

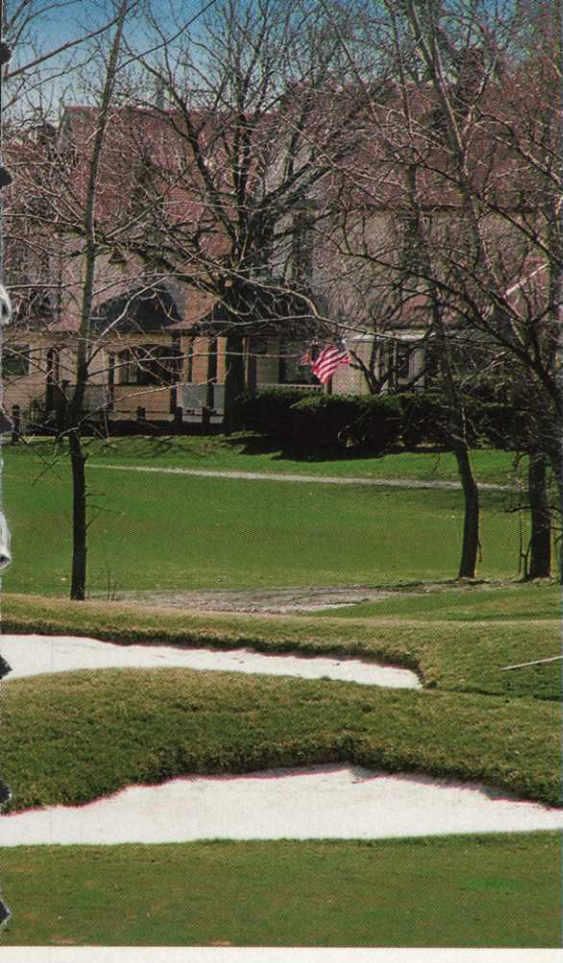


# There Goes the

... on its way up, thanks to a new nine-hole

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

**THE OLD** city park was not really a park anymore but a dumping ground for worn tires and trash. The land was crowded with scrub trees, overgrown with brush, and even peppered with a few abandoned and burned-out cars. The 59-acre plot, located in the shadows of a nearby steel plant, was also a place where youths gathered to party and ride their squealing dirt bikes and noisy all-terrain vehicles.



Homeowners couldn't be happier living on the \$1.2 million golf course, which has increased their property values and given them more incentive to take care of their lots.

# Neighborhood . . .

## First Tee golf course in Cleveland

The “park” was not an appealing sight in the Cleveland neighborhood, located on the city’s southeast side and known for its Slavic heritage of people. In fact, some called it an eyesore.

“It was in a state of disrepair,” says Joanne Scudder, who operates the Washington Park Horticultural Center nearby. “It became increasingly difficult to take care of the area and to make sure people weren’t dumping debris there.”

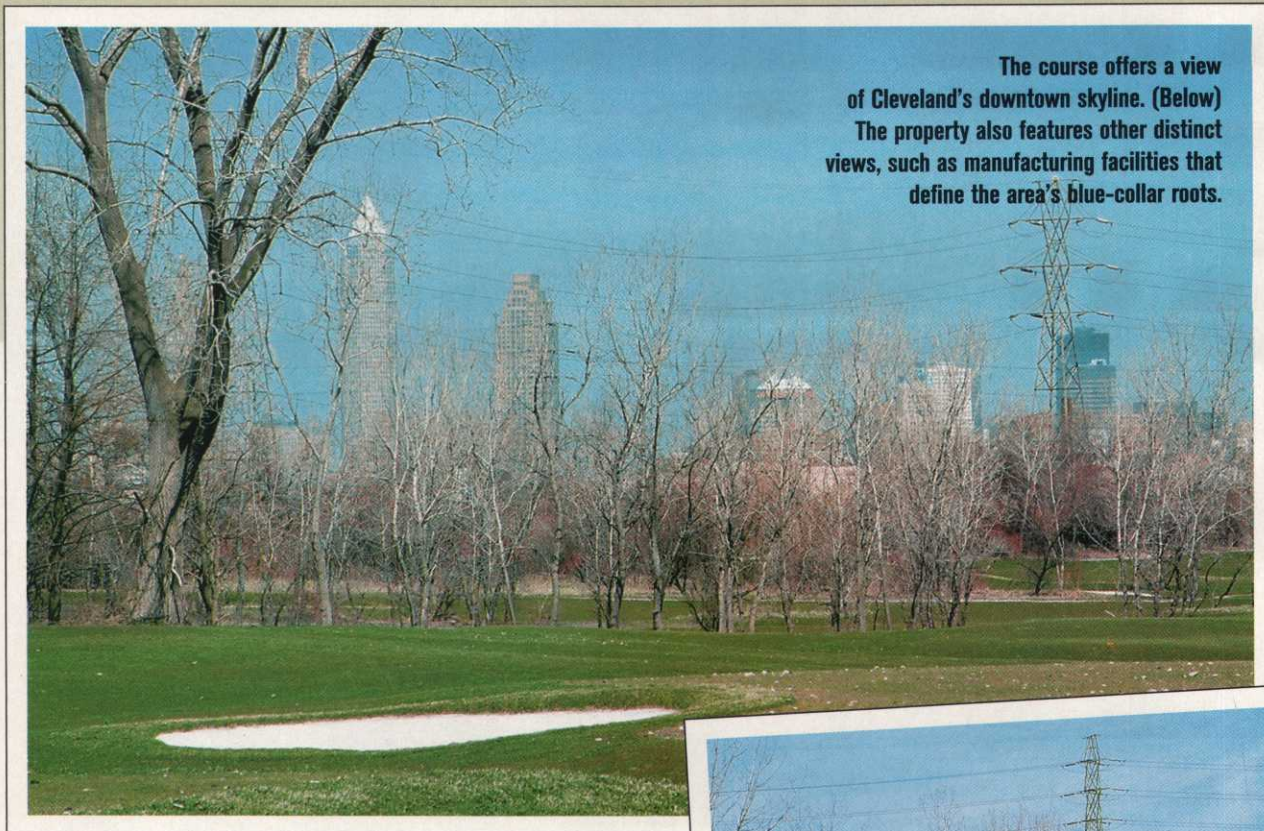
But thanks to The First Tee of Cleveland, an organization dedicated to teaching golf to area youths, and the Cleveland Metroparks, the city’s park district, the eyesore has been

transformed into a lush-green, well-manicured, wildlife-inhabited, nine-hole golf course with a view of Cleveland’s downtown skyline. The \$1.2 million course, which will also feature a clubhouse, driving range and practice area when completed next year, is called the Washington Golf Learning Center.

“I’m standing here looking at the golf course,” Scudder says. “I have to pinch myself every time I look out there. I can’t believe it has happened.”

It’s a good thing it has happened — not only for the neighborhood’s sake but also for the city’s. Hailed as a comeback city only a decade ago,

*Continued on page 44*



The course offers a view of Cleveland's downtown skyline. (Below) The property also features other distinct views, such as manufacturing facilities that define the area's blue-collar roots.



“It’s a god-send that the golf course is being built.”

**PAUL RUGGLES**  
MAYOR, NEWBURG HEIGHTS

*Continued from page 43*

Cleveland has been mired in an economic slump and its people are floundering with an inferiority complex. Last fall Cleveland was bestowed with the notorious label of being the poorest large city in America. Recently, a popular newspaper columnist in the city wrote: “A new kind of grayness has crept into our city. We are a town in depression.”

About 75 percent of the golf course is located in an area of Cleveland called Slavic Village, well known for its residents who immigrated there from Poland and the Ukraine to work in nearby steel plants and raise their families. But like its city, the gritty neighborhood has become rife with crime, poverty and apathy. Government-subsidized housing grew by 73 percent from 2001 to 2004. Slumlords and drug dealers have made their marks on the area.

It’s not unusual to hear people speaking Polish on the neighborhood’s streets or in local food markets. But it’s also not unusual to read in the newspaper about a neighborhood drug bust or carjacking. Many of the area’s 12,000

middle-class residents wonder whether it’s time to move out.

So the community needs this tiny and humble golf course, which measures about 1,350 yards from the back tees. While it’s not some slick, new corporation coming to town that will create 500 jobs, it’s a snippet of much-needed good news for the neighborhood and the entire city.

The project had been rumored for several years. It took time to sort out legal documentation of the land so the Cleveland Metroparks could take it over. Then it took time for the First Tee to fund itself to build the complex.

Ed Rybka, a Cleveland city councilman in the area for 19 years, loved the idea to build a golf course when he heard about it. “It was a

chance to take that underutilized park and give it some life," he says. "The community is excited about [the course] and is embracing it."

About one-fourth of the course is located in Newburg Heights, an adjacent suburb to Cleveland. Paul Ruggles, mayor of Newburg Heights, grew up in the area and remembers when the golf course site was just a huge ravine. It was filled with dirt in the 1960s and there were tentative plans to build an athletic facility on the site. But the plans never became reality and the property began to deteriorate.

"It's a godsend that the golf course is being built," Ruggles says.

Doris Evans, executive director of the First Tee of Cleveland, says the course is bound to improve the neighborhood's image.

"In a word, it's fabulous," Evans says. "I can't think of a better word to describe it. Ultimately, it will be a landmark for the city of Cleveland."

### 'A big boost'

Although the course hasn't opened yet, the people in the neighborhood have taken an appreciation to it, especially people who live adjacent to the course or near it.

Sean McHugh, chief superintendent of golf and turf for Cleveland Metroparks, says homeowners are excited about the course. "A lot of these neighbors take good care of their houses and their neighborhood, and they were upset with the way the area was being used as a dump site," McHugh says.

The course is located behind the home of Mary Dolowy, 83, a Polish immigrant who has lived most of her life in the neighborhood. Dolowy, who lives with her daughter Hedy, says she won't miss the exasperating sound of motorcycles rumbling through the park at all hours of the day. Now Dolowy says she welcomes the serene sound of sprinklers when the course's irrigation system kicks on.

*Continued on page 46*

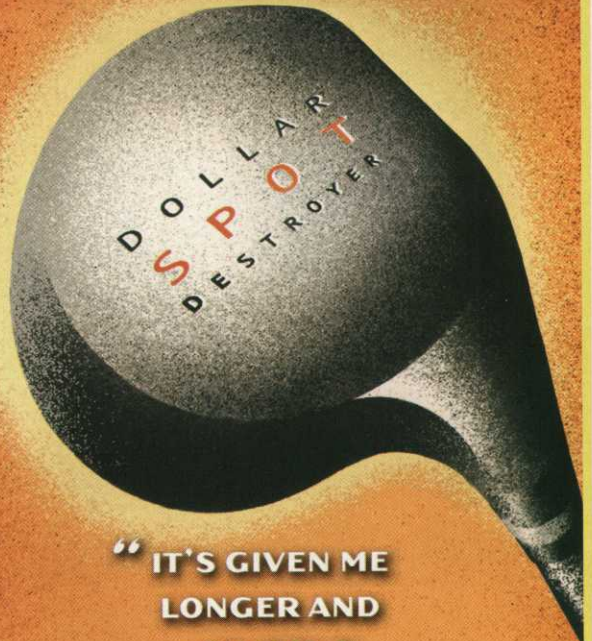


Sean McHugh,  
chief superintendent,  
says homeowners  
are excited about  
the course.



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Mary Dolowy (right) and her daughter Hedy won't miss the sound of dirt bikes. (Below right) Rose (left) and Frances Holecek hope vandals don't strike.



— will be looking at their properties.

What's inspiring, says Terry Baller, an architect with Cleveland-based IMG, whose firm waived its fee to design the course, is that neighbors are cleaning up their backyards on their own accord. "They know the course will have a nice landscaped look," he says.

Says Rybka: "It's my experience when you resurface a street, you find people clean up and paint their houses. It has a triggering impact."

Last summer, during building of the course, a man was in his backyard shooting video of the construction crew in action. The man, who lived in the same house his entire life, said, "I've seen this place go from nothing to what it's going to be now."

The neighborhood may be undergoing somewhat of a transformation, Rybka adds, noting that a developer is interested in building about 125 homes in the area. One of the things that impressed the developer about the area is the golf course. "It's that kind of amenity that

"It's a big boost. It has made the community come together."

**SHIRLEY BAUMAN**  
HOMEOWNER

*Continued from page 45*

Shirley Bauman has lived in the area her entire life and in the same house for 10 years. She says the neighborhood, looking run down in places, needed some good fortune.

The golf course's third hole is about 50 yards from Bauman's house. She says she and her husband Mike couldn't be happier with the view.

"This is the best thing that could have happened to the neighborhood," Bauman says, noting how pleased she is to see the course's green grass. "It's a big boost. It has made the community come together."

When people visit, Bauman is proud to show them the golf course in her home's backyard.

Some people who live on or near the golf course have been affected with cases of cleanup fever. They no longer hide junk behind backyard sheds. Now they're cleaning up their backyards because they know that others — golfers



will position Cleveland and its neighborhoods as good places to live and work," Rybka says.

Rybka and others believe the homes surrounding the course are worth more. Ruggles estimates prices of Newburg Heights homes on the course have increased \$10,000 to \$15,000. "Certainly, housing around a golf course is always attractive and well valued," Ruggles says, noting that homes in the area range from about \$60,000 to a little more than \$100,000.

Sisters Francis and Rose Holecek, who have lived in a large house down the street from the golf course for their entire lives, believe the course will be an asset to the neighborhood if it's kept up. But the Holeceks, who admit they're fearful of the area's increased crime rate, are concerned about vandalism to the course. "Some people are concerned the wrong type of people will come to the course ... people who might damage it," the 75-year-old Frances says. "I hope they're wrong."

But Rybka believes the course will bring more security to the neighborhood because the area will be better policed when the golf course opens. Before, when it was basically abandoned land, police didn't spend much time patrolling it, he adds.

### 'A nature preserve'

If someone had asked McHugh early in the construction process, he would've said that building a golf course on the lackluster site was going to be a major challenge. McHugh says



Sean McHugh (right) confers with Miles Smart (left) of Audubon International and Terry Baller of IMG during construction of the course.

he was taken aback the first time he saw the property up close.

"After walking the property and seeing some of the soils, I was a little nervous from an agronomic standpoint of what we would encounter once we began to open the soil up," he says.

At first, McHugh thought the entire site would need to be capped with more topsoil. "Every time we tried to probe, we kept hitting slag and hard objects underground," he says.

But construction crews dug bore holes and discovered the present topsoil ranged from 1.5 feet deep to 5 feet deep throughout the site. "We made the determination that we could balance the site with the material we had on the site," McHugh says, noting that the decision saved the project about \$300,000.

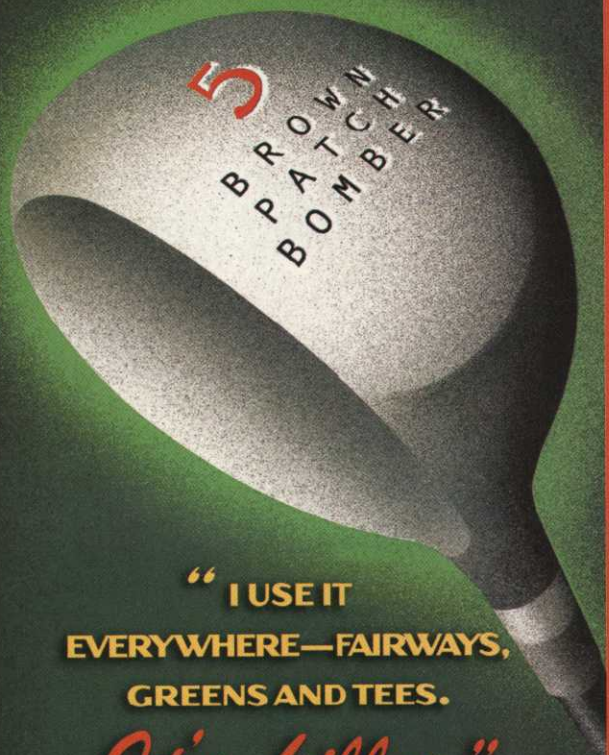
The course's superintendent is Jim Klein, who moved over from the Cleveland Metroparks-operated Manakiki Golf Course, a Donald Ross design located in the city's eastern suburbs. Klein, who spent 15 years at Manakiki and has been a superintendent for 30 years, always wanted the chal-

*Continued on page 48*



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## There Goes the Neighborhood . . .



The course is seeking to become the first First Tee course to participate in Audubon International's Gold Signature Program.

*Continued from page 47*

lence of growing in a golf course. Washington Golf Learning Center was grown in last fall. Its greens are comprised of L-93 bentgrass, and the fairways are a mixture of three

bentgrass varieties: L-23, SR1119 and South Shore. The roughs are bluegrass. The seed was picked for its disease and drought tolerance and meets Audubon International's environmental standards.

Speaking of Audubon, Washington Reservation is seeking to become the first nine-hole design and First Tee course to participate in the environmental organization's Gold Signature Program, a designation awarded to golf courses for integrating "environmental quality, integrity, and sustainability into a new development," according to Audubon. "Gold" level projects involve ongoing monitoring and research and require a long-term commitment to showcase principles and practices of environmental sustainability, the organization says.

"We're in that movement because of who we are," McHugh says. "We are a conservation agency, yet golf courses are looked upon as a negative influence on the environment by a lot of people."

Miles Smart, director of environmental plan-

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ning for Audubon International, calls Washington Golf Learning Center an "oasis in the city." Smart says he's impressed with the design of the course, and that the site features good drainage and a healthy wildlife habitat. When people are playing golf, they'll feel like they're in the country, he says.

"What we've got here is a park ... a nature preserve in the middle of the city, which has to be a positive for anybody living in this area," Smart says.

The site is recognized as a vital refueling stop for migrating birds. It's also the home for about 15 deer.

The course is adjacent to the Cleveland Horticultural Center, which is operated by the Cleveland School District. About 250 students, mostly from a nearby high school, attend the center for its career and technical education programs. The golf course will provide another avenue for the students to get jobs or internships after they graduate. The hope is the center and the golf course will combine to churn out a few future superintendents.

**"I want the adults in this town to help embrace these children."**

**DORIS EVANS**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
FIRST TEE OF CLEVELAND

Of course, the main idea behind the course — and also the First Tee's mantra — is "to provide young people of all backgrounds an opportunity to develop, through golf and character education, life-enhancing values such as honesty, integrity and sportsmanship." The First Tee, an initiative of the World Golf Foundation, has opened about 200 facilities and introduced the game to more than 450,000 people since 2000.

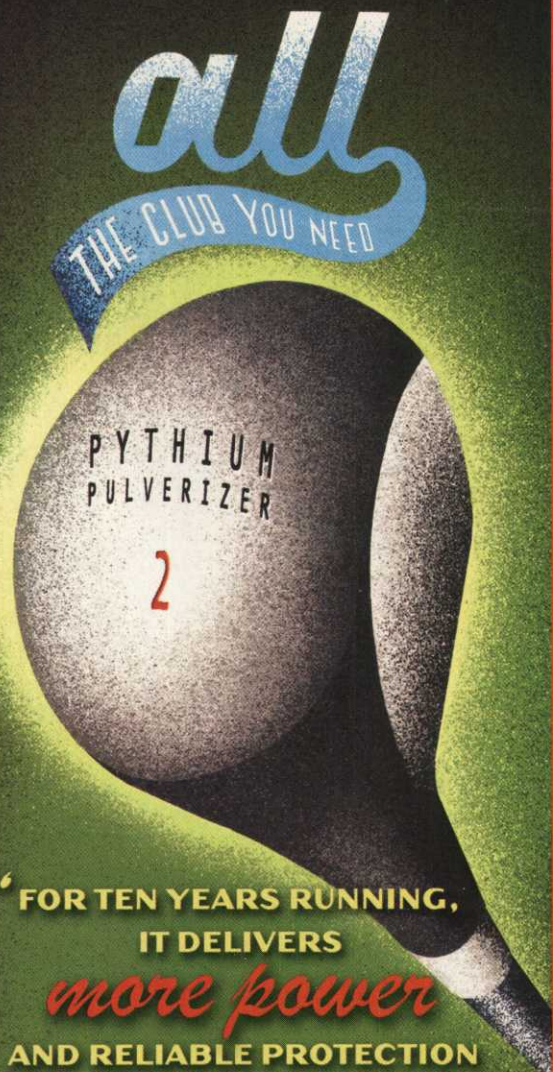
Realizing that it's not a wealthy community with a couple of country clubs nearby, Rybka says the kids who live in the neighborhood probably would never get a chance to learn about golf if it weren't for Washington Reservation.

McHugh says the project could change kids' lives for the better. That's precisely why Evans says she was attracted to the First Tee. She also knew from experience that golf could make a difference in children's lives. When she was younger, Evans played in a junior program at Bob O' Link Golf Club near Chicago. "[Instructors] taught us the skill of golf, but they also taught us more about the skill of living," she says.

Evans likes the First Tee because it's about growing the character of children, not just about growing the game of golf. And she says it's important that the neighborhood's adults get involved as mentors at Washington Golf Learning Center.

"I want the adults in this town to help embrace these children and let them know that life can be rich for them as well," she says. "And those adults will be better for it."

So will the city of Cleveland. ■



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