

The Remodeling of Yales Golf Course

The Roger Rulewich Group, has begun the long-awaited improvement, remodeling & restoration of Yale University Golf Course. First in a series by Roger Rulewich.

Famous golf courses by famous architects are scattered around Connecticut. Names like Ross, Travis, Park, Tillinghast and Jones turn up here and there and some of their efforts are fine examples. One jewel stands out among these courses: the Yale Golf Course, designed by Charles Blair Macdonald. Under construction in 1924, it opened in 1926, the year of Macdonald's death. C.B. Macdonald was a seminal figure in the birth of American golf. He was eccentric and indomitable, necessary characteristics, to bring this strange game to an unsuspecting country.

Exposed to the game at St. Andrews, while attending the University there, McDonald's return from Scotland to the golfing wasteland of Chicago began his crusade to popularize golf in America. He laid out America's first 18 hole course, coined the phrase "golf architect", was a founder of the U.S.G.A. and won its first Amateur Championship in 1895. His handful of courses include the Mid Ocean Club in Bermuda, Chicago Golf Club, Sleepy Hollow, Piping Rock, and his masterpieces, the National Golf Links and his last effort, Yale. These influential designs together with his writings about architecture, earned him the title, the "Father of American Golf Course Architecture".

Designing golf courses was Macdonald's avocation. He secured the aid of Seth Raynor and Charles Bank, to implement his ideas. Both worked on Yale and were instrumental in bringing the course to completion.

The Griest Estate was given to Yale University in 1923. When it was decided to tackle the building of a golf course, no other school in the country had one. The property, a wilderness of hilly, heavily wooded land that had seen no cultivation for half a century, combined stone ledges, soil laced with boulders, rock and swamps. It was an unpromising location for a golf course, certainly not the architect's dream of gently rolling terrain, thick, well-drained soils, natural water hazards and simple construction. Quite the contrary, and after clearing brush and trees, blasting rock and draining swamps, \$450,000 was spent to complete the course. A regal sum in 1925! But it must have strained the University's budget as we can see from the simple log cabin they were able to build as their first clubhouse in 1926. At least they had their priorities right. The golf course itself comes first!

Even Macdonald, the stubborn and iconoclastic promoter of all things related to golf, was overwhelmed when, after plans and cost estimates of the cost of construction were submitted, Yale still decided to proceed.

Thankfully, Macdonald was not overwhelmed by the task at hand and with Raynor and Banks set out to create something like the course we know today.

Any topographic or relief mapping prepared in the 1920's has, unfortunately, been lost to the dim light of history. The original 700 acres has been reduced today by roads and housing that now adjoin the property but never the golf holes themselves. In fact, the Yale course is still striking; once you enter the property you leave the urban world behind for a natural landscape interrupted only by the course.

It was this quiet isolation and the beauty of such a natural retreat that first attracted me to the course as a Yale undergraduate in the 50's. Not to mention a challenge from classmates when I mocked their efforts and skills at such a "simple" game. Mind you, I had never played a round of golf before and had not seen the course that they blamed for all their travails. A target score was set and a wager agreed upon for my first encounter with golf. Somehow I won the bet, but the greater reward was finding the "game of a lifetime" and a golf setting that still ranks as one of golf's greatest. I had no idea how totally this game was to involve me.

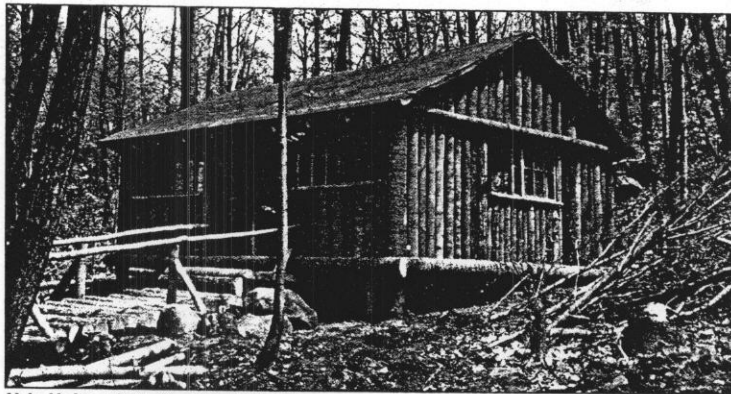
Engineering was my career path for the three years after my graduation. Everything seemed to be on target. Then I met Robert Trent Jones, the premier golf architect of the day, and accepted his offer to come to New York and "give it a try" as he suggested. I had no idea golf course architects even existed. I had a lot to learn and this I did over a long apprenticeship. Somewhere along the way I became a "golf course architect" myself.

After 34 years with "Trent", I established my own firm when he closed his office in New Jersey. I am joined in The Roger Rulewich Group by a number of Jones alumni, most of whom are involved with the specialized construction that is part of our design service on new and existing golf courses.

Which brings me back to the Yale Golf Course and the current improvement program that The Rulewich Group has undertaken. How does anyone recommend changes to a landmark course by an icon of golf course architecture? Very carefully and respectfully. Original plans for Yale by Macdonald no longer exist. Our research

uncovered every bit of information available on the construction of the course and changes since then. Old pictures, aerial photos, University archives and more recent mapping clarified our perception of the original course and its modification. Many site inspections and discussions with past and present staff, golf historians, and alumni kept us busy. Time well spent. A collection of photographs taken during the course's construction in 1924 (literally a shoebox full!) was a fascinating and valuable discovery, confirming the difficulties encountered carving a course out of this stubborn terrain.

Our program's first priority responsible in large part for its initiation, is to correct the poor condition and playability of the sand bunkers. Many have deteriorated and even changed over the years and need major work. Others need less drastic repair but all need



Yale University's first Golf Clubhouse

proper drainage and new sand. Now, do we repair bunkers that were not part of the original design? Do we put back, bunkers that were filled in over the years? Do we consider changes in the game in the past 70 plus years to add, remove or relocate bunkers? The answers will reveal themselves to me as I continue my research, search my soul and visit the course during our ongoing work there. My next report to you will outline the decision-making and design process and then discuss the nuts and bolts of The Group's construction activities, including scheduling, timing, and costs. Yale has made a commitment to upgrade its classic and historic golf course. The first steps taken are important ones and will hopefully generate excitement and continuing support.

The Roger Rulewich Group will do everything possible to ensure this kind of reception and to protect, preserve and enhance one of Connecticut's most challenging and beautiful golf courses.

The Rulewich Group will be contributing feature articles as the Yale Golf Course remodeling proceeds.

