

Club Focus



Apple of Their Eyes

Red Hook Golf Club is enjoying success thanks to a cooperative grass-roots effort by its members

BY BOB SELIGMAN

The bucolic countryside of the upper Hudson Valley constitutes the northern fringes of the Met Area, and is a world away from the concrete canyons of Wall Street. Yet the members and regulars of Red Hook Golf Club, a semi-private club in the town of the same name, have over the years displayed a penchant for deal-making that would be the envy of many an investment banker or day trader.

Red Hook originally opened as a nine-hole course in 1931, and stayed that way for more than 60 years. While it was a pleasant layout that provided a lot of enjoyment for not a lot of money, its members yearned for something more.

"For years, the members always wanted to expand," says John Mahon, Red Hook's head professional for the last 15 years. "They were always looking for ways to get 18 holes."

Red Hook's success in reaching that goal is the result of an extraordinary effort by those members to help expand and renovate the original golf course and yet retain the congenial atmosphere of the club. After all the work they put in, you might say that Red Hook is the apple of the members' eyes. After all, apples figure prominently into the tale.

The path to 18-hole bliss opened when



The closing hole at Red Hook features a push-up green fronted by bunkers. The recently expanded clubhouse stands guard behind the green.

Dave Kane, a member of the club's Board of Directors, discovered that the owners of the apple orchard adjacent to the course were going ahead with a plan to develop the orchard into 31 units of housing.

Instead of seeing an obstacle, Red Hook's members saw an opportunity, and a trade was proposed. The orchard's owners would give the golf club sufficient land to complete an 18-hole course, and in exchange Red Hook would yield density rights to the eventual housing developers that would allow them to build 48 housing units – 36 townhouses and

12 homes – instead of 31 under previous zoning allowances. At an average price of \$200,000 per unit, that translates to an extra \$3.4 million in revenue for the developer, which, in apple parlance, is pretty delicious.

"Red Hook gave them the rights to build 17 extra units on their own land in exchange for them giving us approximately 65 acres that encompasses land around the outside of their housing," says Kane, who served on the club's Board for 20 years. "That allowed us to have enough land for additional holes, plus the driving range, that we would not have been able to have without this arrangement."

Though their vision was one step closer to reality, it would not come easy. The land needed to be cleared of trees and scrub brush before the new holes could be built, and that was accomplished by what Kane calls one of the greatest community efforts ever seen at a golf club. Using their own equipment, Red Hook's members cut down approximately 8,000 apple trees, plus another 600 pine trees, and also removed the stumps. Club officials estimate the volunteer work saved the club an estimated five hundred thousand dollars.

The clearing took nearly five years, for a combination of reasons. One was that the members wanted to enjoy the use of the club during the summer and keep it open for play. The other was that the toppled trees could only be burned in winter, when snow on the ground led to the lowest possible risk of brush fire.

Burning Parties, at which the hewed trees were set aflame and taken away, added a "glowing" atmosphere and were a true joint effort. Club members who could not physically handle the manual labor required with tree clearing instead cooked and handed out hamburgers, hot dogs and drinks to those who did the heavy lifting. "Everybody was volunteering, doing what they could do," says Mahon.

While the initial tree-clearing work was free, the golf club still needed money to fund the course expansion. Red Hook, which started as a course that sold shares of stock to its members, remained true to its roots. The club raised \$380,000 by selling 190 shares at \$2,000 each, and then received a \$1 million loan from a local bank.

In 1996 – five years after the first apple tree was toppled – Red Hook's members had their 18-hole course. The redesign, done by Easton, Pennsylvania-based architect Dave Horn, is massive. For all intents and purposes, Red Hook is now a new course, bearing little



Members helped clear away the former apple orchard to make room for new holes (above). One of the few holes that remained intact is the narrow 11th (right).

resemblance to the original. Tom Schaad, the President of the club's Board of Directors during the expansion, says the extent of the work was due to having only a marginally adequate amount of land on which to build the complete 18 holes.

"We wanted to eliminate the limitations of the existing nine holes," says Schaad.

Parts of only five holes remain from the club's original nine, and of those, only the 429-yard 11th was completely untouched. The 11th is a graceful, straight hole lined with trees, whose narrow corridors and length are enough to make it the No. 2 handicap hole.

The 11th is an anomaly among Red Hook's holes, because the tight land required tweaking almost all of the par fours and fives into doglegs of some degree, including the



double-dogleg, 497-yard fifth hole. Greens are generally open and accessible in front, although some forced carries are necessary, most notably on the 559-yard third hole, where drives must clear low-lying wetlands. The greens at Red Hook mimic the surrounding topography, with slopes that are learned over time rather than readily seen. It's a course where local knowledge acts as a valuable 15th club in your bag.

Red Hook will never be confused with Met Area clubs like Winged Foot, Stanwich or Baltusrol. At 6,539 yards from the tips, it is a relaxing, and sometimes challenging, day in the country. It has been the qualifying course for the New York State Amateur and Junior Amateur tournaments, the qualifying site for the Dutchess County Amateur and the site for the final round of the Dutchess County Women's Amateur Championship.

"It fits in because we have a niche between

Red Hook: Players Wanted

Red Hook currently has memberships available. While most of the members are local residents from the surrounding towns of Rhinebeck, Red Hook, Pine Plains and Hyde Park, some are New York City dwellers who have weekend homes in the area.

Becoming a shareholder in the club is a prerequisite to joining. New members can either purchase a share for \$3,000 from the club, or can negotiate a price with a current

member. Membership dues for 2006 are \$2,160 for a single person and \$3,250 for a family. Other membership packages are also available.

Members can make tee times a week in advance, while non-members can call 48 hours in advance. Greens fees are \$48 Monday through Friday and \$60 Saturday and Sunday, with carts available for an additional \$18.

For more information on Red Hook Golf Club, call 845-758-3672 or visit www.redhookgolfclub.com.



To play at Red Hook is to be immersed in nature, from thickets of trees to crisp, clear lakes.

some of the public courses and some of the somewhat higher-end private courses in the area,” says Kane.

Red Hook has also fit in – and lasted 75 years – because the club is all about golf. There are no tennis courts or a swimming pool. The only social gathering place is a restaurant and enclosed porch, where the club celebrated its anniversary in late July. In fact,

the renovation of the golf course isn’t the only improvement made in the last 10 years. In 1998, the clubhouse was expanded to include a new locker room, pro shop and cart storage area.

Though an expansion of the banquet facilities is being studied, it has historically not been a high priority at Red Hook. “The dining area is not roomy enough to cater to events like large weddings,” says Schaad. “Some people who would join a club completely or partially because they want an extensive social facility won’t find it here. The social facility is limited to member activities, by and large.”

Adds Kane, “it’s an affable course to belong to. I think the conditioning is extremely good, and continues to improve. In general, people enjoy being members at a family club.”

A quick glance around Red Hook reveals a place where the members are intensely proud of their course. They should be proud, because Red Hook only exists in its current form because of their volunteer efforts. Now members can enjoy the fruits of their labor. ■

Bob Seligman is a writer based in Rockland County, New York.

Road Trip

If you’re considering a venture to check out the delights of Red Hook, you might want to consider staying a night or two at the landmark Beekman Arms (*right*) or Delameter Inn, both just five miles from the golf course in Rhinebeck.

These are sister properties, though the 23-room Beekman, established in 1766, is notable as America’s oldest continuously operating inn. More information is available at www.beekmandelameterinn.com, or by phone at 845-876-7077. Rhinebeck is a walkable town of shops and restaurants, and is especially attractive to antique buffs. Other Hudson Valley attractions of note include the Franklin D. Roosevelt Home (800-967-2283) and Culinary Institute of America (845-451-1275), both about 10 miles away from Red Hook in Hyde Park, N.Y.

