

Forest Hill Field Club

GOLF'S HUMBLE HISTORY MAKER

By Rick Woelfel



Forest Hill Field Club, quietly tucked away in the neighborhoods of suburban Bloomfield and Belleville has played an integral part of golfing history both in New Jersey and beyond for well over a century.

If you didn't trip over the sign outside of the entrance you'd never know it was there. Yet up the short driveway lies a classic A.W. Tillinghast design that has been integral to golfing history both regionally and nationally for more than a century.

The members at Forest Hill Field Club can trace their club's history to 1891. Even by the standards of New Jersey and its rich golfing legacy, that is remarkable. The club is more than half as old as our nation and three years older than the United States Golf Association.

It was originally known as the Forest Hill Tennis Club, and situated in the Forest Hill section of Newark. In December of 1897 it officially became the Forest Hill Field Club after other sports, including baseball,

football, and bowling, as well as golf were offered to the membership.

That same year, Scotsman Tom Bendelow laid out the club's first golf course; nine holes that opened for play on July 4.

A second nine, designed by Willie Norton was added in 1906. The full 18-hole layout opened for play on Memorial Day of that year, the traditional Opening Day for new golf courses in that era.

The new nine had some unique qualities. The holes were located across a set of railroad tracks from the original nine in the municipality of Belleville on leased ground that had once been the Hendricks estate.

In addition to dealing with the railroad tracks, the Second River, and the Morris Canal, the members also had to contend with intrusions by members of a local riding academy and, on at least one occasion, a herd of cows, whose owner drove them across the second nine.

In 1917, the year America entered World War I, the greens budget nearly doubled,

to \$10,007 and members of the local riding academy were asked not to take their mounts onto club property in the future.

On October 11, 1922 the club hosted an exhibition match featuring Walter Hagen, who at the time was one of the most celebrated golfers in America and the world. By that point in his career, Hagen had won two U.S. Opens and a PGA Championship along with the first of his four Open Championship titles which he had claimed earlier that year. Hagen teamed with Australian Joe Kirkwood against Fred MacLeod and Bobby Cruickshank, who played the tour but was also working at Shackamaxxon at the time. In years to come, Hagen would travel around the globe doing exhibitions with Kirkwood, who became renowned as a trick-shot artist.

Two years later the club made a momentous decision that forever impacted its future. Its lease on the Hendricks site was set to expire in 1926. With that reality in mind, the club purchased 180 acres of woodlands that straddled the border between Belleville

and Bloomfield. The transaction was officially completed on Oct. 31, 1924 at a price "Not to exceed \$1,000 per acre" according to club records.

Architect A.W. Tillinghast was faced with the task of clearing out some 4,000 trees to create space for the new golf course. He did much of his work in 1925 while the 1926 season was devoted to letting the new course grow.

The new course opened in 1927. Orrin Terry was the golf professional; he had been in charge at the original Newark site since 1925. The following year he was replaced by Craig Wood, who would stay through 1931. Today, Wood is recalled as one of the finest competitors of his era, with 21 tour victories to his credit. In 1941, at age 39, he won both the Masters and the U.S. Open, the first man to win both titles in the same year.

In 1932 someone floated the idea of changing the name of the club, perhaps to Bellewood Golf Club, but the proposal was voted down.

That same year, the club built a swimming pool, which was paid for by assessing the members a fee of 25 cents for each round of golf they played. The club paid off the bill of \$27,000 in fewer than five years in the midst of the Great Depression.

The members were serious about their golf. Over the winter of 1936-37, the club's handicap committee decided to reevaluate the handicaps of every member and adjust them if necessary based on Saturday, Sunday, and holiday scores.

In 1937, on the weekend prior to Memorial Day, the club hosted the Met Open, which in that era was considered a PGA tour event. Jimmy Hines won the tournament with a 72-hole total of 279. There was probably no one more frustrated by the outcome than Hall of Famer Sam Snead, who had shot a course-record 65 on Day Two, only to see the record and in fact the entire round wiped out by rain.

That was the first of three Met Opens at Forest Hill. In 1940 Wood utilized his local knowledge to put together a truly remarkable performance; rounds of 64-66-68-66 to finish the 72 holes at 264. His closest pursuer, legendary Ben Hogan, was 11 shots behind him.

The Met Open returned to Forest Hill for a third time in 1951 with the title going to Claude Harmon.

In today's world, Forest Hill is something of an oasis, an escape from the frenzied

world that surrounds it. Once a member or visitor drives up the entrance road he or she is transported into a new environment.

There are some 330 members on its rolls, approximately 220 of whom play golf. Because of its location, not far from the Garden State Parkway, the club draws its membership from a fairly broad geographic area, one that includes Hoboken, Jersey City, and Bergen County. Some members even make the trip to Bloomfield from Manhattan.

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Jason Fiore

Head Golf Professional Jason Fiore and his staff offer a wide variety of programs and events for their members, including a summer camp and clinics for juniors. The club is also working to expand its roster of female golfers.

There is an active caddie program and it is not uncommon for children of members to be part of the caddie corps. The club is also home to the New York University golf program.

In recent years, Forest Hill has made a concerted effort to attract younger members. Club President Rick Garrigan has been a member for 29 years and says taking that step was necessary. "Our average age went from 49 to 57," he says, "so we needed to get younger members."

Garrigan stressed the need for the club to promote its in-house events to non-members as a way of giving them a sense of what Forest Hill is all about.

"Whether that be a member tournament or whether that be a social event to make it visible to prospective members looking at the club," he says. "Or, if they're coming in for a tour introducing them to the proper people. Getting them in a game with some of our existing members and get people to understand the community aspect of the club."

In recent years, an abundance of private clubs have focused on becoming more family friendly and Forest Hill is no exception.

"Many times you see the wife as the decision maker," says Ed Lapadula, the club's general manager. "And the existing members ... are going to be the best ambassadors for other members, promoting their friends, acquaintances, and business associates."

The club hosts approximately 14,000 rounds of golf each year. The atmosphere is relaxed. There are no tee times and members who drop in with little or no advance notice have little trouble finding a game.

New Jersey State Golf Association Executive Director Kevin Purcell grew up at Forest Hill. He left at one point for family reasons but later returned. He and his brother Patrick teamed up to win the NJSGA Four-Ball Championship in 1998.

"It's a working man's club," Kevin Purcell says, "with self-made men and small businessmen. There were bakers, there were insurance brokers, more of the guy who had a small business in Bloomfield or Belleville. There was one guy years ago who sold dirt."

Purcell describes winning the state four-ball over his home course as "Absolutely special."

"We all know how significant Forest Hill is as a golf course," he says. "It's a terrific golf course. To be able to win on the course that you grew up on with family and friends around to cheer you on was very special to Pat and I."

The golf course is laid out over just 103 acres. It measures just 6,547 yards from the back tees with a par of 71 with additional markers set at 6,282, 5,776, and 5,699 yards.

The course rating varies from 68.1 to 72.5 and the slope from 125-131 (the numbers for women from the forward tees are 74.6/130).

"I think it has 18 really good holes," says Jason Fiore, the head golf professional. "It's a shotmaker's golf course. There are 18 quality holes out there that Tillinghast laid out and are always in great shape, too, which is a huge plus."

Space is admittedly tight; members are barred from using their drivers on the range save for weekend mornings until 10 a.m. when balls are likely to sail beyond the end of the range below to the 14th green. But it should be noted that in 1925-26 golf-course architects seldom if ever allocated space for a range.

Since it is not an overly long layout, some visitors have underestimated the challenges it presents. The tree-lined fairways



and undulating terrain place a premium on accuracy and the putting surfaces offer challenges of their own.

Conditions are immaculate, thanks to efforts of superintendent Frank Tichenor and his team. A decade ago, the club did a renovation that included the installation of a new irrigation system and pond. Prior to the start of the 2017 golf season the sand in all the bunkers (save for one relatively new one) was replaced.

The opening hole is a par four that plays to 378 yards from the back of an elevated tee box. On a clear day, the top of the Empire State Building is visible from the tee. Before the 9-11 attack, the twin towers of the World Trade Center were visible as well.

Fiore is partial to the 13th hole, a par four that plays to a maximum of 439 yards from an elevated back tee. There is a pond on the right side of the landing area some 270 yards out, leaving an approach of some 150 yards.

The layout finishes with an uphill par three that plays to 200 yards from the back tee; most golfers will play it from 168 yards. Three bunkers protect the green which sits in a natural amphitheater in front of the clubhouse, allowing onlookers to watch golfers finish their rounds from the adjacent patio, most notably during the shootout that concludes the club's annual two-man invitational tournament.

Two other big events on the club's tournament schedule are the Silver Putter Tournament and the Craig Wood Pro-Member.

The Silver Putter has been a fixture at

Forest Hill since 1941. The 36-hole tournament is a net event at 100 percent of handicap with all the trappings of an NJSGA major championship or perhaps a tour event. On Sunday, the leaders tee off last. A leaderboard on the course and live scoring on line keeps members and other interested parties up to date on the proceedings.

The winner receives not only a silver putter but also a green jacket. This year's edition, the 77th, is scheduled for Sept. 23-24.

The Craig Wood Pro-Member teams PGA professionals with Forest Hill members for a day of golf that also serves as a tribute to the 18 men (including Fiore) who have served as head golf professionals at the club since its creation (plus one assistant professional).

The first of them was Alexander Pirie, who later in his career served as President of the PGA of America and is a member of the PGA Golf Professional Hall of Fame.

Another, Dave Honeyman, spent 11 years at the club before leaving in 1921 to work for Tillinghast. He later returned to supervise the construction of the golf course the members play today.

Paul Runyan served as an assistant to Wood during his tenure at Forest Hill. One of the greatest iron and short-game players in history, Runyan won 29 times on the PGA Tour and won the PGA Championship twice, in 1934 and '38. He was later a celebrated instructor.

Charlie Cowell served as the head golf professional for 15 years, from 1998-2011. A fine player himself, his resume includes New Jersey Open (1992) and Met Open (1994) titles. He was also the New

Jersey Section PGA Player of the Year in 1992. Prior to turning professional he won the New Jersey state public-links title. The most celebrated of the men who have been in charge of the Forest Hill golf shop is Emery Thomas, who served as the club's head golf professional for a record 27 years, from 1943-69. He won the New Jersey Open back to back in 1949-50 and was the runner up in that championship on five occasions. He also won the New Jersey Section PGA Championship five times.

Today, the trophy presented to the New Jersey Senior Open champion is named for him.

Visiting professionals have noted how well the layout stands up even by today's standards. "Acre for Acre there is no golf course that gets more out of the property in all of New Jersey than Forest Hill," said Noah Bodt, head professional at Ramsey Golf and Country Club.

In addition to its member tournaments, the club has always made it a point to regularly host New Jersey State Golf Association events. No fewer than 17 NJSGA championships have been contested at Forest Hill, including 11 major championships; five New Jersey Opens, two New Jersey Amateurs, and four state Four-Ball Championships.

The atmosphere at Forest Hill is a relaxed one to be sure. But at a time when it is no simple matter for a private equity club to thrive, no one should question how much the members care about their club and not only preserving its history but adding new chapters to that history in the years to come. 🌱

GREAT GOLF HOLES of New Jersey



NO. 18 AT FOREST HILL FIELD CLUB: WHERE MEMORIES ARE MADE

PAR 3 200 Blue
168 White
153 Red

Par threes are encountered during the course of a round, but few are positioned as the grand finale. A. W. Tillinghast built Forest Hill's home hole in the slope just down the hill from the clubhouse. The natural amphitheater means there's always someone watching. People having drinks on the patio, or in the dining room, people on the range or teeing off on No. 1 or No. 12... playing the 18th at Forest Hill means you always have an audience for the last hole of the day. Sometimes it's a small one... and sometimes it's a bit bigger.

The annual Member-Guest and the Silver Putter culminate here. In a recent Member-Guest shoot-out, an alternate shot 8 was good enough to grab the prize. Similar calamities have become part of the Silver Putter lore. This 36-hole net event has seen players limp in with scores of double, triple and even a 13.

Not all the stories are sad. My brother Pat negotiated the 211 yards from the back tee in three by making a two-foot uphill putt to win his first club championship there at 18. I had a good view of that one as I was the one he beat.

Lots of memories made on this par three. Good or bad they all become a story.

—Contributed by NJSGA Executive Director, Kevin Purcell 🌱

