



A class act at Oakland Hills

By Rob Schultz

Ted Woehrle stood on fabled Oakland Hills Country Club's 10th green, pointed back toward the tee and told a grand, old story.

It was a cool, crisp autumn day in Birmingham, Michigan, the air was clear and, as Woehrle spoke, the characters in the Oakland Hills golf course superintendent's story almost seemed to come to life.

In the backdrop of the 10th tee that Woehrle pointed to was the magnificent clubhouse. It almost has as much history as Oakland Hills' grand south course, which Ben Hogan labeled "The Monster" during the 1951 U.S. Open.

But Hogan wasn't the main character in Woehrle's story. Instead, it was the great Walter Hagen, who served as the pro at Oakland Hills about 60 years ago and once said, "I don't want to be a millionaire, I just want to live like one."

Hagen did just about anything to live like a millionaire and that included gambling on the golf course, even at midnight. Woehrle said Hagen would sit at the Oakland Hills bar and bet anybody that he could par the brutal par-4 10th hole in total darkness. Even though he was one of the greatest golfers in the world at the time, such a feat still seemed so improbable that it wasn't difficult to find some takers.

Woehrle said that Hagen stood on the 10th tee and said he'd hit his drive just a few yards short of the fairway bunker. The small gallery then ran up to that spot and, sure enough, they found his ball.

Hagen then said he'd hit his second shot on the green about 10 feet short of the pin. Once again the gallery ran to the green and found his ball precisely where he said it would be.

Hagen, meanwhile, putted out for par and collected his money. "And nobody ever knew," said Woehrle, "that Hagen had a clubhouse boy place those balls on the fairway and green long before he made the bet. All Hagen had to do was make sure he didn't hit the ball anywhere close to where he said it was going."

A great story. And there were more. Each hole on this wonderful, old track seemed to have a story. As I trudged along with Woehrle and listened to him spin tale after tale, it was hard to stifle the shiver that kept going up and down my spine.

Oakland Hills has an ambience carved out by the world's greatest golfers in the world's greatest tournaments over a period of nearly 100 years. Hagen, Hogan, Bobby Jones, Gene Littler, Sam Snead, Gary Player and architects Donald Ross and Robert Trent Jones, Sr. are just some of the great faces that are part of Oakland Hills' pictorial Hall of Fame in the clubhouse's main upstairs hallway.

But none deserve a spot on that wall more than Woehrle, who is as much a part of Oakland Hills' story as the stories he tells so well.

Oakland Hills and Woehrle are a perfect match; a superb golf course that needs a great deal of care and a savvy superintendent who has all the answers for all the course's needs.

Woehrle, only the third superintendent in the course's illustrious 73-year history, has preserved and protected Oakland Hills as if it was one of his own children or grandchildren of which he is so proud.

And, like Hagen, Hogan or Player, Woehrle does his job with grace and class. Spend a few hours with Woehrle and it's easy to understand why he is one of the world's most respected golf course superintendents.

First, Woehrle pays attention to detail. As we stood on the first tee he pointed out the new tees that have been built, in part, for next year's Senior U.S. Open. New tees were also built for the women members, who, in the past, were forced to tee off from the front of the men's tees. It was a major undertaking that came out magnificently.

But in the same breath Woehrle also pointed out the new flagpole that was installed the day before our round. He took just as much pride that that project was pulled off just as well.

Second, Woehrle is at the top of his

class as far as understanding and successfully completing even bigger jobs than building new tees.

After we completed our round, Woehrle took us into the men's club room and pulled out about 50 before-and-after photos of his latest project. It was a dandy. His crew painstakingly restored Oakland Hills' 100-plus sand traps — most of them designed and added to the Donald Ross course by Robert Trent Jones in 1950 — back to their original shape.

Some had been finished just a few days prior to my arrival at the course. But nobody would have known it. I stared at the ground looking for marks where the sod was placed. For that matter, I stared at the entire course wondering if there was a flaw somewhere. I couldn't find one.

Third, Woehrle has heart; a special gift that completes a very special package. He understands the history of his course, how its subtleties and nuances make it so great and he has made sure nothing occurs that could change it. It's not just a job. He has let the course envelop him. Subtly. Like the course itself.

Woehrle spent a beautiful Saturday afternoon with an out-of-state newspaper guy, a complete stranger. Yet he treated me like a long lost friend because he knew I loved the course. Quietly, he pointed out some of the wonders of his course. The other wonders he let me find out for myself.

And then Woehrle watched the course envelop me for the duration of the round. He smiled when I birdied the No. 1 handicap hole, the infamous par-4 No. 5 where T.C. Chen two-chipped and lost the '85 U.S. Open to Andy North. And he smiled when I dropped a 10-foot downhill slider to save par at the equally infamous dog-leg par-4 No. 16, the course's only real water hole.

Hopefully the afternoon made him feel good, worth the time away from home to spend time with this stranger. As I waved good-bye to Woehrle later that night, I wondered how many others of Woehrle's stature would do the same for such a stranger.

Woehrle talked of Hogan and Hagen and Player and Littler with respect. They are all great stories at Oakland Hills.

But Woehrle is their equal; a true, great story himself.