

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NORTH COURSE, A.K.A. NORTH HILLS.**

**By Richard Howting**

Oakland Hills Country Club was founded at a meeting of some 46 interested parties gathered at the Detroit Athletic Club by Joseph Mack on October 17, 1916. Three years to the day after that founding, the Oakland Hills board of directors appointed Mack, now the club president, to look into purchasing grounds on the north side of Maple Road for the purpose of constructing a second golf course.

These were busy times for Oakland Hills. The South Course had just opened for play in 1918. That same year, Joe Mack had hired Walter Hagen to be the club's first professional. Local automotive magnets were queuing up for membership: John and Horace Dodge, James Couzens, and Charlie Sorensen all became members in 1918. Edsel Ford joined the following year. In 1921 and '22 a clubhouse was built at the cost of \$650,000 (some \$300,000 over budget.) Also in '22, Oakland Hills hosted its first major golf event, the Western Open. It was won by Mike Brady, who had succeeded Hagen as Oakland Hills' pro (to this day, Brady is the only host professional to win the Western).

Amidst this hectic pace, Joe Mack turned to Donald Ross to look over the property proposed for the new course. Ross had designed and built the South Course in 1917 and '18. Already, it was widely considered the finest golf course in the Midwest. Ross liked what he saw and before the end of 1922 had drawn up an 18-hole layout for the new course – even before all of the property had been secured. (Farmland formerly owned by Elizabeth Harff would become the western side of the course, and farmland from John Miller's property would make up the eastern side.)

Before proceeding, it's important to address the issue of the North Course as an authentic Donald Ross design. The original Donald Ross layout of the course went missing many years ago and, as time passed, a rumor spread that Alex Ross, Donald's younger brother, was the architect of the course. For a time in the sixties, even the Oakland Hills member book credited Alex Ross with the North Course design. The rumor seems to have gained currency owing to the fact that Alex was the head professional at the Detroit Golf Club from 1916 (the year his brother, Donald, designed both of the Golf Club's courses) until 1947. Many people have been willing to presume that Alex's proximity translated into carrying

out design work for Donald, who had many other projects to look after, particularly in the Northeast and South. However, both Bradley Klein in his book *Discovering Donald Ross*, and Geoffrey Cornish and Ron Whitten in their comprehensive *The Architects of Golf*, credit Donald Ross with the North Course design. Klein's book even confirms Donald Ross's presence on the course site.

Oakland Hills has since recovered the long missing, original 1922 layout for the North Course. It lists Donald Ross as architect and Walter B. Hatch as his associate. There is no mention of Alex Ross. One would presume that if Alex had, in fact, had any part in the design work, his brother would have credited him. But on the course layout, only Walter Hatch is credited.

Which brings us to this question: Who was Walter B. Hatch? According to Klein's book, Hatch was a student of landscape architecture who went to work for Ross in 1918. He was good with topographic maps while Ross still relied on two dimensional plans and notepad sketches from the field. Hatch headed up Ross's satellite office in North Amherst, Massachusetts and functioned as Ross's on-site man for many projects in the Northeast and Midwest. His project responsibilities could include preliminary surveys and routings, over-seeing construction, and rebuilding or tweaking courses as needed. One of his trademarks became the green slightly tipped toward the line of play with the crown at the back. Geoffrey Cornish has referred to such Hatch greens as "more Ross than Ross." Indeed, the green on the second hole of Oakland Hills' South Course, designed by Ross in 1917 (prior to employing Hatch), is a perfect example of this style.

The long and short of all this is simply to say that Donald Ross was the architect specifically hired by Oakland Hills to design the North Course. He was on-site to review the property, and the only primary source material available lists him as the course architect. Walter Hatch probably functioned as Ross's on-site man. He may have done some preliminary work, he most likely oversaw construction, and he may have been in charge of any "tweaking" that was seen as necessary. But from top to bottom, the Oakland Hills North Course was a Donald Ross course.

It wasn't until April 25, 1923 that Joe Mack, now chairman of the Green Committee, was finally authorized by the club's board to proceed with the construction of the new North Course. It took just about a year to complete the work. The official opening was May 13, 1924. (It was announced by the club's board that ladies could play on the North at any time and on any day – Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays included!)

The new course opened less than a month before the U. S. Open arrived on the South Course, June 5 and 6, 1924. In fact, before the end of May, the board had posted bulletins in the clubhouse "requesting our members to kindly refrain from playing golf on the (South) course during the week of the National Open." Happily, members who couldn't do without their golf during Open week now had the North Course to turn to.

For the balance of the twenties, the North Course served Oakland Hills well. It was enjoyed by both members and guests. Professionals such as Gene Sarazen and Tommy Armour spoke highly of the course's ability to test every club in the bag. However, with the arrival of the depression, the feasibility of a second course came into question. Like many golf clubs, Oakland Hills faced a decreasing membership and increasing financial challenges. The club directors were forced to examine several options for the North Course: lease it, sell it outright, or operate it as a daily fee course.

In January of 1933, two entrepreneurs by the names of Aldinger and Frater offered the club \$11,000 a year for a ten year lease on the course. After a long discussion, the board rejected the offer. Instead, it was decided that Al Watrous (who had been Oakland Hills' pro since 1930) would operate the North Course on a daily fee basis under the name of North Hills Golf Course. Actually, North Hills would call itself a semi-private golf course – semi-private meaning that yearly passes were available. You could choose to be a "member" for an annual fee or you could simply pay per round.

Watrous, not overly excited with having to deal with North Hills in addition to his duties at Oakland Hills, hired Leo Conroy to be the manager and golf professional at North Hills on February 12, 1934 – the same day that Leo's son, John, was born. (John has been a long-time Oakland Hills member and is a former club champion).

After a year, the board of directors was unsatisfied with the income from North Hills and decided to place oversight of the operation with the club's House Committee and its chairman, A. M. Wibel (whose Tudor home still sits across Oakland Drive from the 15<sup>th</sup> green on the South). By November of '35 things had begun to improve, nevertheless, Wibel directed Conroy to submit new ideas to increase play and generally make North Hills more attractive to the public.

Conroy's suggestions resulted in moving the first tee forward by about 95 yards (to eliminate a blind, over-hill tee shot), and filling-in many of the bunkers. There

is some disagreement as to whether or not Leo also leveled some of the dips and rolls in the Ross greens. His son, John, doesn't believe Leo altered the greens, but Wally Lasky, Leo's assistant pro at North Hills, claimed that Leo had modified several of Ross's more severe greens in order to speed up play. There's also the order in which the holes were played. Ross's order for the front nine moved from the first hole to what is now the par 3 fourth as the original second hole (see the map of Ross's original layout). That order changed: what Ross had designed to be the par 4 seventh hole became the second hole. From the evidence available, one presumes that reordering the holes on the front was yet one more adjustment Leo came up with to move players along with maximum efficiency.

In the end, the course wasn't as challenging as it had been, but it made for a friendlier, faster set-up for the average pub-links player. During this period, a North Course clubhouse was also built. It was a white wood structure with some brick and fieldstone trim. It faced east, backed up to Gilbert Lake Road, and added the convenience of a pro shop, locker room, and knotty pine bar and grill to the North Hills operation.

For the next three decades North Hills was both a successful daily fee golf course, and one of those special places that become legendary (perhaps infamous) in the lore of the locals.

Just to begin... The course caught fire in the mid-forties! No one knows how this happened, it may have been spontaneous combustion or, perhaps, the result of some evening revelers innocently building a camp fire. In any event, the peat bog, which covers much of the lower ground on 14, 15, and 16, caught fire and proceeded to burn underground for several months until the Autumn and Winter weather finally put it out.

The course caught fire in another way during the fifties and sixties. In that same 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>-hole vicinity (14 and 16 on today's course), local teens and twenty-somethings discovered a great place for late night partying during the summer months. Much to Leo Conroy's chagrin, many a morning was spent clearing the fairways and rough of beer cans and bottles.

Of course, there were wintertime shenanigans for Leo to deal with as well. It seems that there were those who were loath to give up their golf owing to a touch of cold and snow. These stout-hearted souls would head out on the links in their cars. Their trunks would be loaded down with clubs and beer and left open

for easy access. One veteran explained that the warmth of the car and the added length off the tee (when the ball would hit that frozen fairway) were welcome benefits. However, on the negative side, it was extremely hard to hold the greens.

North Hills received very little watering, so holding the greens could be a summertime difficulty, too. Many were the approach shots to the ninth green (which was then perched high atop the hill that is now the first tee) that would hit like they were landing on a cement patio, take a bounce off the back of the green, slide down the hill and come to rest in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> fairway.

The history of North Hills is filled with interesting tales. Consider this example: One of the course's immediate neighbors seemed to think the course was an open park for the exercise of his German shepherd. Players never knew when the dog might appear and, suffice it say, the beast did not care for golfers. Leo warned the owner to keep the dog off the course, but to no avail. Finally, after one particularly nasty attack, Leo decided to call in an eastside friend and his Staffordshire bull terrier for a little assistance. Within a matter of days Leo received a phone call from the neighbor, "My dog is dead," he told Leo in an accusatory tone. "Was he on the course?" Leo asked. There was no answer, just the sound of the phone slamming down. That was the end of the dog problem at North Hills.

Off the course, North Hills was equally interesting. The clubhouse locker room was the regular venue for many of the areas hottest poker games. In fact, on one particular Stag Day, after they had completed their rounds on the links, the hardcore poker regulars headed to the tables. In the bar and grill, Leo was presenting the golf awards and conducting drawings for prizes. The first prize was a new set of Hagen woods. One of the poker regulars was the winner. Leo announced his name but no one answered. Leo announced it again – still no answer. This continued for some time. Finally, Leo scooped up the woods, carried them into the locker room, and tossed them on the table in the middle of the poker game. "What the hell is wrong with you?" Leo demanded, "You just won these new Hagen woods, don't you want 'em?" The player in question picked up one of the clubs and examined it. "Yeah, those are damn nice clubs, Leo, but how are they gonna help me win this hand?"

For those of a more cultured bent, North Hills offered oil painting and art display. Of course, all of the painting was done by Leo, and all of the works displayed were

painted by Leo. While he painted a variety of still lifes and portraits, far and away Leo's favorite subject was the golf swing. The walls of the pro shop and bar and grill were covered with Leo's depictions of the golf swing – some done in blues, some in reds, some in greens. Leo executed golf swings in every color of the rainbow. When asked why he continued to paint the golf swing, Leo explained that the swing was a difficult thing to perfect, whether on the practice range or the canvas.

In spite of the course having been tempered to accommodate speedier play, North Hills was recognized throughout the district as one of the finest courses available to the public. As such, it was chosen to annually host the local Hearst Tournament – sponsored by the *Detroit Times* (the local Hearst newspaper) and run by the *Times'* great sports writer, Ed Hayes. These tournaments began in the mid-forties and ran until 1960 when the *Times* was sold to *The Detroit News*. Both the tournament winner and runner-up would go on to compete in the national Hearst tournament.

In the early sixties, when the Hearst had disappeared, Conroy replaced it with his own invitational known as "The Hustler." Leo decided who would play and who wouldn't. There was plenty of golf and, afterwards, plenty of food and adult beverages in the clubhouse. Prizes of golf merchandise were handed out to the top ten finishers. And, you never knew, you just might end up with your face on the clubhouse wall in one of Leo's paintings.

Throughout the sixties, as the Oakland Hills membership grew, so did interest in taking the North Course private once more. Toward this end, the club had Trent Jones (the architect who had famously turned the South Course into "The Monster" for the 1951 Open) look over North Hills and make recommendations for updating the layout.

Trent proved to be the same master of public relations he had always been. Prior to the 1967 membership vote on whether or not North Hills should be updated and taken private again, the board sent out a letter in which Jones was quoted as saying that the redesigned North Course would not only stretch to over 7,000 yards, but would compare favorably with the Augusta National course. Exaggeration indeed, nevertheless, the membership overwhelmingly approved the proposal.

Trent's North Course alterations covered five general areas: 1) *Additional length*: Not 7000 yards, but 6668 – an increase of 368 yards. 2) *New bunkering*: As mentioned above, many of Ross's original 80-plus bunkers had been removed – in fact, by this time, there were fewer than 20. Trent's plan called for over 90. 3) *Using more of the available property*: A northeast section of the course covered with swampy wetlands had, as much as possible, been avoided by Ross. Jones had the equipment to deal with the water by gathering it into ponds and designing new water holes (today's six, 12 and 13). 4) *Combining holes*: Jones combined the fifth and sixth holes (see the map of Ross's layout) to create a new par 5 fifth hole of over 600 yards. He did the same with the twelfth and thirteenth, creating the par 5 12<sup>th</sup> of over 500 yards. 5) Finally, *reversing holes*: On the front Jones reversed one and nine. On the back he reversed 15 and 16.

In addition to these changes, Jones turned the second hole into a dogleg left with a totally new green complex; shortened the 11<sup>th</sup> from 528 to 463, adding another new green complex; and doglegged 14 to the right with a new tee location. In the end, the only holes that remained substantially as Ross had designed them were three, four, seven, eight, 10, 17 and 18. But even these were not truly Ross holes because Jones had reshaped the greens. In fact, according to those familiar with the Ross course, Trent Jones' 1967 redesign left none of Ross's greens intact.

The new North Course has served the Oakland Hills membership well. It has provided a second course that is both challenging and fun in spite of (perhaps because of) being considerably less demanding than its sister to the South. It has also proven a godsend when major championships are held on the South Course – providing space for parking, a bus depot, hospitality tents, contestant practice facilities, and more. In 2004, it proved the perfect venue for both the opening and closing ceremonies of the 35<sup>th</sup> Ryder Cup Matches.

The North has also seen its share of competitive golf excitement. In 1992, the North Course played host to its first Michigan Amateur – won by Randy Lewis (who, at 54, played in this year's Masters). In 2002, the North Course was an equal partner with the South in hosting the U. S. Amateur, won by Ricky Barnes. In 2007, both North and South saw action during the International Foreign Qualifier for The Open Championship (a.k.a. the British Open). This year, Oakland Hills is proud to host its second Michigan Amateur on the North Course. And in 2016, in celebration of its centennial, Oakland Hills will host the U. S. Amateur for

the second time – and, once again, both the North and South Courses will see action.

All things considered, one has to suspect that over the past 88 years you would be hard-pressed to name another patch of 121 acres that has provided golfers in Michigan with more enjoyable, memorable, and even surprising moments than Oakland Hills' North Course – the great North Hills!



