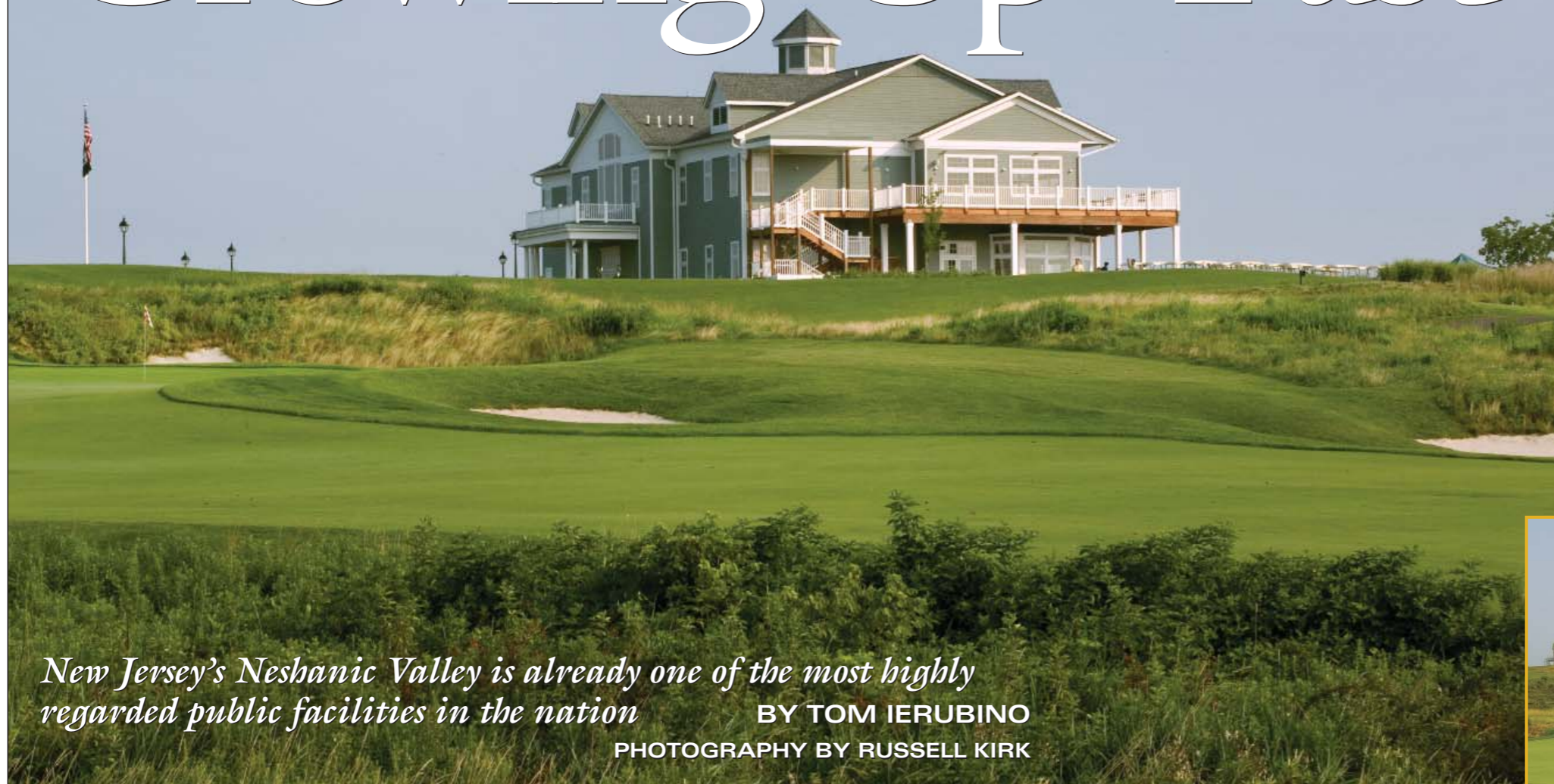


# Growing Up Fast



*New Jersey's Neshanic Valley is already one of the most highly regarded public facilities in the nation*

BY TOM IERUBINO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUSSELL KIRK

**N**eshanic Valley Golf Course is like that rare golfer who takes up the game as an adult and is a low handicapper within what the rest of us would deem a ridiculously short amount of time. The 27-hole public facility, which opened Labor Day weekend of 2004 in Branchburg Township, New Jersey, is that good, that fast.

A group of MGA volunteers got their first look at Neshanic Valley about a month after it opened, and it didn't take long for them to report back to MGA Tournament Director Gene Westmoreland with a glowing review of the place. Westmoreland then put in a call to Bob Ransone, Manager of Golf Operations for the Somerset County Park Commission (SCPC), which runs Neshanic Valley as well as four other courses. "Would Neshanic be

interested in hosting an event?" Westmoreland asked.

The answer was yes, and Neshanic Valley will be the site of this year's MGA/ MetLife Public Links Championship on July 6. Another SCPC course, Quail Brook, will host one of the five qualifying rounds in June.

The MGA isn't the only organization impressed with Neshanic Valley. *Golfweek* named it one of the 50 best courses that opened in the U.S. in 2004-05, and it was the only municipal course on the list. *Golfweek* also ranks it as the sixth-best public-access course in New Jersey.

But Neshanic Valley is about much more than its three championship nines (Lake,

Meadow and Ridge), a fact that is apparent as soon as one turns in the entrance drive off of South Branch Road. On your right you'll see a state-of-the-art Learning Center featuring a double-ended driving range with grass and mat hitting areas on each end, a 16,000-square-foot putting green, a short-game practice area including bunkers and three chipping greens, and two practice holes. The building you see on your right houses the Callaway Golf Performance Center (*see sidebar, page 91*). As you advance farther up the drive toward the 12,000-square-foot clubhouse, you'll see on

your left the nine-hole, par-32 Academy Course.

No, this isn't your father's muni.

Once upon a time the 375 acres that Neshanic Valley occupies was a couple of farms. Evidence of this can be seen on the Meadow nine, where a barn and house sit not far from the fourth tee and a silo stands sentinel behind the fifth green. The barn will be restored and preserved as a historic structure, while Merrill House is where Ransone and John Kitchen, the SCPC's Deputy Director of Golf Management, have their offices.

The SCPC acquired the farmland in the mid-1990s through the county's Open Spaces program, keeping it from being turned into a housing development.

"We walked the land – I was a Park Commissioner at the time – and couldn't believe the changes in topography," Kitchen says. "We always thought it was fairly flat. We said this could be one heck of a golf course. We didn't have anything down here in the south end of the county, so it was ideal."

After the long process of getting the necessary government approvals, the SCPC began looking at golf course architects in 2000. "We weren't trying to compete with



**Below: Bunkers and wetlands demand accurate approach shots to the large, fast greens.**



**Above: The hilltop clubhouse offers views across all three nines at Neshanic Valley.**



The thick native grass found throughout the property can swallow errant shots.

the privately owned facilities, but we wanted something a little bit nicer than what our public golfer in the county had experienced before," Kitchen says.

When they ended up hiring Hurdzan/Fry Golf Course Design, Dr. Michael Hurdzan showed them that they could do so much more than they had dreamed, giving them a

plan for 27 holes and a learning center. "We told him we were just looking for 18," Kitchen says. "He said, 'This is what you can do here if you want to.' We only had experience with 18-hole courses. We didn't know what the land could hold."

They were pleased to find out, and construction began in 2001. The Lake and Meadow nines, along with the Academy Course, opened for play in September 2004. The Ridge nine opened a year later. The total cost came in at over \$19 million, but the investment is already paying off.

"Revenue-wise, this place has gone beyond our wildest imagination," Kitchen says. "This facility, including the learning center, accounted for 43 percent of all the golf revenue from our courses in 2006. The learning center is like having a sixth golf course."

Registered county residents pay \$50 to play Monday through Thursday and \$55 Friday through Sunday, while out-of-county golfers pay \$65 and \$75. All fees include cart. Golfers can choose to walk, but each nine features a few long treks between holes.

Each of Neshanic Valley's three nines plays to a par of 36, and each hole has five sets of teeing grounds. From the back tees, the Lake is 3,549 yards, the Meadow 3,520 and the Ridge 3,516. The Meadow-Lake combination is rated (73.8/130) the most difficult by a small margin.

"It's natural, rolling land with

long-range vistas, so we tried to create a course with that feel," says Bill Kerman, lead designer on the project for Hurdzan/Fry. "We weren't going to build a parkland-type course with lots of trees here. We wanted to keep the look of the land from when it was all farms. There were natural grasses, native vegetation, and wetlands, so we worked the holes between all of those elements. The overall design goal was to not move much dirt at all, and we didn't."

"The conditions, even though the course is still new, are fantastic," says Neshanic head professional Fred Glass.

Credit for that goes to Darrell Marcinek and his staff. Marcinek was an assistant at Canoe Brook Country Club prior to becoming superintendent at Neshanic. He has since been promoted to head golf course superintendent for all five county courses, with Ed Highland taking over as Neshanic's super.

Two ponds come into play on the Lake nine, one

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The fee is \$100 for an hour-long appointment, and the center completed approximately 1,000 fits last year. If Callaway clubs are purchased, \$50 of that is applied as credit to the cost of the clubs.

"I think it's been a great thing for the local golfer," says Neshanic head professional Fred Glass. "I can't tell you how many people end up getting something different than what they thought. It's good because people get what works best for them."

The Callaway connection has had additional benefits, as company spokespersons David Leadbetter and Annika Sorenstam have given clinics at Neshanic in 2005 and 2006, respectively.



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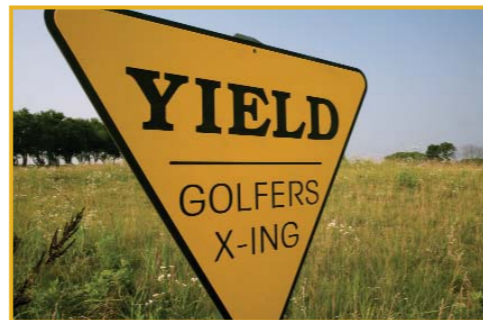
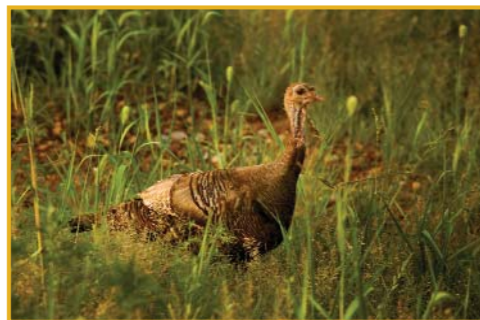
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While golfers have invaded, there are still reminders that Neshanic was once farmland.



in front of the tee on the 588-yard, par-five fifth hole and the other on the right side of both the 382-yard, par-four seventh and 204-yard, par-three eighth. All three nines have environmentally sensitive areas (ESA) that play as hazards – most are lateral – but the Meadow has the most. The 536-yard, par-five fifth hole on the Ridge has perhaps the most daunting ESA hazard, as it comes into play on the left from the tee, then must be crossed on either the second or third shot. While the ESAs can be intimidating, the fairways are relatively generous. Because the course has very few trees, the wind can be a big factor.

Which nines will be used for the 36-hole MGA Public Links competition had not been determined at press time, but any combina-

tion should provide a challenging test.

Kevin Foley, last year's Met Amateur runner-up and low amateur at the Met Open, won the Somerset County high school championship at Neshanic Valley in 2005 and was runner-up last year.

"Those were played from a forward set of tees, but I've played the course a couple of times from the tips, and it gets pretty tough," says Foley, now a freshman member of the golf team at Penn State. He notes that some of the ESA areas come into play more from the back tees, especially on the 458-yard, par-four fourth hole on the Lake nine and the 444-yard par-four eighth on the Meadow nine, both featuring an ESA hazard all the way up the left side. "I've seen people make some

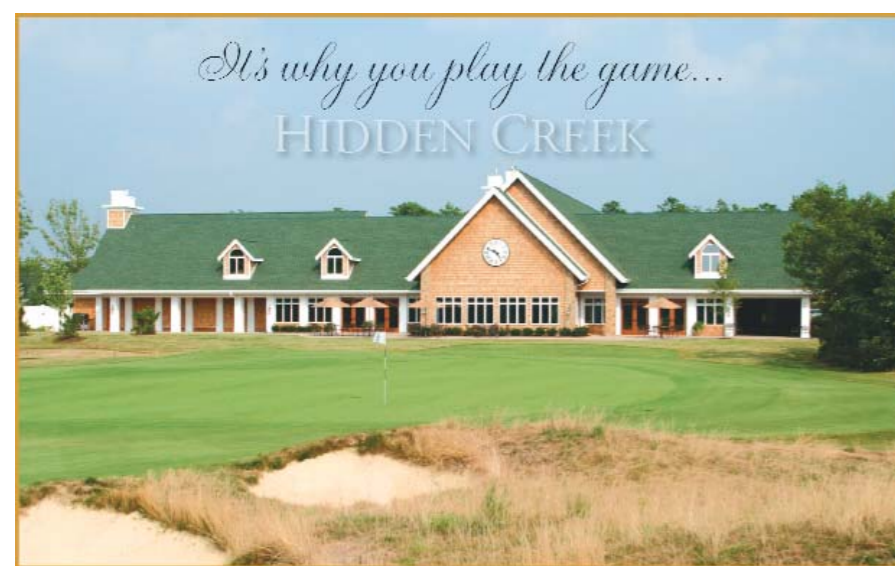
big numbers on fourth hole of the Lake," Foley adds.

Glass, himself a former MGA Publinks competitor at Richter Park in 1988, describes the par-five ninth of the Meadow, which could play as the 18th hole in the Publinks, as "a great risk-reward hole if you don't use the back tee." The hole plays from an elevated tee but into the prevailing breeze, so from the tips at 577 yards there will be very few going for the green in two. However, if played up 30 or 40 yards closer that could tempt more players to play boldly on their second shots.

When the competitors swing away at the MGA Public Links, they figure to be as impressed by Neshanic Valley as the local golfers have been.

"From the feedback we've gotten, there's a lot of pride among our county golfers in this facility," Kitchen says. "They're very happy with what they've got here. They consider it their own country club. And you know what, why not. In my opinion, they deserve that." ■

Tom Ierubino is a golf writer based in Somerset, New Jersey.



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