

A Wee Gem

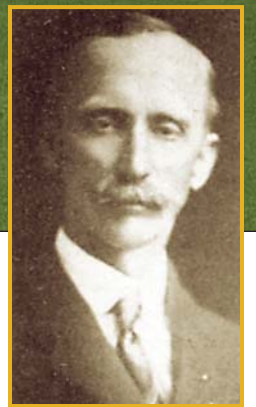
Wee Burn gets ready to host the best senior amateurs in the Met Area on its newly renovated and beloved layout BY REED RICHARDSON

Long known for having one of Connecticut's most challenging and picturesque golf courses, Wee Burn Country Club in Darien can trace its origins back 112 years, to the earliest days of the game's emergence in the U.S. Since then, Wee Burn has evolved into a thoroughly modern country club with loads of amenities, including a charming and popular beach club. But for many members, their abiding passion remains rooted in the club's 18 majestic holes and the unassuming brook that wends its way through them. Having recently completed a multi-year renovation to the golf course, Wee Burn will show off its restored glory this spring when it plays host to the MGA Senior Amateur Championship May 5 & 6.

The Early Days

For a club born out of golf's burgeoning popularity in the Gilded Age, it is a bit ironic that Wee Burn's recognized founder, noted New York City builder John D. Crimmins, had an admittedly cool relationship with the game. At the beginning, it's perhaps easy to see why, as Wee Burn's annual membership dues of \$125 didn't get him and the other members much in the way of golf choices.

In fact, the club's initial course in Noroton, Connecticut consisted of little more than two crudely sketched-out holes situated on a working cow pasture. The small brook that ran through the property served as the lone hazard. Club legend has it that it was this brook that



Devereux Emmet, already known for his Met Area courses, was hired in 1923 to build a new golf course at Wee Burn.



The Wee Burn poses an obstacle for players around the 16th, one of golf's earliest island greens.

prompted steel magnate Andrew Carnegie — a good friend of Crimmins's and one of the club's first invited guests — to note that it would be called a "wee burn" were the course located in Scotland. The name stuck.

The old country's influence continued over the next few years as charter member George Strath, a transplanted Scot descended from the legendary St. Andrews clan, took the reins as the club's first golf pro, architect, and greenskeeper. It was Strath who spearheaded the course's first two expansions — four holes were added in 1897 and another three in 1898. Once established, this nine-hole track, which would stand as Wee Burn's home for the next 25 years, quickly earned a reputation as a stern test of golf as well as a breeding ground for some of the best golfers in the Met Area.

The Current Course

By 1923, Wee Burn's members were looking to expand. Hemmed in by the Connecticut coast and the Boston Post Road, the members decided to relocate, purchasing a larger plot of land roughly two miles farther inland, in Darien. The new site's rolling terrain seemed promising, and even more fitting. Several small brooks meandered across the property, allowing the Wee Burn name to survive. Renowned golf architect Devereux Emmet, whose notable Met Area designs include Garden City Golf Club, Nassau Country Club and Rockaway Hunting Club, was commissioned to build an 18-hole track. In 1925, the new course officially opened to critical acclaim and, more than 80 years later, Wee Burn continues to be ranked among the top ten courses in the state by *Golf Digest*.

To accommodate the new site's hilly terrain, Emmet laid out his course in roughly two sections. Holes one through five comprise the first group and include Wee Burn's toughest hole, the long, uphill par-four fifth, notable for its tree-lined fairway, lack of sand bunkers, and the distinctive horseshoe-shaped mound guarding the back of the green. "That green, and most of the others at Wee Burn, follow well-known Emmet designs," notes eight-time club champion Jay Rice. "They're all fairly small and have some slope in them."

Connecting this first group to the eastern section of the course is the monstrously long par-five sixth hole, a 588-yard dogleg left that seems to run downhill forever. With a fairway water hazard located just short of halfway to the green, the sixth is emblematic of many other holes at Wee Burn in that it rewards

those who can hit it long off the tee. "Unlike some courses, you can really hit the driver on just about any par four or par five at Wee Burn," explains Rice.

The club's namesake comes into play on the course's back nine. Of the five holes where water affects shot selection, Emmet's most imaginative incorporation of the "wee burn" into the course's design involves the 336-yard, par-four 16th, where he split the brook in two to surround the approach to the hole, thereby creating one of golf's earliest island greens.

Six years ago, the club brought in golf architect Tom Marzolf of Fazio Course Design to draw up a new, long-range master plan for the course and complete Wee Burn's first real renovation since 1974. Noted for having remodeled such legendary courses as



Top: Extensive bunker renovation has put more teeth into the green complexes.

Above: Michael Muehr defeated Jeff Thomas in the finals of the 1992 Met Amateur at Wee Burn.

Merion, Oakmont, Pine Valley, and Winged Foot, Marzolf recalls that when he walked Wee Burn for the first he was immediately struck by how Emmet had maximized the site. "The course is very well routed on the land," explains Marzolf. "It was clear there was no need to change the design, rather just restore and clean up what was already there."

Still, to keep pace with today's modern equipment, the club had Marzolf and his team build new tee boxes and add 21 fairway bunkers. "Over the years, Wee Burn had evolved into more of a second-shot course," Marzolf explains. "These additions made the course more challenging from tee to green." As a result, Wee Burn's back-tee length grew to more than 7,000 yards and its back-tee Course and Slope Rating rose to 75.1 and 146, respectively. Then, drawing upon the club's vast archive of photos and records, Marzolf's team restored – by hand – every one of Wee Burn's greenside bunkers, taking care to bring back all of Emmet's distinctive contours. Additionally, his team began what is an ongoing campaign to remove several species of trees that hadn't been present during the initial course layout. "As a result, you now have better views of Emmet's original design, and it shows off the property more," notes Marzolf.

Championship History

Throughout its history, Wee Burn has had ample opportunity to show itself off, having hosted numerous MGA, Met PGA and CSGA events, including the memorable 1999 Connecticut Open, when club member Rice eked

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out a one-stroke victory over five-time PGA Tour-winner Ken Green. The 1992 Met Amateur at Wee Burn also had star power, as future PGA Tour player Michael Muehr defeated highly decorated New Jersey Amateur Jeff Thomas, 1-up, in the final. At the 2006 Met PGA Championship, winner Ron Philo was the only competitor to finish at par or better (even-par 216).

However, the club's first bid at hosting a tournament, nearly a century earlier, did not foretell such homegrown success: Club member Charles H. Seely was thoroughly trounced, 6 & 5, in the final match of the 1900 Connecticut Amateur. Seely rebounded strongly from this embarrassing defeat, though, capturing the state amateur title the next three years and the Met Amateur in 1905 and '08.

Noted Wee Burn member Genevieve Hecker was another player who experienced incredibly rapid improvement, going from playing in the ladies' club championship in 1899 to winning back-to-back U.S. Women's Amateur titles in 1901 and 1902. Hecker also penned several magazine articles and publishing a groundbreaking book, *Golf for Women*, in 1904. (Unafraid to question that era's conventions about gender, Hecker, in her book, boldly proclaims, "Women, I am proud to say, show a relatively greater degree of nerve in golf than do men, and particularly is this so on the putting-green.")

Women golfers from Hecker to current club member Becky Montgela, who partnered with Rice to win last year's MGA Mixed Pinehurst Championship (they also won the event in 1997), have maintained a strong presence at Wee Burn over the decades. Accordingly, the club has supported ladies' golf by playing host to the U.S. Women's Amateur in 1939, '58, and '70. (The 1939 tourney, won by Hall-of-Famer Betty Jameson, served as the true women's national championship since the first U.S. Women's Open was still seven years away.)

"Wee Burn has always been a challenge for women golfers, especially for those who can't hit a long ball," explains 10-time ladies' club champion Montgela. "But it's still number 16, with that second shot over the wee burn, that has the ability to turn a match around completely." And in fact, the 1970 U.S.

Women's Amateur final turned on just such a shot at 16, when Cynthia Hill's approach found the bottom of the burn, giving the hole and the match to Martha Wilkinson, 3 & 2.

The Future

In early May, MGA championship play will return to Wee Burn for the first time since the course's recent renovation, when the club hosts the 2008 Met Senior Amateur. This will mark Wee Burn's second turn at hosting the event; its first, in 1986, saw Ardsley's Art Thomas take home the title.

According to Wee Burn head pro Sam Wiley, the club plans no special changes to the course for the tournament. "Wee Burn has always been a challenge for the average member as well as for the scratch player," he notes. And now, after such an extensive restoration, Wiley says playing Wee Burn will be an even greater test. "Now, the course not only requires that you make shots, it forces you to think about those shots a little bit more, and that's what a great round of golf should do." ■

Reed Richardson is a frequent contributor to *The Met Golfer* and is a senior editor at TPG Sports in White Plains, N.Y.



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