

The City Game

After years of neglect and despite numerous obstacles,

public golf courses in New York City are alive and well

BY RAPHAEL TENNENBAUM

E

xperienced golfers can rattle off a litany of great American destinations. Pinehurst and the North Carolina sandhills, for sure. The Monterey Peninsula, definitely, along with Arizona and South Florida. You can add Bandon Dunes, Oregon to the list now. And then there's New York City. Huh? Well, okay, maybe not a destination like the others. But for those of us who live in or near Gotham, the city's public courses are treasured oases that help us escape from the city while also being eminently accessible. After all, Dyker Beach is a heck of a lot cheaper than Pebble — and just try taking the subway to Pinehurst No. 2.

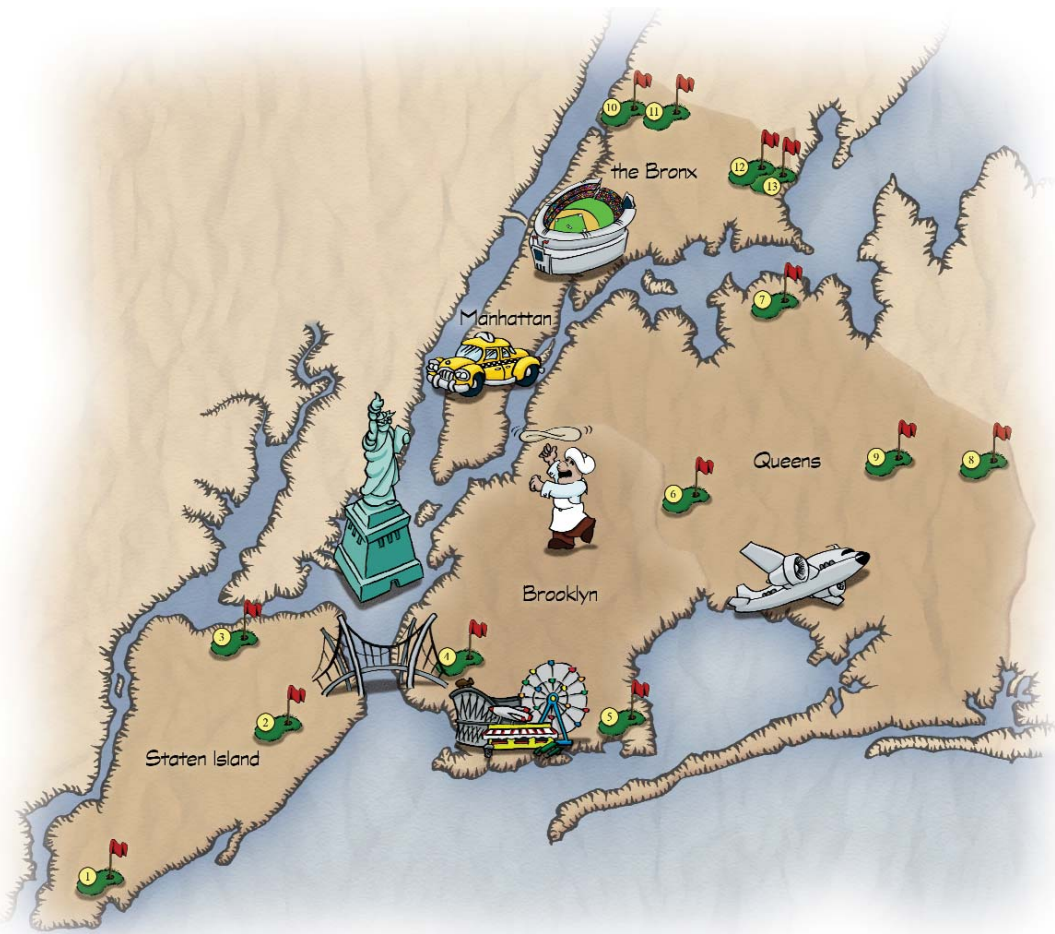


While one round of golf begins, the action behind the tee at Brooklyn's Dyker Beach is fast and furious.

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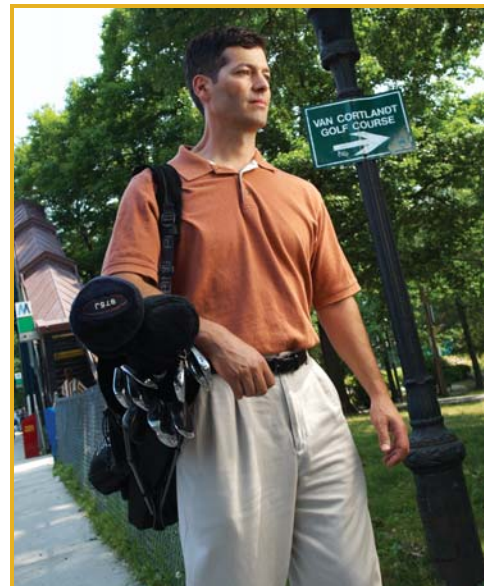
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KYLE ATKINS

The 13 golf courses in the city, picturesque Edens imagined and built from 50 to 100 years ago, are nearly perfectly preserved. Playing the city courses, from the farmlike setting of LaTourette to the hilly serenity of Van Cortlandt Park, is like traveling back in time to New York's gaslight era, when the outer



The entrance to Van Cortlandt Park is just a few steps from the subway.

boroughs were still suburbs. Offering first-rate golf at a reasonable price, they function as a gateway for beginners of all ages, and draw single-digit handicappers and other seasoned players in increasing numbers.

While the courses attract residents city-wide, they also function as hubs of neighborhood activity. Out in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, a lot is happening this sunny June morning at Dyker Beach. At the picnic tables behind the first tee, the pinochle game is going full-tilt among the old salts of The Sandtrappers, one of the larger MGA clubs without real estate, whose members meet most mornings to kibitz and kvetch over cards. After they finish their rounds of golf, of course. One of the more subdued retirees tells me, "You know, Tiger Woods's father learned to play golf here, while he was stationed at Fort Hamilton." (He and many others, since during the 1950s and '60s, Dyker Beach was the most-trafficked golf course in the world, averaging over 100,000 rounds annually.)

American Golf Corporation, which in 1999 won the contract to run the majority of New York City courses, is working to complete the renovation of the Dyker Beach club-

JEFF WEINER

house by March 2008, so a trailer temporarily serves as the golf shop, hot dog stand, and office. Inside, general manager Jeff DeFranco is soothing a foursome that's miffed about the afternoon green fee having gone up this year from \$27 to \$28.

Out beyond the eighth hole, a construction crew is working to complete a City Parks Foundation junior golf center, slated for completion in September. Over near the parking lot, Brooklyn-born and raised Hank Whitney, a big, broad-chested, retired high school principal who marshals two days a week, is seated in a cart waiting to meet a couple of his former pupils for a quick hello. He started playing golf ten years ago after his kids bought him a computer golf game.

"I started playing, fell in love with it. Now I'm addicted." He gestures at the setting. "If you don't see the streets or hear the noise, you wouldn't think you were in the middle of Brooklyn."

It's easy to see what makes Dyker Beach so popular with both Brooklynites and visiting golfers: stirring views, occasionally enhanced by the towers of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, alternate with peaceful meadowlands. Relatively forgiving off the tee, its small-but-mountainous greens present opportunities for

approach shots of every variety. If you think soft greens are easy to play, let's see how you putt at Dyker, where they're slow but sloping; don't be surprised if you four-putt your first time out here.

Back by the trailer, Bill Castner, formerly the Dyker Beach head pro, has stopped by to pay a visit. Some of the Sandtrappers have a hard time placing him, but Castner remembers their names. Though he relocated five years ago ("I love living in New Jersey, life is much easier there. But I hate not being a New Yorker.") Castner's heart still belongs to the golf courses in New York City where he learned to play, and where he worked for over twenty years, managing courses in each of the boroughs. His website, golfinnyc.com, is an affectionate

testament to the city courses, which he knows as well as anyone.

Castner likes New York City's appeal as a golf travel destination. "You could easily stay in Manhattan for your golf trip — I know people who have done it — and spend a week riding out to the boroughs to play."

All this possibility and optimism is a relatively recent

Playing the city courses is like traveling back in time to New York's gaslight era, when outer boroughs were suburbs.



The pastoral nature of LaTourette (below) is reinforced by the historic clubhouse (left).





TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF FTMYN; OTHER PHOTOS BY RAPHAEL TENENBAUM

Thank Moses For Marine Park

Of all the New York City courses, Marine Park has perhaps the most intriguing and checkered history. It emerged from a morass of dredged sand, landfill, conflicting agendas and the budget shortfalls that characterized much of the last century. Real estate speculation in the southern tip of Brooklyn began around 1905, when developers briefly considered turning Jamaica Bay into a port, using canals to connect to Flushing Bay. By 1911, the designers of the Chicago Exhibition had proposed development, including golf courses, on the land between what is now Gerritsen and Flatbush Avenues, once the site of a racetrack. Completion of the southernmost section of Flatbush Avenue after World War I further bolstered interest.

Since the marshland development would require public works, area landowners began a campaign to persuade the city to take over the project. In 1917, two investors went so far as to attempt to donate parcels to the Parks Department. Though they sweetened the deal with \$72,000 in cash, the city balked, before finally accepting the land in 1925. A golf course was again part of the plans, which also included a stadium, baseball and cricket fields, and tennis courts.

By 1930, the city had started acquiring nearby parcels. But progress proved difficult, and the project's fortunes ebbed and flowed throughout the decade — a 1934 Supreme Court

ruling that the city could no longer haul its garbage to dump in the sea resulted in Marine Park effectively becoming a convenient place for waste disposal.



After the war, Parks Commissioner Robert Moses (above), having held off proponents for years, finally took the reins of the project, which involved 14 million cubic yards of fill comprised of dredged sand, sanitation fill, clay, and sludge. The difficulty of the undertaking is clear from this July 21, 1948 letter from an irascible-sounding Moses to Mayor William O'Dwyer:

"[because] the city has never been willing to face the cost of this

improvement on a strictly contract basis, little has been done since the first part of the park was acquired.... because of the staggering quantities of fill and topsoil required, the only alternative is to use waste materials."

Moses marshalled all the forces at his command to complete the project, one of the first golf courses built on a landfill, by the start of the 1964 World's Fair in Queens. The tone of Moses's speech at Marine Park's opening on August 27, 1963 — he mentions the phrase "golf course" only once" — is equally triumphant and bitter:

The indisputable record, which will be accepted when time gives its verdict, is that those who were responsible in the last thirty years for saving Jamaica Bay and its shores and for reclaiming Rockaway ... were ahead of most of their contemporaries and are more deserving of public recognition than the Johnny-Come-Latelies who were never visible when the going was tough ... Some time ago my friend Herbert Bayard Swope was asked, 'What is the recipe for success?' Herb replied thoughtfully, 'I don't know the rule for success but I know the sure recipe for failure — try to please everybody.'

While time's verdict on the Moses legacy may not be beyond dispute, Brooklyn golfers have rendered theirs: we're grateful for the breezy links he managed to build on Flatbush Avenue. — R.T.

development. Thirty years ago, when New York City's finances were in desperate condition, so were its fairways. Castner remembers a homeless man living in a tent off what is now the first green at Dyker Beach. Dyker also had a dubious distinction along the way, as it furnished the backdrop of a book titled *America's Worst Golf Courses*. The infamous photograph showed a golfer addressing a golf ball atop one of the burned-out cars stacked up near the fence of what is now the par-five ninth hole.

In 1978, the City Parks Department was averaging losses of more than \$100,000 per year on the courses. Frank Hannigan, not yet executive director of the USGA, was commissioned by then-Department chief Gordon Parks to study new directions for managing the golf course property.

"He was taking some heat from then-mayor Koch," recalls Hannigan in a recent

conversation. "It was a time when the city was on the verge of bankruptcy and Koch had gone down to Washington, begging for money. And one of the senators from Wisconsin said to him, 'How poor can you be when you own 13 golf courses?'"

Soon after, the city began leasing golf operations to concessionaires. With that move, the courses began to rebound, operating profitably within just a few years. The city's insistence that lessees make capital improvements has resulted in new clubhouses being built at Forest Park in Queens and Marine Park in Brooklyn, not to mention the reconstruction of the historic 170-year-old LaTourette House, completely restored after a 2001 fire, with more enhancements due elsewhere. And the city's own investments over the years, including the installation of irrigation at most of the city's courses in 2000, has vastly benefited playing conditions.

Scenes from a typical summer day at NYC golf courses (clockwise from top left): Teeing off at Vanny, learning the game at Mosholu, keeping cool at Forest Park, and a happy twosome at Marine Park.



Players at Dyker Beach enjoy a scenic course with views of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

The history of these courses is uniquely New York, reaching back to a time when the outer boroughs represented the cutting edge of suburbia. When golf first became a sensation, in the 1890s, wealthy golfers established private clubs throughout the boroughs. In Brooklyn, when Sunset Park and Flatbush had golf courses, half a dozen links were located within a twelve-mile stretch containing Bay Ridge and the eastern tip of Staten Island. One of these, Richmond County Country Club, exists today in Staten Island, and is the only private club in the city. Queens boasted an Alister Mackenzie design, Bayside Links, favored by Babe Ruth, along with the original Fresh Meadow Country Club.

The Bronx is where public golf was born in 1895, not exactly on purpose. When a group of prosperous Gotham golfers despaired of finding affordable land in lower Westchester, they asked the city to build them a course for their use, and their use only. But, as the *New York Sun* described it in an 1895 story, the city declined. "In reply to the first petition they learned that the public parks cannot be used for private amusement schemes," the *Sun* reported. "Accordingly, the petition... was prepared in which the club asks for a golf course open to all players who may obtain permits to use it. But as a reward for having broached the idea, the new club thinks

that on two or three days each the links should be set aside for its sole use."

The *Sun's* reporter offered the proposal a familiar-sounding boost:

"The game appeals to all who seek recreation, tramping over the meadows and hillsides on half holidays, as it can be played without any systematic training. The park links should be popular with business men, clerks, and mechanics, when they learn the benefits of golf."

How to Play the City

Three times at many New York City courses can be made through www.nycteetimes.com, which offers seven-day advance reservations to the six city courses operated by American Golf Corporation (Clearview, Pelham Bay, Split Rock, Dyker Beach, South Shore and LaTourette). Green fees at the city courses range from \$21 for weekday twilight play to \$45 for weekends. The following are the courses not covered by the AGC website:

Van Cortlandt: 718-543-4595

Mosholu: 718-655-9164

Kissena Park: 718-939-4594

Douglaston: 718-224-6566

Forest Park: 718-296-6566

Marine Park: 718-338-7113

Silver Lake: 718-442-4653



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The golf shop at Forest Park in Queens, circa 1947.



Thus came the first layout of Van Cortlandt Park Golf Course, which featured a 700-yard ninth hole (a 7 is said to have been the lowest recorded score) and was used to host a number of large tournaments, including one in which Walter Travis finished ninth.

Van Cortlandt Park came to be the favored course for a certain type of urbanite, including journalists, artists, actors, doctors, lawyers, and songwriters. It didn't hurt that the Broadway IRT (now the 1 train) brought eager players directly to the park entrance at 242nd Street, as it still does today. Walk up to "Vanny's" third-floor locker room (featured in the 1987 movie "Wall Street") and you are entering one of the shrines of American sport, its banged-up wooden lockers lit by a skylight and huge, ancient light fixtures, where a gamut of heroes running from Christy Mathewson, Willie Mays and Grantland Rice to The Three Stooges changed into spiked shoes. More recently, it is where Andrew Giuliani, the 2006 MGA Player of the Year, honed his game as a teenager.

The history, the years, and even the roads frame the course with a soothing gravity: It's ravishing, with remarkable variety, from the rolling meadows below — the short par-four sixth hole bends slightly rightward, leaving an approach to an elevated green set in the

woods — to the finishing holes, climbing up the beginnings of the Hudson highlands.

While Dyker Beach and Van Cortlandt Park hold the most appeal from a historic and aesthetic viewpoint, there are 11 other city courses that range from a 7,000-yard test like Marine Park to a par-64 layout like Kissena Park in Queens. Here is a sampling of other city courses where the recent renaissance has been most apparent:

On the other side of the Bronx from Van Cortlandt is **Split Rock**, named for the giant halves of a boulder where Anne Hutchinson sought refuge from a Siwanoy Indian attack in 1643. It's a magnificent parkland course lined with phalanxes of massive old oak trees and willows. Not just pretty, Split Rock is pretty challenging as well, with tight, canted fairways and small greens. A major renovation completed last year by Robert Trent Jones Jr. has brought new life to the layout and given it championship-level credibility. Split Rock is a stone's throw from Long Island Sound, along with its companion, **Pelham Bay**, a second home in the city for the great courses of Westchester. Pelham Bay also underwent a renovation, which included the rebuilding of all bunkers and the repositioning of two greens. These immensely popular courses have never been more deserving of attention.

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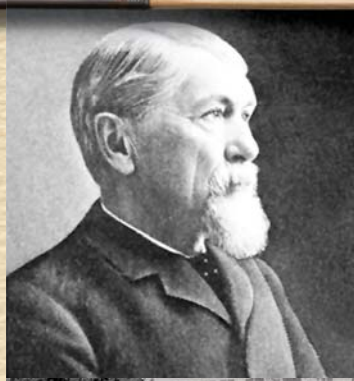
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In between those two is **Mosholu**, a nine-hole layout that was recently named for the second year in a row as one of the Top Short Courses in America by *Golf Range Magazine*. Noted golf architect Stephen Kay oversaw a careful renovation of this nuanced property of heavily forested, rolling terrain that gives it a remote feel despite its location in the center of The Bronx. Mosholu is the city course that perhaps introduces more residents to the game than any other, as it was the inaugural site for The First Tee of Metropolitan New York and is home to the MGA Foundation and Met PGA's growing venture, which now encompasses five Met Area locations. According to MGA Executive Director Jay Mottola, "The 'new' Mosholu is truly something special. While the course has been shortened as a result of a large water treatment project, Stephen Kay turned the course into a fun and visually appealing layout."

LaTourette vies with Split Rock for the city's best layout. A gently rolling, strategic parkland course decorated with an historic 170-year-old brick clubhouse, the back nine here opens up with a strong sequence of par fours. LaTourette is the site of the annual NYC Amateur Championship, a 20-year-old event that attracts many of the finest players from throughout the Met Area (city residency is not

required). The tournament has been won by the likes of George Zahringer, Ron Vannelli, Mike Stamberger, and other top amateurs.

Forest Park, just off the Jackie Robinson Parkway in Queens, has benefited from the stewardship of Norman Taft and his son Michael, who also took over Van Cortlandt Park earlier this year. Conditions are excellent on this charming, tree-lined course that favors accuracy over length.

Designed by Robert Trent Jones, **Marine Park** is the city's longest golf course at a shade under 7,000 yards. When the wind is up from Jamaica Bay (which is nearly always) it's no mean feat to reach the large greens, guarded with false fronts and the occasional cross-bunker [see *Marine Park sidebar, page 35*].

Douglaston is a hilly but forgiving par-67 track whose clubhouse was once featured in an episode of *The Sopranos*. Located between the L.I.E. and Grand Central Parkway in eastern Queens, it was built in 1927 as North Hills Country Club before the city purchased it in the early 1960s. It has since undergone a successful restoration by Stephen Kay.

Queens golf courses are close to Kay's heart, in fact. He still remembers the first good golf shot he hit, at the tender age of 13: A five-iron to the 14th at **Clearview**, when, as he puts it, "the needle went in and the addiction began."

"I fell in love with being at Clearview at the end of the day. I couldn't believe that, in the midst of New York and the fuss and the cars and the factories in the 1950s, here I was surrounded by all these trees and green grass, and I was looking out over Long Island Sound and seeing sailboats. I loved the serenity and the peace of it, and I loved the getting-away-from-the-world feel of it."

It's hard to argue. New York City courses provide a means to get away from it all, yet most are just a subway ride away. What's not to love? ■

Raphael Tennenbaum is based in Brooklyn, New York.

Ferry Point's Future

A decade after then-mayor Rudy Giuliani, former City Parks commissioner Henry Stern and Jack Nicklaus announced plans for the city's first new municipal course in 35 years, there is still no golf being played at Ferry Point Park in the Bronx. But that looks as if it might finally change in the next few years. Since cancelling the deal with Ferry Point Partners — which would have included a Nicklaus-designed course — the city has been accepting proposals from a number of well-known golf management companies and architects. The 220-acre site near the Whitestone Bridge has potential, but also a cloud of misfortune, as the project has been beset by cost overruns, community opposition and accusations of environmental mismanagement. However, the city wants to bring a new course to city golfers, and the hope is that a new deal can be reached by the end of 2007.



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