



Green Monster

Fenway Golf Club challenges players with a lush, rolling layout that will serve as an intriguing host course for this year's Ike

BY REED RICHARDSON

Nestled amongst the rolling hills of southern Westchester County, Fenway Golf Club proudly boasts a rich tradition of great golf and legendary players. For the past 85 years, Fenway has played host to some of the best the game has to offer, whether from across the country or within the Met Area. This summer, Fenway will add yet another storied chapter to its legacy. For the first time, the club will host the Ike MGA Stroke Play Championship, to be played June 25 and 26. It promises to be an exciting week, as defending champion Roger Hoit of Baltusrol will lead a strong field competing for the most coveted amateur stroke play title in the region.

The Early Days

In 1920, an aspiring group of businessmen chose the 40-acre Scarsdale estate of publishing baron Eugene Reynal as the anchor point for a new golf course. (Reynal's mansion would later be pressed into service as the clubhouse.) Having begun this quest almost 100 years to the day that James Fenimore Cooper, the famous early American author of *The Last of the Mohicans*, settled in Scarsdale, they chose to name their new club after him. By the spring of 1921, the members of Fen-



Compared to the nearby competition — most notably, the recently completed Winged Foot Golf Club — Fenimore had obvious shortcomings. So, who better to remedy these problems than Winged Foot’s own architect, A.W. Tillinghast. Given the full 240 acres available, “Tillie” redesigned Fenimore in his signature style, which included a strong dependence upon the natural terrain along with heavily bunkered greens of various sizes. When Fenimore re-opened in 1924, its new, tougher course was immediately crowned a smashing success.

During its first decade, Fenimore’s reputation grew even more, as it became one of the first clubs in the country to employ a playing Tour professional as well as a standard club professional. Leo Diegel, who won back-to-back PGA championships in 1928 and ’29, and “Wild” Bill Mehlhorn, who won 20 PGA Tour events between 1923 and 1930, were among the club’s notable playing pros. But despite this notoriety, Fenimore and its members found themselves struggling to survive as the club’s 10th anniversary approached, yet another victim of the Great

Depression. After foundering for a few years, the club reorganized in 1936 and adopted a new name, Fenway, that gave them a fresh start yet also gave a nod to their history.

The Current Course

Though Fenway looks different than your typical Westchester golf course — you won’t find as many stark elevation changes and holes with tree-lined fairways — it still possesses design elements found in the other nearby Tillinghast courses from the same era, such as Winged Foot



imore had acquired enough adjacent land to build a full, 18-hole course as well as a short, nine-hole companion track. To carve out these courses, they enlisted legendary golf architect Devereux Emmet, who had already made a name for himself in the Met Area by designing well regarded courses for Garden City Golf Club and Pelham Country Club.

Not long after the club opened in 1922, however, members began to complain.

and Quaker Ridge.

“Tillie always put in a short hole or two, and these holes were about great golf shot-making,” says Bob Alonzi, Fenway’s head superintendent for the past eight years. Alonzi, who spent nearly 16 years as Winged Foot’s superintendent from 1984 to 1999, says he sees several similarities between the sixth hole on Winged Foot’s West course and Fenway’s

Main photo: The tee shot on Fenway’s ninth hole must avoid the tree on the right side in order to set up an approach into the green.

Inset photo: Leo Diegel, two-time PGA champion in 1928 and ’29, served as Fenway’s playing pro.

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Through their annual First Tee Day, the staff and members of Fenway introduce youngsters to the game.



300-yard, par-four 15th hole. “Both have small, almost postage-stamp greens well defended by bunkers on either side,” he notes. “They’re the type of holes where it’s just as easy to make a double bogey as it is a birdie. For Tillinghast, these holes were all about building in risk

versus reward.”

By the late 1990s, however, much of Tillinghast’s original design had slowly been compromised; some bunkers had disappeared altogether and many fairways had narrowed as a result of encroaching vegetation. To

restore the course’s original characteristics, the club brought in architect Gil Hanse in 2000. “Gil rebuilt many of the bunker complexes, brought back play areas around the greens that had fallen into disrepair, and pulled some trees out of there as well,” explains Alonzi. The result, he says, is a course that is now in “great condition and plays as Tillinghast would have wanted it.”

These renovations have made an already challenging and entertaining course both tougher and better, says Fenway’s head professional, Heath Wassem, one of the Met Area’s top players. “It’s a very difficult golf course to score low on,” he says. “It’s a shotmaker’s course, where you pay a severe penalty if you land in a bunker or on the wrong level of the tiered greens.”

Thanks to these characteristics, Fenway garners its share of recognition. In this magazine’s ranking of the Top 50 Courses in the Met Area (April/May 2007), Fenway came in at number 36. On a national scale, *Golfweek* lists Fenway among the Top 100 courses built before 1960.

When asked to single out a few of



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The approach shot to Fenway's 15th hole must be precise to avoid well-placed greenside bunkers.



the course's more difficult holes, Wassem laughs and says "five through eighteen." In fact, the 458-yard, par-four fifth — rated the toughest at Fenway — throws numerous challenges at a player. From the series of newly restored bunkers guarding both the inside and outside of its dogleg to a treacherous green

that drops five feet from front to back, the fifth hole is all business. "I'd rank it among the toughest holes of any Westchester course," says Wassem.

Championship History

Two years after its rebirth in 1936, Fenway played host to perhaps the biggest tournament in the club's history, the Westchester 108. A six-round affair, the 108 offered the PGA Tour's richest purse at the time (\$13,500) and drew a field full of legends. A young Sam Snead, who was still four years away from winning his first major, had to scramble to take home the \$5,000 first prize, shooting a very humbling 10-over par 430.

In addition to being the home of the annual Mittlemark Invitational, Fenway has also hosted the Met Amateur (1953), the MGA Senior Open (2000), and the Met Open (1955 and 1969). Jimmy Wright, a seven-time Met PGA Player of the Year, won his only Met Open title at Fenway in '69. Not surprisingly, he later returned to replace 40-year Fenway fixture Herman Barron as head pro in 1976. Barron had played on the 1947 Ryder Cup team and won three times on the PGA Tour.


The Future

Not only is the Ike Championship visiting Fenway for the first time in its history, but the course will have a different look than what even long-time club members have come to

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expect. "Because of pace of play concerns, we, in consultation with the MGA, have decided to start with the 390-yard number seventh hole instead of number one, which is a shorter, easily drivable par four," explains Wassem. "Then, the players will play eight and nine before returning to the first hole to finish one through six in order. The back nine will be unchanged."

This new order of play will give Ike competitors a bit of a breather during the middle of the front nine, but it also means that the course's three toughest par fours (the fifth, the 10th, and the 12th) are now clustered together around the turn, making it even harder to generate momentum and shave strokes before heading down the stretch. But as history has shown and club pro Wassem is quick to point out, "at Fenway, par is a great score."

Later this year, well after the competitors in the Ike Championship see Fenway's layout first-hand, the club will play host to the next generation of aspiring golfers during its fourth annual First Tee Day. Spearheaded by club member Jason Monroe, Fenway's First Tee Days are part of a campaign to bring dozens of kids into an environment that many of them have never experienced. "It's about throwing open the doors of the private club community

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to them," says Monroe. "We give the kids lunch, provide them a series of rotating golf instruction stations, play a golf hole, and then end the day with a big barbecue and prize and equipment giveaway. It's been fantastic and the club has been very supportive."

In fact, Fenway's program has been so successful that it has spawned similar First Tee Days at nearby clubs like Whipoorwill and Metropolis. "But it's about more than just us teaching the kids," Monroe points out. "It's also about them teaching us what they've learned

about the game of golf and its traditions and etiquette, as well as the core values of the First Tee program."

Between hosting tournaments and opening its doors to a new generation of golfers, Fenway is one of the Met Area's best examples of a club that gives back to the game. ■

Reed Richardson is a Westchester-based writer and a senior editor with TPG Sports.

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