbors have already taken to turning the course into their own playground, stealing cups and vandalizing turf. Incredibly, as we stood in the middle of the fourth fairway waiting to hit our approach shots, a young boy rode his bicycle across

the green while his mother stood nearby watching the entire proceedings. They appeared surprised when Garvin told them to leave, in a firm but polite voice.

We traversed the layout in no time even as we negotiated silt fences already in place for the coming destruction. There were cups in the greens and broken flagsticks (when visible) served as our targets. The good ones had been removed to thwart stealing.

The putting surfaces hadn't been mowed in a few days, but the undulations her great-grandfather and grandfather built into the greens in the early 1930s

still made putting a delightful challenge even at slow speeds.

Garvin has played the course innumerable times, honing a game that was good enough at one time for her to qualify for the USGA Women's Public Links Championship. She is a low-handicap that hits straight and far and possesses a deft putting touch.

As we went along, I found the course more and more to my liking — the natural rolls in the fairway, the variety of the holes and the shots required to master them. I wondered why I had never driven the 45 minutes

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before to play such a wonderful course and was disappointed I had not. In a state that abounds in boring, repetitive layouts, Canton stood out — even with only nine holes.

Garvin doesn't like to talk of the future. Part of the course she has nurtured for so long may be turned into a nine-hole par-three layout or a teaching facility that will preserve a few of the holes as part of the shopping center complex. Of course, the entire place could be bulldozed under and replaced with cement and asphalt. The owners haven't decided. Garvin doesn't want to dwell on what is being lost, even when local residents she meets during her daily routine press her on how she is *really* feeling about the sale. How do they think she is feeling?

Garvin is too busy to be morose, packing up and sorting through her parent's house (circ. 1780), which sits just off the first tee and will also be lost, as well as readying items for an auction. Much has been accumulated in the last 60 years.

Even in such a depressing and emotional time, Garvin has turned the demise of her course into a positive for other layouts. Canton is giving away its greens.

While other courses in the area have been hit with severe winterkill, Canton made it through unscathed. So rather than just turn her back on the greens, Garvin has allowed other to come



in, cut them up and cart them off.

Superintendent Kevin Bengston of Indian Hill CC in Newington used about 1,500 square feet of turf from the third and the eighth holes to resod his entire damaged putting green. Bengston was happy to get the grass, but not with the

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circumstances that made it possible. "I'm not a big fan of bulldozing golf courses to put up buildings," he says.

At Hunter GC in Meriden, superintendent Tom DeVaux and his crew built

a nursery out of turf strips taken from two greens, something the golf course has wanted to do for years. Three of DeVaux's workers traveled to Canton and loaded up with nearly 1,500 square feet of good, healthy turf. Less than 24 hours later on a chilly morning, what was once a Canton green was now a Hunter nursery.

Making the deal even sweeter for Indian Hill and Hunter was the price — free.

The Lowells have a history of giving to the game of golf and this was just the latest donation, sort of like an organ transplant. The person may be dead, but in the process he has given life to someone else.

Garvin is delighted the two courses were willing hosts. She intends to keep an eye on how the transplants worked.

"My husband (Dana, Canton's assistant superintendent/mechanic) said,

DeVaux and his crew took nearly 1,500 square feet of healthy turf back to their course and built a nursery, something they always wanted to do.

"We can go visit our grass," Garvin said smiling.

Too bad someone who cares so much about a golf course is losing one. Garvin is unsure what her next job will be. She is taking the summer off.

I feel fortunate to have had the chance to play Canton and even more so in the company of Garvin. The course is no more, but I have my memories and my Canton Public GC ball-mark, logo ball and scorecard. The scorecard is blank. The day was not about numbers. It was truly about the game and the golf course and the company — just the way it should be.

But it was a sad, sad day. ■

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