

Oakmont's OVER

Members seek to restore classical course to its glory days . . . and bring it up to date

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF



John Zimmers says members have the utmost respect for "Mr. Fownes."

Oakmont Country Club, one of America's great classical golf courses, is undergoing a major restoration. The late Henry C. Fownes, the steel industry tycoon who designed the Pittsburgh-area course in 1903, is also directing the makeover.

How can that be, you ask, considering that Fownes has been dead for 70 years? Simple. Fownes is an institution at Oakmont, where his spirit and influence abound. Everybody involved with Oakmont's restoration, including superintendent John Zimmers, knows who's the boss on the project.

"We're not going to do anything unless we can base it on what Mr. Fownes did," Zimmers said of the restoration, which will conclude in the fall.

You can still feel Fownes' presence at Oakmont. You can picture him walking the creaky floors in the historic clubhouse. You can en-

vision him, dressed in his gray knickerbockers and plaid cap, hitting out of the course's famed church pew bunkers.

Oakmont, regarded as a National Historic Landmark, is the only golf course Fownes designed. Born in 1856 and laid to rest in 1935, Fownes was an excellent player. He qualified for the U.S. Amateur Championship five times in the early 1900s. He designed the 18-hole course because he was bored with playing the nine-hole courses in the area.

"He set out to make the hardest golf course in America, and I think he achieved what he wanted to do," Zimmers says. "I think he'd be proud of what we're doing today."

What they're doing is extensive. The club hired Fazio Golf Course Designers to engineer the restoration and builder McDonald & Sons to do the physical work. Zimmers and his staff have assisted throughout the project.

The ambitious restoration, aided largely by the use of old photographs of Oakmont in its heyday, has touched about every part of the course. When it's finished, the club will have spent about \$2.5 million on it, including a new irrigation system.

"They wanted to put the course back to the original design that Mr. Fownes had," Zimmers says of Oakmont's 400 members. "They have the utmost respect for Mr. Fownes."

Not every Oakmont member agreed on every aspect of the restoration, notes Bob Wagner, who was Oakmont's grounds chairman and president in 2003 and 2004 and has played a major part in planning the restora-

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tion. "But most of the members were behind the notion to restore the course, and the things that we're doing have been widely accepted," he adds.

The restoration has taken part in accordance with two big golf tournaments: the U.S. Amateur, which occurred in 2003; and the U.S. Open, scheduled for 2007.

When Zimmers arrived at Oakmont in 1999, he viewed the restoration plan from the ground up — the ground being the maintenance facility. Zimmers is a firm believer that a superintendent and his crew can only be as good as their maintenance facility.

"When you go to any maintenance facility, you can generally tell how that operation is run just by looking at the facility," Zimmers says.

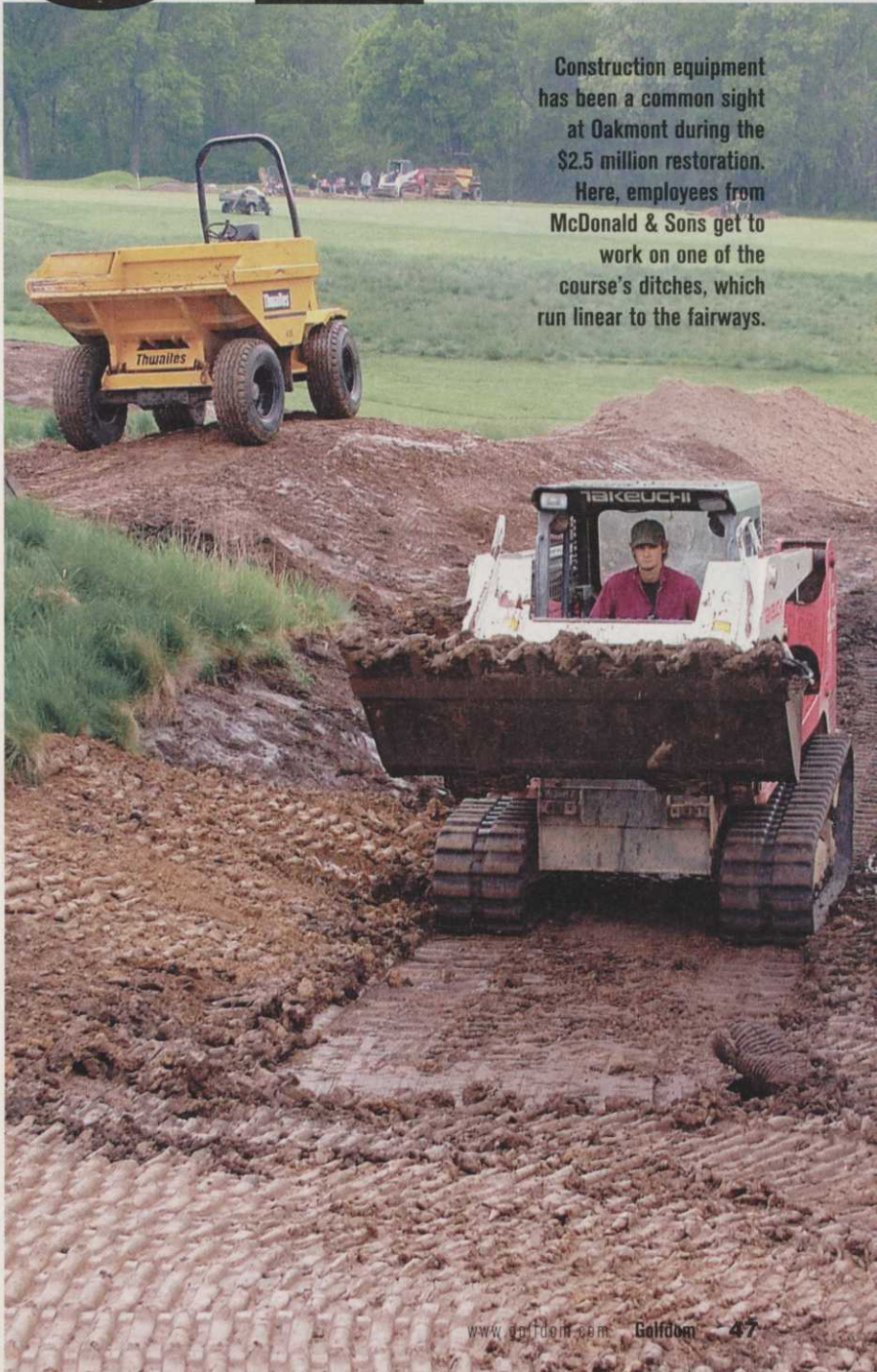
Zimmers asked for an upgrade and got it. The maintenance facility was updated with a new wash and fuel pad as well as a new chemical building. Zimmers admits it's difficult to show members a return on investment for upgrading the maintenance facility. "But five years down the road, the members are truly proud of it," he adds.

Trees toppled

On a recent tour of the golf course, Zimmers stops his utility vehicle and points to a vista. "Look, you can see the tees on No. 2, No. 8, No. 5 and No. 4," he says. "You couldn't see any of this before. This was a jungle."

He's talking about the trees, of course. There were few, if any, trees on the course when

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Construction equipment has been a common sight at Oakmont during the \$2.5 million restoration. Here, employees from McDonald & Sons get to work on one of the course's ditches, which run linear to the fairways.

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Thousands of trees – including some very big ones – were removed from the course to create vistas like the one above.

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Fownes designed it, but they accumulated like houses in the suburbs over the next 90 years.

“The trees were planted mostly in 1961 as part of a beautification program,” Wagner says.

It got to the point where players couldn’t see one fairway from another because they were lined with huge pin oak trees. The course became so

overgrown with trees that playability was affected and some areas of turf had become weakened because of poor air movement and shade.

Oakmont’s board of directors decided it was time to bring down the trees. Oakmont was designed as a links-style course, not a parkland course, they reasoned. But the board’s decision sparked controversy, Wagner says. In fact, a faction of Oakmont’s members threatened to sue the board if it gave orders to cut down the trees. The matter ended up in front of a judge, who was also a member of Oakmont, who ruled in favor of the board.

So the tree removal program began in earnest in 1995 under the direction of Mark Kuhns, who spent nine years at Oakmont and is now director of grounds at Baltusrol Golf Club, site of this month’s PGA Championship.

“We started taking the trees out with the intention of restoring the holes to where they were when the course was first designed and built,” Wagner says.

Zimmers and his crew performed the majority of the tree-removal program from 1999 through 2005. It’s finished now, and about 5,000 trees are gone.

Most of the work was done in-house. Assistant superintendent Jason Hurwitz manned a chain saw often during the winter months when the tree cutting was performed. Hurwitz was part of a core group of five workers who toppled the trees.

“Rarely did anyone see a tree hit the ground,” Hurwitz says, explaining that such an experience can spark sentiment and emotion. “It was done almost exclusively in the winter, and mostly in January when the club was closed.”

But every spring when the members returned to the golf course, most of them liked what they saw and supported even more tree removal. When members saw the impact the tree removal was having on the course — more sunlight and air movement, healthier turf and wonderful vistas, among other things — they liked it.

“It’s wide open now,” says Zimmers, who counts about five tall elm trees still standing on the course. “It’s like members are playing a different course.”

It’s so different that some members are literally getting lost on the course. The trees they had used for landmarks are no longer there.

"I've had several people tell me that they didn't know what holes they were on," Zimmers says.

At length

Tom Marzolf, who has been with Fazio Golf Course Designers for 23 years, has been the architectural anchorman on the restoration. Marzolf's first order of business upon arriving in 1999 was lengthening Oakmont from the tees to get them ready for the U.S. Amateur. More than 200 yards was added to the course, which now plays about 7,220 yards. Length was added on holes three, four, seven 12, 15 and 18. A new par-3 tee on No. 8 will make the hole 290 yards for the U.S. Open.

Marzolf says the members understood the course had to be lengthened in reaction to players being able to hit the ball farther with their monster drivers and high-flying balls.

"Look at every golf course in the Top 10 — they've all done lengthening," Marzolf says. "You have to respond or you get left behind."

Much of the restoration has taken place in the past year. Oakmont's bunkers and greens are getting a good go over.

It's no surprise Fownes designed Oakmont with 300 bunkers, knowing he wanted a course that provided the ultimate test of golf. But many of the bunkers were removed from the course to cut back on overall maintenance and many were renovated.

Zimmer and his crew are in the midst of restoring the existing bunkers and adding 10 new ones, which will bring the total number to about 200.

Of course, the project included the mother of all bunker restorations — the refurbishing of the church pews bunker, one of the most sacred and famous bunkers in golf.

The crew took so many photographs of the church pews bunker and from so many angles that, well, let's just say that a super model has nothing on the bunker complex when it comes to Kodak moments. "We had it down to a T," Zimmers says of the church pews project, which began last fall and was finished in May.

Over the years the floor of the church pews bunker had accumulated so much sand that it had become raised. "It was too high," Marzolf says. "So we had to lower the floor back down and rebuild the bottom. Once we did that we had to rebuild the pews themselves.

We put fresh topsoil on them and planted clean fescue grasses."

The lowered bunker floor has made a big difference, Wagner says. "You go in there now, and you have a different kind of a sand trap to get out of it," he says with a chuckle.

The crew also added two additional pews to each end of the bunker. Marzolf says the pews had to be added because the "most famous bunker in American golf" no longer invoked the fear of God in players that a hazard of its stature should. Thanks to equipment technology, the big hitters — from some Oakmont members to the pros who will play in the U.S. Open — drive their balls past the church pews bunker with relative ease. So the bunker was stretched down the left of the third hole and down the left side of the fourth hole.

"It sounds like a daunting task to go into the most famous bunker in the country and do those things," Marzolf says. "But when you break it all down, we just did things that made sense."

Still, it was a bit distressful doing surgery on such an historic hazard. "We certainly breathed a deep sigh of relief when we were finished with it," Hurwitz says.

All of the bunkers, which received new drainage and sand, were restored "to what a Fownes bunker should look like," Wagner says.

"He had a certain kind of a rollover of grass on his bunker," Wagner adds. "It's a distinctive look. All the bunkers will be uniform now."

Oakmont's other hazards — its ditches — are also getting a go over. What's odd about Oakmont is the course has no water hazards. But it has the ditches, which run linear to the fairways. The ditches are also functional hazards and provide good drainage on the course. "When it rains all the water goes into the ditches and is taken off the property," Zimmers says.

But over the years the ditches, much like roadside ones, became full of heavy organic matter and a mixture of grasses. They were inconsistent in their depth and weren't aesthetically appealing.

"We decided to clean them out and restore them," says Zimmers, noting that he and his crew used old bunker sand to cap the ditches and then planted fine fescue sod in them to achieve a defined look. "Now if you hit your ball in the fescue, you can hit it out," Zimmers says.

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TOM MARZOLF

FAZIO GOLF COURSE DESIGNERS

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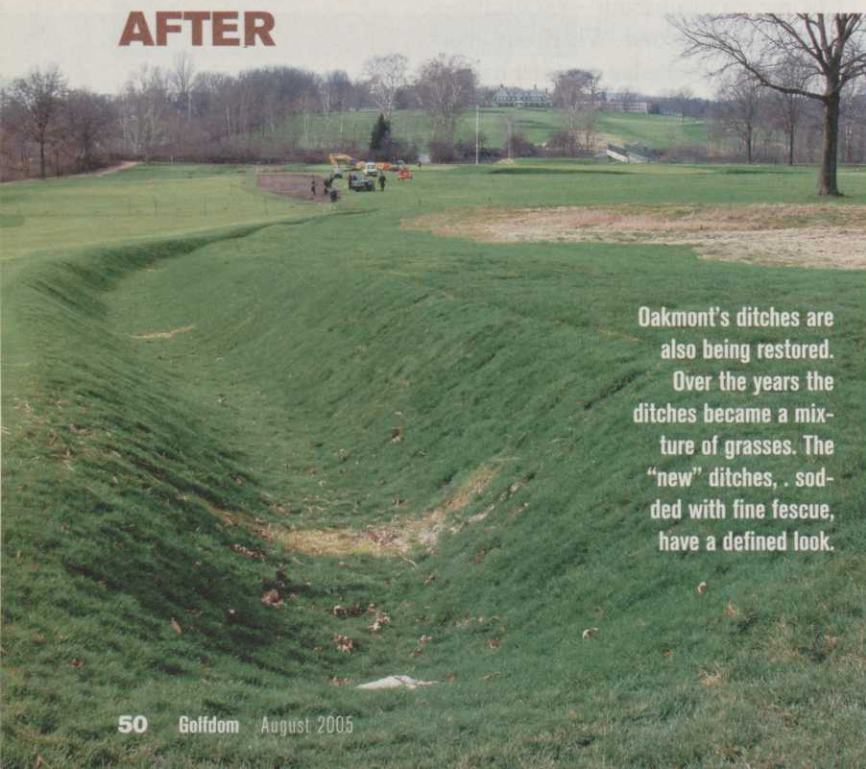
Like the bunkers and ditches, Oakmont's push-up greens needed some renewal. They hadn't been disturbed in 102 years.

"We've had high rainfall the past three years," Zimmers says, noting that several greens, after a heavy rain, would form bird-baths, which became havens for turf disease.

Zimmers says Oakmont is installing the XGD, or Existing Greens Drainage, on all of its greens. Developed by Stuart, Fla.-based T.D.I. International, XGD is a subsurface drainage system to remove surface water more rapidly and lower the water table in the green, thereby improving turf growth. T.D.I. International says its system is a permanent solution to poorly drained and compacted greens.



AFTER



Oakmont's ditches are also being restored. Over the years the ditches became a mixture of grasses. The "new" ditches, sodded with fine fescue, have a defined look.

Zimmers likes what he sees so far with the XGD. "It will make a big difference," he says. The first green to be fitted with the system was No. 8, the course's most problematic green. "Now it's nearly our best green," Zimmers adds.

The greens were also restored to their original size, although their topography remains the same. As old greens go, the fringes tend to encroach them after many years and the greens get smaller. "Looking at old pictures of the course we found that a lot of what used to be part of the greens was now fringe or rough," Wagner says. "So we resized them to be consistent with how they were originally built."

Marzolf made subtle design changes to the No. 2 and No. 17 greens. The pros would've had a field day with the 17th hole, a drivable 315-yard par 4, if the green wasn't altered slightly. The pear-shaped green, which could easily be reached in two, needed to have more bite.

So the club decided to let Marzolf lower the grade of the green on each side. "Now a slightly mis-hit shot will slide toward the bunkers," Marzolf says, noting that the hole's basic design was not altered. "You have to aim that shot at the center of the green and be precise."

Although not part of the restoration, Oakmont, which sits on the north and south sides of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, built a new pedestrian bridge across the highway in 2002. The club now has two bridges that extend over the turnpike. The new bridge was much needed to accommodate the people traffic that comes with hosting big tournaments, such as the upcoming U.S. Open.

While Zimmers and his staff had little to do with the actual construction of the bridge, they played a major role in coordinating the effort. There were permits to obtain, bids to take and contracts to award. And Zimmers is proud to say the course was open for play the entire time during the four months of construction.

Playing his part

Oakmont is known for several things, including its lightning-fast greens, and its passionate and demanding membership. In golf circles the course is also becoming known for its hardworking superintendent, the 35-year-old Zimmers, who learned the ropes of golf course maintenance from Paul R. Latshaw while working for him at Wilmington Coun-

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The church pews bunker (below) received new sand as part of its restoration. The completed bunker is above and stretches a few pews longer in each direction.

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try Club and Congressional Country Club.

The restoration has been politically challenging for Zimmers, who has had to field questions and opinions from various members about the project. But Zimmers, who studied turf maintenance at Rutgers University, realizes it's all part of the process. So he does his best to answer questions with a smile on his face and a politeness in his voice. "I've had people come up and say things like, 'John, you're making this bunker too deep. How's it going to play?' I tell them, 'I certainly appreciate your opinion, and I'll share it with the committee,'" he says.

Communicating details of the restoration

has been vital in keeping members in the know about what's going on, says Zimmers, who distributed a 10-minute DVD to members last spring that highlighted aspects of the restoration. Zimmers also passed out a brochure detailing the restoration work schedule.

Zimmers has made an impression on the members. "He's the best superintendent in the United States," Wagner says. "He has a great work ethic and a great interest in seeing that our golf course be the best it can be."

Zimmers, who credits his assistants Hurwitz and Brett Bentley for the important behind-the-scenes work involved with the project, has repeatedly said the restoration is all about the members and not about him leaving his mark on the course.

"We're just trying to do the right thing ... do what's best for the club and the membership," he says.

And, Mr. Fownes, of course.

"I wish Mr. Fownes could come back for a day," Zimmers says. "I wonder what he'd say."

Wagner and Marzolf believe the boss would be pleased.

"I think Mr. Fownes would find the effort well worth the investment," Wagner says.

"I've got to believe that if Mr. Fownes were here, he'd be doing exactly what we're doing," Marzolf adds. "All we want to do is pass this golf course on to the next generation. Hopefully, we'll hand it off a little better than we found it." ■