

Full Steam Ahead



A new clubhouse and course renovation at Tamarack Country Club have brought renewed attention to the Charles Banks masterpiece

BY REED RICHARDSON

Though significantly larger, Tamarack's new structure blends in with the club's natural environment.

Tucked into a corner of southwest Connecticut's tiny panhandle, Tamarack Country Club has been home to one of the Met Area's best golf courses for nearly 80 years. With its uncompromising terrain, infamous bunkers, and challenging greens, Tamarack boasts some of the finest examples of classic golf course design found anywhere. The club has flown well under the radar for many years, though that may be about to change. After completing a recent multi-year renovation of its course and complete reconstruction of its clubhouse, Tamarack — which will celebrate its centennial in 2009 — can now look forward to a second century of excellence.

The Early Days

Though long a fixture in Greenwich, Tamarack's origins can be traced back across the state line to New York where, in 1909, a group of local business leaders founded the Port Chester Country Club. The club's initial foray into golf was less than auspicious, however, as its first course, a small nine-holer, relied on a flock of sheep to maintain the fairways. Four years later, the club would expand to 18 holes, but club members wouldn't have too long to enjoy the new layout. By 1928, Port Chester's burgeoning population necessitated building a larger high school, and when the town chose the ground underneath the golfers' feet as their preferred site, the club sold the land and decamped across the border to Connecticut.

The new club — which took its name from the delicate Tamarack pine trees indigenous to the area — quickly hired architect Charles Banks to lay out its 18-hole course. The selection of Banks was no doubt due to both his familiarity with the terrain — he had recently designed the course at Whippoorwill — as well as his prestigious pedigree. Banks had been a former assistant to notable course designer Seth Raynor, who himself had been a protégé of the father of American golf architecture, Charles Blair Macdonald.

Not surprisingly, a few of Macdonald's architectural nuances, particularly his fondness for recreating classic golf holes from the British Isles here in America, found their way into Banks's courses. Accordingly, those lucky enough to have struck a ball on legendary holes such as the "Eden" 11th on the Old Course at St. Andrews, the "Redan" 15th at North Berwick, or the original "Biarritz" hole



The yawning bunker and raised green on Tamarack's third hole (above) were signature design elements of Charles Banks (below).



in France might find themselves facing all too familiar challenges when playing Tamarack's 3rd, 7th, and 11th holes, respectively.

In addition, Banks's own stylistic affection for monstrosously large, elevated greens guarded by slippery false fronts and treacherously close bunkers also came to define Tamarack's layout. (This penchant for fortress-like bunker complexes, and the large earth-moving operations required to build them, eventually earned Banks the professional nickname of "Steam Shovel.") After a year-long effort reshaping what had been dense woods and farmland, Tamarack's 18-hole course finally opened to club members on July 4, 1929, and quickly earned wide acclaim as one of the Met Area's most interesting designs.

The Current Course

"Banks designed the course to give golfers a couple of different ways to get to the hole," says Bobby Farrell, Tamarack's director of golf. "If you're a 20-handicapper, you can run it up onto the green from the fairway, or you can try bombing it high and dropping the ball right down onto the green," he explains. Of course, using each of these strategies brings their own set of risks.

For example, Farrell points out that on Tamarack's 508-yard, par-five 17th hole, the green's narrow approach, false front, and gaping front-right bunker (known to club members as "Big Bertha") can frustrate all but the most precise attempts at finding the green in regulation. "After I came to Tamarack in 2003," he says, "it took me half a season to figure out how to deal with these greens."

Farrell, whose golf bloodlines run deep (his father, Billy, was a longtime head pro at Stanwich, while his grandfather, Johnny, the 1928 U.S. Open champion, had head pro stints at both Quaker Ridge and Baltusrol), says that he has always thought of Tamarack as one of the "hidden gems" of the Met Area. "As a kid, I would come here occasionally with my father," he recalls. "And I always loved playing it." But to truly do well on a course whose expansive greens can rival a basketball court in size, Farrell acknowledges — with just a hint of understatement — that "it helps to be a good long putter."

More than seven decades, though, took its toll on Tamarack: greens had shrunk, trees had encroached on some holes, and a few bunkers had been overgrown with grass. Consequently, the club decided four years ago to

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Everything old is new, as Tamarack's pool was rebuilt two years ago.



undergo a significant renovation of its golf course as part of a new master plan. Jeff Scott, Tamarack's course superintendent, explains how the club brought in golf architect Brian Silva to restore many of the course's original features as well as add in some new elements to keep it challenging for today's golfer. "Still, the main directive behind everything we did

was to remain true to the intentions of Charles Banks," he notes.

As a result, Tamarack added back nearly one acre in total to its greens, lengthened several holes and converted the nearly 500-yard, par-five 13th into a par four. Silva also built up many tee boxes and strategically placed nearly three dozen new fairway bunkers. The

three-year project, which finished this past spring, presented members with a 6,800-yard, par-70 course that Scott says plays dramatically different than the one from a few years ago. "And it's all for the better," he says. "It's a bit more demanding and the playability of it requires you to think about your shots more, yet the average golfer really doesn't suffer."

Championship History

No doubt, Tamarack's most notable contribution to competitive golf in the Met Area was its role as co-host of the Ike Championship from 1953 to 1962, that tournament's first ten years. After separate private club and public course Ike competitions in 1953, hosted by Tamarack and Bethpage, respectively, Tamarack emerged as sole host to all players in 1954, and then co-hosted the event with Whip-poorwill every year through 1962.

The brainchild of New York *Daily News* publisher F.M. "Jack" Flynn, the Ike sought to fill the void left between the Met Open, a stroke-play tournament dominated by club professionals, and the Met Amateur,



a match-play event. (The MGA acquired the rights to the Ike in 1986 as its official stroke play championship.) With assistance from renowned *News* sportswriter Dana Mozley and former MGA president George Sands, Tamarack witnessed some great golf during the Ike's first decade. Many Met Area golf stars, from Tommy Goodwin to Willie Turnesa to Bob Gardner to Jerry Courville Sr., made their debut on the victory stand at Tamarack.

The Future

Not long after Tamarack began to rejuvenate its golf course in 2004, the club also took on an even more ambitious challenge. As part of its long-term plan to add more member services, Tamarack began a \$24 million facilities reconstruction project in October 2005 that rebuilt the club's pool complex, added more staff quarters, and culminated this past Fourth of July with the opening of a new, state-of-the-art clubhouse. "It was a complete tear down and rebuild," says general manager Brian

Gillespie of the clubhouse project. "We went from 35,000 square feet up to 54,000, adding a massage room and an indoor golf training facility. Also, the architect angled the footprint of the clubhouse so you can see more of the course. Now, every window has a great view."

As a result of the improvements, Tamarack has a membership waiting list for the first time in club history. And they're not done yet: the club is looking to begin a complete rebuilding of its tennis courts.

With practically a brand new club from the front door to the back nine, Gillespie doesn't hesitate when asked what's next for Tamarack as it heads toward its second century: "Just let the club members enjoy it." ■

Reed Richardson is a senior editor for Westchester-based TPG Sports.

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Distinct embankments frame the 11th green (above), while the par-three 15th hole (left) demands a well-judged approach shot.

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