

Newark Athletic Hall of Fame Inductee
John Murry, Past NJSGA President



BEFORE

Before and after photos of the seventh hole on Upper Montclair's West nine show improved bunkering that offers greater visual interest and challenge.

AFTER



UPPER MONTCLAIR CONTINUES TO KEEP UP WITH THE TIMES

BY ED BROCKNER

Upper Montclair Country Club dates to 1901 and began with a very informal course that has morphed over time into its current 27-hole championship layout.

Located at the intersection of two of the New Jersey's busiest thoroughfares, the Garden State Parkway and Route 3, the course's evolution in many ways represents the rapid growth and development that this area just a few miles from New York City has experienced over the past half century. And while many of these external factors have helped shaped the club history, it remains at its core a golf club created for the enjoyment of members and guests alike.

Regarding the guests who have played at Upper Montclair over the years, few if any can boast a visitor's log book that includes such illustrious names as those at the club. From Nicklaus and Lopez to Palmer and Trevino, UMCC has hosted professional events of all three major tours—the PGA, LPGA and Champions. These events began shortly after the club underwent a major transformation in the 1950s, when the three nines of architect A.W. Tillinghast were replaced by the current layout designed and built by Robert Trent Jones Sr. and have continued into the 21st century.

Due to the expansion of Route 3 from country road to major highway connecting New York to New Jersey via the Lincoln Tunnel and the creation of the Garden State Parkway, Jones had little of the land for the original layout at his disposal for the new design. Only a handful of the Tillinghast features survived, but Jones replaced the existing course with three expertly routed nines, the East, West and North, that feature a fine variety of holes in his signature style.

In 2008, the club recognized the need to perform major work once again to keep up

with the times and invest in the necessary infrastructure. Through a master plan developed by golf architect John Harvey, who learned his craft under Robert Trent Jones disciple Roger Rulewich, UMCC went to work on modernizing its irrigation, maintenance facility, cart paths and drainage systems, along with attention to other aesthetic and strategic elements of the courses. "Drainage and irrigation improvements really provided the main thrust of the renovations, but bunker renovations

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JOHN HARVEY, ARCHITECT

and green surrounds re-sodding were all important elements that needed to be addressed to promote the success of the program as well," says Harvey. "In addition to these improvements, some tees were rebuilt and several cart paths were installed."

Along with the hiring of Harvey to lead the design and planning effort, the club brought golf course superintendent Mike Brunelle on board just as this process was kicking into high gear to handle

the completion of the maintenance facility and agronomic aspects of the course improvements. Brunelle came from Trump National-Bedminster, where he was initially hired as superintendent of the Old Course. However, he soon became the director of grounds for the entire facility, which included grow-in of the New Course and continued maintenance of the Old. "I gained a great deal of experience working at Trump-Bedminster both from a construction aspect as well as providing the highest quality turf possible," says Brunelle. "This helped me tremendously at Upper Montclair in managing the project and maintaining the best conditions as this work was completed."

Perhaps the most dramatic improvements performed through the master plan, other than the maintenance infrastructure that has allowed Brunelle to present top-notch conditioning, are the bunkers on the course, nearly every one of which was rebuilt. This was a matter of both form and function for the club's layout. "The club and design team wanted to enhance the visual drama on the course while complementing design strategies already in place by Jones' clever routing, sequencing of holes, risk/reward demands on tee shots and approaches," according to Harvey. "We re-positioned some fairway and greenside bunkers to make them more relevant to today's player demands and maintenance regimen."

Harvey and Brunelle worked closely together in this collaborative process, building bunkers that are consistent with the "cape and bay" sand lines reminiscent of Robert Trent Jones Sr.'s style. The



Renovations to the ninth hole on Upper Montclair's South nine provide an even more beautiful setting for the final hole of the layout used for championships.

expansion of the putting surface and changes in mowing patterns around the courses were more subtle in nature than the rebuilt bunkering and work around the greens. Another one of Jones' trademarks was large greens, and many lost hole locations were reclaimed as a result of the renovation work at Upper Montclair. Careful shaping work regrading some areas around the greens also allowed everything to tie in together perfectly and provide a much better overall aesthetic appearance.

Another prominent feature of Upper Montclair are the beautifully mature oak trees that are now able to be seen throughout the property, and through selective removal of others, these specimens are now on full display. This has opened up playing corridors, helped turf flourish and allowed the introduction of more fescue areas that provide visual contrast. Remnants of the historic Morris Canal also run through the

property, and the drainage functionality of the waterway was enhanced by the renovation efforts and also provides a challenging water feature on no less than a third of the club's holes.

All of these collective features and improvements provide great enjoyment and variety for golfers, and the same can be said of the distinctive character of each of the club's three nines. The East features the most elevation change with more doglegs than the other two nines, and although it is not part of the normal rotation of courses used for professional events, many members say this is their favorite. Tournaments have traditionally been played on the West, which is likely the most challenging of the nines with its long par 3s and less hilly topography, and the South that features a little bit of everything.

As Upper Montclair Country Club continues to thrive and improve its

courses, the recent changes that have been successfully completed will allow the club to continue in its evolution from a rudimentary few holes of a club that was then truly in the country to today's beautifully manicured 27-hole facility quite literally located at the crossroads of northern New Jersey. Through these investments that have been made in infrastructure and strategic design enhancements, it is clear that Upper Montclair is well positioned to continue promoting its core mission of being a great golf club for many years to come.

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