

## Club Focus



# What's Oldest is

*Essex County Country Club, one of the MGA's original members, is enjoying a remarkable upswing*

**BY EVAN ROTHMAN**

**H**ere's an easy bar bet to win in any New Jersey grillroom: Ask your mark to name the state's oldest country club. To make it fair, give him five guesses. You'll hear Somerset Hills and Plainfield, and likely Baltusrol. Ridgewood? Montclair? Nope, all wrong. Then enjoy the quizzical look, and your free beer, when you say it is Essex County Country Club, formed on May 26, 1887. Only you better pull this stunt soon, because ECCC is quickly turning back into a BMOG, regaining its rightful place among the Met Area elite.

The club, located in leafy West Orange, began life as an offshoot of local hunting and toboggan clubs, and early on, polo was the game of choice. Golf was introduced in 1895 (by which time six New Jersey clubs had courses) with a nine-holer designed by Alex Findley, who went on to serve as head pro and greenskeeper. He was also a fine player, and

maintained his game such that he competed in a series of barnstorming matches against Harry Vardon.

The course expanded to 18 holes a year later, and Essex County became one of the first 25 clubs to join the USGA; the following season, 1897, ECCC became a charter member of the MGA. While the club was originally founded without golf in the master plan, the game soon became the club's identity. In fact, the sublime challenge of the modern-day back nine rivals any in the state, and indeed in the Met Area. One of the highlights is the 202-yard 11th hole, with a mesmerizing blend of beauty and difficulty that makes it the type of hole that players anticipate long before reaching the tee.





Essex's rich history includes a long list of visiting dignitaries and famous members. It has hosted three U.S. presidents: Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson prior to their terms, and golf nut William Howard Taft while in office. Thomas Edison was a social member for 42 years until his death in 1931, and his locker remains intact (and unused) today. Babe Ruth was a frequent Essex guest during his Yankee heyday, and other celebrity visitors included Cecil B. DeMille, Adolph Menjou and Bob Hope. Exhibition matches brought Bobby Jones to the club on three occasions, as well as Vardon, Ted Ray, Francis Ouimet, Sam Snead and Byron Nelson. The star power at times even extended into the employee ranks: U.S. and British Open champion "Long" Jim Barnes served a stint as head professional.

ECCC's trailblazing is equally notable. The club hosted the first New Jersey State Amateur Championship in 1900 and the state's maiden Junior Championship in 1919. Member Genevieve Hacker Stout, the 1901 and '02 U.S. Women's Amateur winner, is believed to be the first woman to make a living as a golf writer. Most important to the club's history was the year 1918, when the

**Long and tough, the 11th hole (above, left) is one of the best par threes in the Met Area; Tillinghast (inset, above) first designed ECCC's East Course; the clubhouse is simple yet elegant.**

# New







**The fifth green (top) has subtle ridges to make putting a challenge; Seth Raynor (inset, above left) died before he could complete his course renovation; New Jersey's own Jim McGovern (inset, above right) finished second in the 1987 Ike Championship at ECCC.**

opening of A.W. Tillinghast's East course made ECCC the first MGA club with two 18-hole layouts.

Due to land considerations associated with the town's growth, within a decade the club needed to revise the East. Rather than bring back Tillinghast, whose fees had increased dramatically after the success of Winged Foot and Baltusrol, among others, Essex County hired Seth Raynor and his assistant, Charles "Steamshovel" Banks for the job in October 1925. When Raynor died of pneumonia just a few months later, the board hastily decided it wanted a more prominent architect than Banks to do the work, and tried to fire him from the project. Banks, in turn, argued that he would make the changes according to Raynor's specs – not to mention the fact that he had a signed contract – and so kept the job. (The club's respect for him has only grown;

ECCC competes in the annual Banks Cup against fellow Banks-designed MGA members Rock Spring, Hackensack and Forsgate.) When Banks was finished, only seven Tillinghast holes remained intact (today, holes 1-6, and the ninth), and the architect had survived a battle with Mother Nature and, perhaps, darker forces.

"During the period of construction there were torrential downpours," Banks later wrote, "and it seemed at times as though the devil himself conspired against everyone concerned."

While far from accursed, ECCC's status never quite matched its top-shelf lineage. Financial troubles stemming from the Great Depression led the club to turn the West into a semi-public course in 1939, and it was sold off to the county for \$3.1 million in 1978 (it is today known as the municipally-run Francis A. Byrne Golf Course).

The East hosted the MGA "Ike" Stroke Play Championship and the New Jersey State Open in 1987, the club's centenary year, and the New Jersey PGA Match Play Championship almost annually from 1988 until 1998. However, by the start of this century it was generally held that the course, which was the club's main draw, stood short of its potential and lacked forward momentum.

The inauguration of a master plan in 2001 started a hugely well-received and eye-catching transformation. Course architect Gil



**The crescent-shaped bunker lurking behind the uphill 12th hole will catch overcooked approach shots.**

Hanse, who is known in the industry as an admirer of classic golf course design, was hired to oversee a course restoration to bring back many of the Raynor elements that had faded in the ensuing seven-plus decades since the last major work. In turn he brought on the noted Golden Age architecture expert George Bahto as the project manager. Their work, supported by original drawings and historical photos, has focused on tree removal

and bunker renovation for this 6,901-yard, par 71 layout. More than 400 trees have been taken down in the past four years, opening the course's visuals as well as improving playability and course conditioning; the bunker program has been equally progressive.

"Our main concern was that the course is almost schizoid," says Bahto. "While early Tillinghast can look like Raynor, the bunkering styles don't match. Tillie bunkers were curlicue things; Raynor wouldn't have done that."

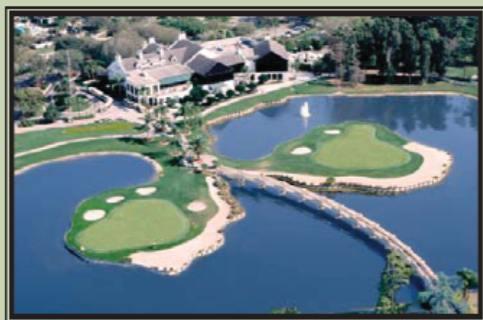
To date, 10 of 20 bunkers lost over time have been restored, and others reshaped. The course project – which has included finer and firmer new sand in every bunker – is only the most obvious aspect of an ambitious overhaul that has taken in nearly every aspect of the club. The September 2002 arrival of Jason Thompson as head superintendent from Maryland's renowned Caves Valley Golf Club (where he served as an assistant), in conjunction with a significant budget increase, presaged a vast improvement in the course's conditioning. Today, a visit to Essex County confirms that the course's visual strength is equal to its design.

As important as the additional investment, however, has been a change in management style. "The board is now committed to letting the professionals do their jobs and supporting them," says Richard Tompeck, ECCC's president since 2003. "The architect must approve any changes to the course. The golf club is being run like a business."

In business as in golf, the only constant is change. ECCC's much-admired head pro, Steve Wilson – another Caves Valley hire – was lured away this fall after three years by The Bridges at Rancho Santa Fe near San Diego, replaced by Baltusrol's second-in-command, Dave Coates. Coates will helm what promises to be an exciting time.

"Three or four years ago, we were ashamed to have people over," Tompeck says. The club will host a Met Open qualifier in 2007, perhaps a U.S. Open qualifier in 2008 and, after a successful return this fall, the New Jersey PGA Match Play Championship through at least 2010. What's oldest will be seen in a bright new light in the coming years – that, too, you can bet on. ■

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