

# THE NIFTY FIFTY

Our ranking of the Met Area's top 50 courses reveals outstanding

quality, depth and a wealth of championship venues

BY BILL QUIRIN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY L.C. LAMBRECHT

**T**en years ago, the MGA asked a panel of local club pros, top amateur players, journalists and course architects to submit their votes for the best golf courses in the Met Area. In the intervening years, a number of notable new courses have been built, public and private, throughout the region.

No. **2**  
Shinnecock Hills



No. **14** Friar's Head



No. **6** Quaker Ridge



**Top Courses  
by Region**

**Long Island**

1. Shinnecock Hills
2. Bethpage (Black)
3. National GL of America

**Westchester**

1. Winged Foot (West)
2. Quaker Ridge
3. Winged Foot (East)

**New Jersey**

1. Baltusrol (Lower)
2. Plainfield
3. Ridgewood

**Connecticut**

1. Country Club of Fairfield
2. Stanwich
3. Brooklawn

This wave of construction elicited many questions as we set out to compile an updated Met Area course ranking. Among the burning questions were the following:

- How do courses such as Friar's Head, Hamilton Farm, Laurel Links, Manhattan Woods, The Bridge and the two Trump National courses compare with the likes of Shinnecock Hills, Winged Foot, Quaker Ridge, and Baltusrol Lower, the top four on the 1997 survey?
- How would the "class of 2006" – Bayonne, Liberty National and Sebonack – measure up?







grand fortress of magnificent classic golf courses that characterizes the Met Area been able to withstand the challenge?

To get some answers, a group of 46 panelists was assembled and asked to rank the courses with which they were familiar, placing them into one of four categories, and in particular, to rank their top ten courses in order.

Here's how it worked: The panelists assigned a "1" if they felt the course belonged in the top 10, a "2" if it should be in the 11-25 range, a "3" for the 26-50 bracket, and

# No. 10

Country Club of Fairfield

- How do Ballyowen, Centennial, Long Island National, and Hudson Hills fare against Bethpage Black, king of public courses ten years ago?
- Have Atlantic, Hudson National, Metedeconk National and the Golf Club of Purchase, who made it onto the 1997 list as relatively new courses, matured into contenders for the top spots in the rankings?

Furthermore, we wondered if impressive renovations at clubs such as Essex County and Seawane changed some opinions. Or has the

## Best-Kept Secret

**S**ome Met Area courses, like those at Bethpage, are open to anyone who can pay a green fee (and snag a tee time). Others are less accessible, and therefore virtually unknown to the masses. That's why we asked our panelists to name the course they feel is the Met Area's "best-kept secret." In general, these courses don't host big tournaments or otherwise seek publicity. So if you ever get the invitation to play one, accept it on the spot.

1. Fishers Island
2. Country Club of Fairfield
3. Tuxedo
4. Blind Brook
5. Bedford Golf & Tennis



# No. 11

Plainfield





## King Tillie

There is no question that, since golf first came to the Met Area more than 120 years ago, every prominent golf course architect has either worked here or wanted to work here. The list of distinguished designers is long, and just about all of their names appear on the top 50 course ranking. Once again, A.W. Tillinghast has the most courses to his credit. Here is the breakdown of architects and the number of their courses that appear in the top 50:



1. A.W. Tillinghast (17)
2. Seth Raynor (6)
3. C.B. Macdonald (4)
- T4. Charles Banks (3)  
Donald Ross (3)  
Walter Travis (3)

a “4” if they felt it did not belong in the top 50 ranking at all. These numbers were then assigned values and computed into an “aver-

age rank” that gave us our list. The panelists were asked to only vote for courses with which they were familiar, and were to avoid ranking courses they had not played or seen first-hand.

The results, revealed in our gatefold on pages 38-39, show that, at least in the Met Area, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Of the top fifteen courses of 1997, fourteen remain in that category, though in a somewhat different alignment. Winged Foot (West) and Shinnecock Hills are again the top two courses – in reverse order. Winged Foot’s rise to the top, by the slightest of margins, can be attributed to the universal acclaim the course received as host to the 2006 U.S. Open, when players and spectators alike were treated to a glimpse of the Winged Foot Tillinghast envisioned, the course that hosted the 1929 U.S. Open. This is due largely to bunker restoration, green enlargement and a tree removal program

## No. 8 Fishers Island



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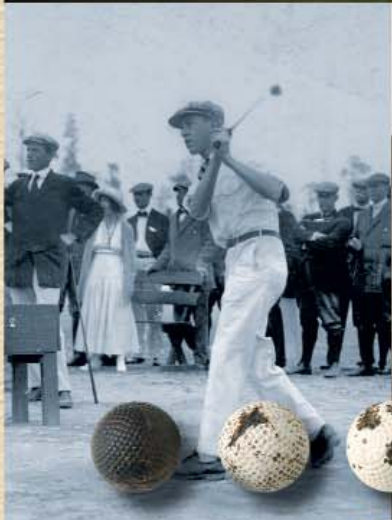
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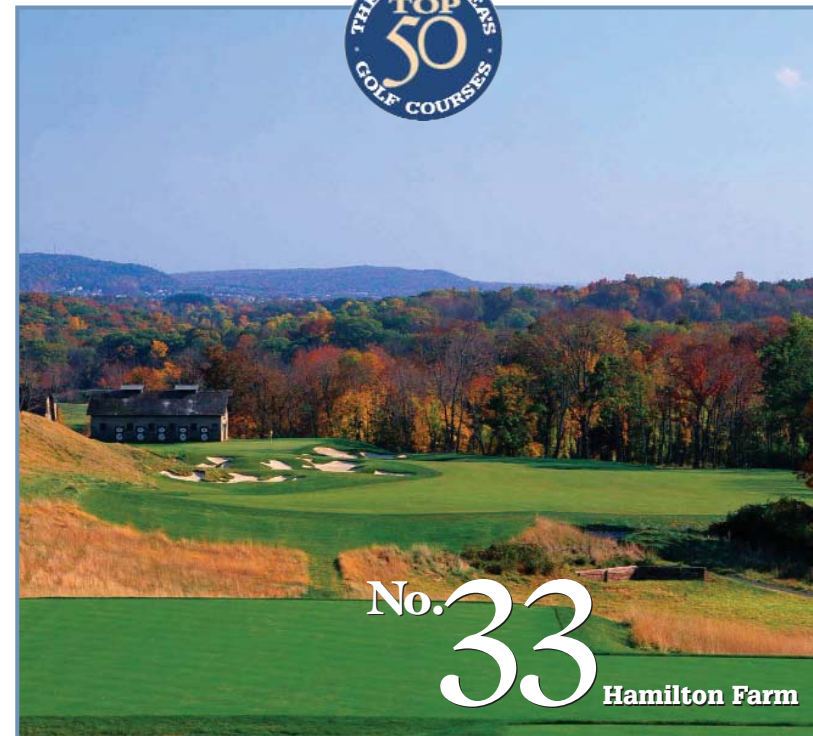
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and a **GOLDEN BEAR.**



No. **33** Hamilton Farm

which were overseen by architect Tom Fazio. More than a thousand trees came down, especially ones that encroached on fairways and greens and blocked sight lines. These did not diminish the course's challenge, as the course is still well-populated by mature, majestic trees. Just ask Phil Mickelson.

Bethpage Black, basking in the continued glow from the 2002 U.S. Open and awaiting the championship's return in 2009, made the strongest move at the top of the list, moving up from fifth to a close third. These three were tightly bunched statistically, and well ahead of their nearest pursuers. Such was Bethpage's superiority in the public realm that not one panelist who had played the course voted for anything else in the Best Public Course category.

Moving into the top ten this time were two coastal courses – Fishers Island and Country Club of Fairfield – built by Seth Raynor. Best liked of the new courses was Friar's Head, a dunes-laden Coore/Crenshaw gem that overlooks Long Island Sound near Riverhead, N.Y., which came in at number 14. Overall, there were seven courses among the first seventeen where a coastal location has a

profound impact, suggesting an emerging preference among Met Area golfers for courses in the style of the ancient seaside links of Scotland and Ireland. Surprising, then, was the absence of Bayonne from our list. Only a handful of panelists had seen Eric Bergstol's creation on the shores of New York Harbor, so we'll have to wait until next time to learn its ultimate destination in our rankings.

Another new course which made a splashy debut on the rankings is Trump National-Bedminster, a Tom Fazio design that rolls and tumbles across the New Jersey horse country.

### Going Public

The rankings reveal a relative scarcity of public-access courses, with only the Black and Red courses at Bethpage State Park earning enough votes to make it into the top 50. However, that doesn't mean the Met Area is lacking in high-quality public venues. Here are the public courses that earned some high marks from our panel, but did not receive enough support to push them into the half-century club:

- |                 |                      |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1. Ballyowen    | 5. Long Island Nat'l |
| 2. Hominy Hill  | 6. Montauk Downs     |
| 3. Grossinger's | 7. Spook Rock        |
| 4. Royce Brook  | 8. Centennial        |



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## National Ranking Comparison

Here's how are the top ten Met Area courses ranked in *Golf Digest* and *Golf Magazine's* most recent listing of the top 100 courses in the U.S. (national ranking in parentheses):

| <i>Golf Digest</i>      | <i>Golf Magazine</i>     |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Shinnecock Hills (3)    | Shinnecock Hills (4)     |
| Winged Foot West (8)    | National Golf Links (11) |
| National Golf Links (9) | Winged Foot West (16)    |
| Fishers Island (16)     | Fishers Island (17)      |
| Bethpage Black (29)     | Bethpage Black (19)      |
| Quaker Ridge (30)       | Baltusrol Lower (25)     |
| Winged Foot East (34)   | Quaker Ridge (35)        |
| Baltusrol Lower (40)    | Winged Foot East (36)    |
| Somerset Hills (42)     | Maidstone (38)           |
| Garden City Golf (46)   | Garden City Golf (39)    |

It was built on the former estate of John DeLorean, and surely will have more staying power than the car bearing his name. Other newcomers include Hamilton Farm and Manhattan Woods, two private clubs that have already established strong pedigrees.

As for the architects, A.W. Tillinghast lost just a touch of the stranglehold he had at the top of the rankings in 1997, when his designs claimed positions two through six. This year, "only" five of the first nine are Tillinghast courses, as Garden City Golf and The National Golf Links of America moved up slightly. But when the entire list of fifty courses is considered, Tillinghast had a challenger – the Macdonald/Raynor/Banks school of golf course design. Tillinghast is represented in the top 50 by 17 courses that he either designed

*Pull open for Top 50 list.* ----->



No. **3**  
Bethpage (Black)



No. **34**  
Metropolis



or to which he made significant contributions; Macdonald/Raynor/Banks courses account for 11. In fact, both contributed holes to Essex County's challenging course, which moved up eight notches to no. 28 this year.

Another interesting tidbit about the rankings is the prevalence of clubs or facilities that had super siblings – meaning they had two of their courses make the top 50 list. These clubs are Winged Foot, Bethpage, Baltusrol and Canoe Brook. If you regularly play at any of

these, you are doubly fortunate.

So how did our panel's collective opinion compare to those employed by such national magazines as *Golf Digest* and *Golf Magazine*? Pretty well (see sidebar, on page 36).

Nine of the ten in each listing appear in *The Met Golfer's* top ten. The difference is the Country Club of Fairfield, ranked by our panel the second best-kept secret in the Met Area (Fishers Island was first), and obviously a well-kept secret nationwide.

### Waiting in the Wings

Since the last top 50 courses ranking appeared in *The Met Golfer* ten years ago, a slew of outstanding new courses have opened in the Met Area. These include three just last year – Sebonack, Liberty National and Bayonne – as well others including The Bridge (right), East Hampton, Laurel Links, Fiddler's Elbow (Forest) and Glen Arbor. While these courses were under consideration for the top 50 and many received high marks, they were not seen by enough of our panelists to qualify for inclusion in the list.







No. 15  
Maidstone

### The Panel

Our Panelists represent a broad cross section of area golfers. MGA Committee and staff were *not* part of the selection process.

**Casey Alexander**, Farmingdale, N.Y.  
**Andy Anello**, Plainview, N.Y.  
**Cheryl Anderson**, Stamford, Conn.  
**Dave Anderson**, Tenafly, N.J.  
**Eric Bergstol**, New City, N.Y.  
**Peter Bisconti**, Scarsdale, N.Y.  
**Jay Blumenfeld**, Parsippany, N.J.  
**Gene Borek**, Hartsdale, N.Y.  
**John Carlone**, Jericho, N.Y.  
**Ken Cohen**, Jeffersonville, N.Y.  
**Jerry Courville Jr.**, Milford, Conn.  
**Missy Crisp**, Fishers Island, N.Y.  
**Jon Doppelt**, Great Neck, N.Y.  
**Jimmy Dunne III**, New York, N.Y.  
**Peter Famiano**, West Orange, N.J.  
**Gail Flanagan**, Rye, N.Y.  
**Bryant Gumbel**, New York, N.Y.  
**Sean Hartman**, Huntington, N.Y.  
**Bobby Heins**, Purchase, N.Y.  
**Russ Helwig**, Essex Fells, N.J.  
**Bob Housen**, Brielle, N.J.  
**Rees Jones**, Montclair, N.J.  
**Stephen Kay**, Egg Harbor, N.J.

**Darrell Kestner**, Manhasset, N.Y.  
**Scott Kmiec**, Piscataway, N.J.  
**Ann Ligouri**, Westhampton, N.Y.  
**Kammy Maxfeldt**, Westport, Conn.  
**Jim McGovern**, Oradell, N.J.  
**Pat Mucci**, Clifton, N.J.  
**Greg Muirhead**, Montclair, N.J.  
**Mark Mulvoy**, Rye, N.Y.  
**Tom Nieporte**, Bayville, N.Y.  
**Scott Niven**, Greenwich, Conn.  
**Tom Nolan**, Ridgewood, N.J.  
**Pat Norton**, Westport, Conn.  
**J.P. O'Hara**, Stamford, Conn.  
**Nancy Paton**, Rye, N.Y.  
**Maury Povich**, New York, N.Y.  
**Greg Rohlfs**, White Plains, N.Y.  
**Joe Sommers**, Stamford, Conn.  
**Chuck Stogel**, White Plains, N.Y.  
**Bob Thomas**, White Plains, N.Y.  
**Donald Trump**, New York, N.Y.  
**Ed Whitman**, Blairstown, N.J.  
**Tom Yellin**, New York, N.Y.  
**Greg Zorilla**, Eastchester, N.Y.

When it comes right down to it, the best-kept secrets show that a top 50 list in the Met Area is almost unfair. After all, these courses could, if they were in just about any other region of the country, form their own top 50 list. They are representative of a much larger pool of terrific golf courses that scored very well but simply fell a bit short of the top 50. These courses included Old Westbury, Glen Oaks and Westhampton on Long Island; Woodway, Round Hill and Rockrimmon in Connecticut; Sunningdale and Siwanoy in Westchester; Crestmont, Upper Montclair and Knickerbocker in New Jersey; and The Concord in the Hudson Valley. Transport these courses away from their more famous neighbors, and they immediately lead the hit parade.

But there is hope for these and other courses that did not crack this edition of the top 50. Courses fall in and out of favor, and newer courses will eventually elbow their way in. In fact, the list includes ten courses built after World War II, eight of which were created in the last twenty years. Maybe things are changing, at least a little. Check in again in another ten years. ■

LEONARD KANISLER

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