

THE DEFINING MOMENT: THE 1951 U.S. OPEN

By Richard Howting

Part I

“Oakland Hills Country Club is in unusual contrast to some of the courses where the National Open has been held in recent years in that no trickery has been resorted to in order to make it a real championship test.

“Its officials pride themselves on the fact that in its character and general layout Oakland Hills has not been changed since Donald Ross designed it...

“...(I)t is the same course the golfers saw in 1924 when the Open was played at Oakland Hills the first time.

“ ‘This course needs nothing more to prepare it for the Open. What it needs is to be left alone,’ A. W. Tillinghast, internationally famous golf architect, told Al Watrous and Chris Brinke when he toured the course with them in the fall of 1936.

“Oakland Hills is one of the finest golf courses, not alone in this country, but in the world,’ Tillinghast said.”

So wrote *Detroit News* golf writer John Walter in the 1937 U. S. Open program. Why all the chatter about the course? The year before, Tony Manero had won the U. S. Open at Baltusrol by firing a record-breaking 282. Officials of both the USGA and Oakland Hills wanted to assure everyone that Oakland Hills was more than tough enough to take on all comers in the 1937 championship. There would be no repeat of Baltusrol. And just to make sure, they lengthened the course to 7,037 yards (163 yards longer than the 1924 Open), making Oakland Hills the longest course in the history of the Open championship!

In spite of the wishful thinking and added length, when 1937 rolled around Ralph Guldahl shot 71, 69, 72, 69 to not only win the tournament, but set a new U. S. Open record of 281. The president of the club that year was John P. O’Hara, Sr. Over a decade later, he would be Oakland Hills’ General Chairman for the

upcoming 1951 U.S. Open. He remembered 1937 very well – and he wasn't going to let it happen again.

On June 11, 1946, Chris Brinke, chairman of the Golf Committee, extended an invitation to the USGA to conduct the Open championship at Oakland Hills in 1947, '48, or '49. It was an entire year before Brinke was able to report to the board of directors that the USGA would give consideration to holding the Open at Oakland Hills in 1949 or '50. And it wasn't until February 4, 1949, during a mid-winter board meeting held at the Detroit Athletic Club, that Oakland Hills' president Charles Houff was finally able to announce that the USGA had invited Oakland Hills to host the U. S. Open in 1951. For the occasion, past club presidents O'Hara, Burgess, Mead, and Costello were on hand. Each, in turn, gave his views of the work involved in staging the National Open. While they all agreed it would be a tremendous effort, they also agreed that it was well worthwhile for the overall benefit it would be to the club.

For four years, they had been trying to get Oakland Hills on the books for another Open, now, finally, it would arrive – 14 years after the last Open. It was an occasion to celebrate.

Two days before all this excitement took place in Detroit, while driving to Fort Worth on a fog-shrouded road just east of Van Horn, Texas, Ben and Valerie Hogan had a head-on collision with a bus. To protect his wife, Hogan had tossed himself over her a split second before impact. This had not only saved her, it had prevented Hogan being impaled as the steering column was driven through the car like a bullet. While Valerie was relatively unharmed, Hogan had suffered multiple injuries: a broken collarbone, a broken ankle, a fractured rib, a broken pelvis. His face had smashed into the dashboard and his left leg had been crushed when the car's 500-pound engine crashed through the firewall. As they waited for help over the next hour and a half, Hogan's blood pressure and pulse dropped rapidly. He was going into circulatory shock, drifting in and out of consciousness, and in serious danger of dying right there, on the road side.

With the Open headed to Oakland Hills, John Oswald, chairman of the Green Committee, became a very busy man. From February 4 to May 24 he reported five times to the board on various matters concerning the care and maintenance of the south course and on miscellaneous golf facility improvements. New pumps were to be installed to insure an adequate and steady supply of water from the club's water tower on the corner of Maple and Gilbert Lake Roads. The new practice green that was to be built between the first fairway and Maple Road was being moved to a position just behind the ninth green and tenth tee. And the direction of the practice tee was going to be changed from west to south owing to the construction of new homes along Oakhills Drive.

At a Tuesday evening board meeting on June 28, 1949, President Houff announced that John P. O'Hara would be General Chairman of the 1951 National Open Committee. And at a board meeting on August 23, Houff read excerpts from a report on the south course written after a recent visit by Fred Grau, the director of the Greens Section of the USGA. It was all very complimentary. Everything seemed to be coming along just fine.

John Oswald and John O'Hara believed the south course needed more than new water pumps or back tees. After 14 years they didn't want to witness another low-scoring record set at Oakland Hills. Back in 1946 when Chris Brinke had first contacted the USGA about another Open, Oswald had thought about contacting Donald Ross to look over possible changes to the south course. Ross, after all, was the man who had designed and built the course in 1917. But now it was too late, Ross had died just over a year before, in April of 1948. Oswald's search for someone to replace Ross didn't take long. Robert Trent Jones had been designing courses since 1930, he had worked for years with the great Canadian architect, Stanley Thompson, and since 1945 he had been Bobby Jones' architect of choice, not only designing Peachtree for Jones, but making a series of changes to Augusta National. Trent Jones was the guy John Oswald called.

To be continued.

