



9 is Fine

*Our author expounds
on the joy of nine-hole rounds
and encourages others to
join in the fun*

BY MERRELL NODEN

Many years ago I was lucky enough to spend four years at The Lawrenceville School, whose leafy campus is just down the road from Princeton University. Along with just about every other amenity known to man – except girls, as this was before Lawrenceville went co-ed – the prep school had its own golf course. It was only nine holes, but the first tee was about 300 yards from my dorm room, which meant that on warm spring evenings, if I gobbled dinner fast enough, I could race out and play nine holes before dark.



Peninsula executive board members Robert Oehler, Joe DeSimone and Frank Sorrentino (l. to r.) enjoy some laughs on the ninth green.

Looking back, I can say with all honesty that those rounds were pure bliss. I kept score, sort of, but the only pressure I felt was to finish before the sun went down.

For some reason, when I started to take the game more seriously, I forgot all about the pleasures and advantages of playing “only” nine holes. Somehow that didn’t seem like real golf. If I didn’t have time for 18, I didn’t play at all, an attitude that now strikes me as foolish and self-defeating, especially when I think back to those idyllic nine-hole evenings. If this sounds like you, then perhaps it’s time to rediscover the joy of nine holes.

“If you can’t play 18, why not play nine? At least you’re playing.” That’s how Joe Casamento, the manager of Long Island’s Peninsula Golf Club, one of several nine-hole clubs

in the Met Area, put it to me. Of course, it’s even better if you’re going to play your nine holes at a charming place like Peninsula, which still sits on the same 57 acres of suburban Massapequa as it did when it was bought, in 1946, for \$16,000 by a group of former Inwood Country Club caddies just back from the war. Peninsula’s tree-lined holes range from a single par three that plays anywhere from 131 to 173 yards to two short par fives that open and close the nine.

It’s hard to argue with Joe’s logic on the joys of nine-hole rounds, and most Peninsula members are in staunch agreement. “A lot of them play nine before work,” says Casamento. “They start at 6:30, they’re done by 8, they shower, and head off to work.” And it’s not just at public tracks like Peninsula and Merrick Road that Long Islanders enjoy the pleasures of nine-hole rounds. On the east end, Quogue Field Club is a scenic, challenging test of golf that continually delights its members and guests. Just a stone’s throw from there is Shelter Island, affectionately known as Goat Hill for the precarious slopes over which its par-33, 2,615-yard layout plays.

The powers-that-be in the U.S. golf industry have been feverishly at work in recent years trying to figure out ways to grow the number of golfers and rounds played in this country. Why are these efforts necessary? Of all the explanations heard for golfers either quitting the game or simply not playing more often, “the time it takes to play” is always near the top of the list. And no wonder: Playing 18 is probably the only thing we do that routinely takes four hours or more. A gym workout, a movie, a good meal – none of these rivals golf for gobbling up the one thing we increasingly feel we have less of: our precious time.

“Playing 18 holes is nice, but it can take all day,” said Ron Faust, a retired chief of detectives with whom I played nine very pleasant holes at Merrick Road Park Golf Course, just a few miles from Peninsula.

Merrick Road is another neat little nine-hole oasis, with its first three holes hugging the shore of Merrick Cove. It’s not as tight as Peninsula, but it is a treat to play. Faust lives just a few miles away, which allows him to fit his golf into his life, not the other way round. “If my wife is going out shopping, I call over here and if it’s not busy, I come right over,” he says.

Why are so many of us tied to 18 holes? Partly because 18 is one of the sports world’s truly iconic numbers, right up there with nine (innings) and 26.2 (miles). We are so used to

Posting Nine-Hole Scores

To be acceptable for handicap purposes, nine-hole scores must meet the following conditions:

1) The course must have a nine-hole USGA Course Rating and Slope Rating. All MGA member clubs have nine-hole ratings.

2) At least seven holes must be played. The remaining two holes may be completed using a rule which states that scores for unplayed holes must be recorded as par plus any handicap

strokes the player is entitled to receive on the unplayed holes.

When two nine-hole scores are combined, the USGA Course Rating is the sum of each nine-hole USGA Course Rating and the Slope Rating is the average of the Slope Rating of the two nines.

If two nine-hole scores are combined to create an 18-hole score, it should be designated with the letter C (combined).

defining a round of golf as 18 holes, and only 18 holes, that we assume, in some vague way, that playing anything less just isn't golf.

But an enjoyable round need not be a marathon. And it isn't, in other – dare I say wiser? – parts of the country. Whereas stand-alone nine-hole courses represent about 29 percent of all U.S. courses, in a handful of Midwestern states they easily out-number 18-hole courses. According to the National Golf

Foundation, 89 of North Dakota's 114 courses are stand-alone nines, presumably because there just aren't enough golfers to justify the expense of maintaining a full 18.

Keeping in mind our legendary provincialism, there is simply no need for we Met Area golfers to envy Midwesterners, playing all their cute little courses out on the vast prairies. We have our own standout nine-hole courses, starting – as many lucky young golfers do – with Mosholu in the Bronx, home of The First Tee of Metropolitan New York and the recent beneficiary of a marvelous renovation by golf architect Stephen Kay. In the Hudson Valley, Mohonk Mountain House has a lovely nine-hole course, as does the New Paltz Golf Club which, at 3,460 yards from the tips, has all the challenge of a regulation course.

Other Met Area hot spots for nine-hole outings include the town of Pawling, New York: There is Dutcher Golf Course in town, which opened in 1890; Harlem Valley Hospital, which dates to 1920; and Quaker Hill, designed by Robert Trent Jones and opened in 1939. Babe Ruth used to play there, and if nine holes were enough for the Babe, a man of prodigious appetite, surely they're enough for you and me. The Babe also liked Sedgewood, a wonderfully hilly nine in Lake Kent, N.Y., with great views. Sedgewood avoids the shortcoming of many nine-hole courses by setting its alternate tees far, far apart – as much as 100 yards on one hole. Go around a second time, and it really feels like a different nine.

If you are looking for an especially tough nine-holer, check out Doral Arrowwood, a semi-private course in Rye Brook, N.Y. It has water in play on seven holes and stretches to 2,924 tight yards from the tips. And just a little farther northeast into Connecticut you'll find a duo of nine-hole jewels: Millbrook Country Club in Greenwich, and Birchwood Country Club in Westport. Birchwood, in fact, has an especially impressive lineage. Built in the 1946, when it was known as Westport Country Club, Birchwood can play from 3,200 to almost 3,400 yards, and has fantastic greens of velvet bent grass. No won-

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A group of friends enjoy a nine-hole round in the midst of a mild winter.

der both *Golf Digest* and *Sports Illustrated* have ranked Birchwood among the Top 10 nine-hole courses in the country. If you go there, you may see five-time Met Amateur Dick Siderowf, who often fine-tunes his game on the sloping fairways and small greens. Over in New Jersey, Madison Golf Club is 110-year-old club with an exacting and enjoyable nine holes.

If it is possible for our lives to grow busier than they already are, and for open land in the Met Area to become even scarcer than it already is, we'll see a surge in the popularity of nine-hole rounds. "I think they should become more common," says golf course architect Stephen Kay, who has worked on a number of nine-hole courses in the Met Area in addition to Mosholu.

Then again, playing "only" nine doesn't mean you have to do it on a nine-hole course. Except on courses whose layouts don't return to the clubhouse at the halfway point, you're always free to stop midway around your home 18. "That's why we try to get as many routings with nine holes coming back," notes Rees Jones, adding that the high real estate taxes in highly populated areas like ours might also make nine-hole courses more attractive to developers. And if you really require some form of validation, remember that since 1984 the USGA has allowed golfers to post nine-hole scores for handicap purposes (see sidebar, page 52). They are absolutely official.

Something dawned on me during my round at Merrick Road: Every single one of the guys I'd played with that day – three at Peninsula and two at Merrick – seemed to have a refresh-

ingly low-key attitude towards the game. "I haven't put a number on a card yet," said Ron. I know it's a gross generalization, but the guys who play "only" nine seem more relaxed than guys who play 18. I doubt they are hard-wired to be that way. It's just that they don't have as much invested – either time or money – in their round. Probably it's because they know they'll be out there again in just a day or two for another quick, idyllic nine. Lucky guys. ■

Merrell Noden enjoys playing rounds of any length near his home in Princeton, New Jersey