And, indeed, great it is. Or so says a panel of experts (players, administrators, media, and others) compiled by the MGA and given the job of creating a “Dream 18,” a fantasy course made up of superb holes from around the Met Area. They had more than 7,000 holes to choose from, in a geographic area covering more than 300 square miles — from the far eastern tip of Long Island to the mountains of western New Jersey, plus Westchester, southern Connecticut, and the lower Hudson Valley. That’s a lot of ground to cover, a lot of holes to consider.

They did their job well, as I can attest having now looked closely and critically at all 18. Because more than simply choosing the region’s best holes, the task was to create the ultimate test of golf, a “course” that would...
be a shining example of greatness — quite simply, as good as it gets.

Which means that my job is to try to answer the inevitable question: What makes a golf hole great? It’s hardly a new topic, likely one you’ve debated in your favorite 19th hole. The only difference here is that I’m taking as evidence only these 18, using them to point us toward some kind of definition of greatness. Putting the heart, if you will, before the course.

Having stuck our tee in the ground at Bayonne, let’s use it as a jumping-off point. More than anything, this hole proves the old first rule of real estate, and now of greatness: location, location, location. It starts on high ground and tumbles down toward New York Harbor, with cacophonous views of city, sail, and industry. Not everyone will think the scene beautiful, but it is an impressive setting no matter how the hole plays. The fact that it plays almost as good as it looks — asking the golfer to negotiate wind coming off the water, find the left side of the fairway to give a clean view of the green, and hit that green, which sits at water level with not much land around it — is more than just icing on the cake.

Other holes on the list also make the most of their location. The ninth at Rockaway Hunting Club — a classic “Cape” hole, wrapping around a body of water and challenging the golfer to play across it — tucks up against Reynolds Channel, a strait coming out of East Rockaway Inlet off the Atlantic. The sixth

Hole by Hole

Par Three

Shinnecock Hills #11
Southampton, New York
William Flynn, 1931
Back tees: 158 yards
Middle tees: 150 yards
Shortest hole on the course, but the player has to judge distance based on elevation, wind, and luck.

Essex County #11
West Orange, New Jersey
A.W. Tillinghast/Seth Raynor/Charles Banks, 1918
Back tees: 198 yards
Middle tees: 185 yards
The green is deceptively higher than the tee, and has a ridge through its middle which funnels the ball toward the hole if used properly, or well away if not. There are bunkers on both sides and behind the green.

Winged Foot (West) #10
Mamaroneck, New York
A.W. Tillinghast, 1923
Back tees: 190 yards
Middle tees: 179 yards
Tillinghast called this hole, “the Pulpit,” the best par three he ever built. Three bunkers are in plain sight: the one short and left can affect distance judgment, and all three are deep.
Bayonne No. 16
COURTESY OF BAYONNE GOLF CLUB

Center, the 11th at Quaker Ridge, the 17th at Stavung, and especially the very long 17th at Baltusrol’s Lower Course, where a new back tee — 650 yards from the green! — brings yet another chute of trees into play when a major championship comes to town.

Length often figures in great holes. But that doesn’t just mean long; it means making the most of the distance. While it’s rare for the members to hit Baltusrol’s penultimate hole in two at a “mere” 543 yards from the middle tees, what they really have to think about is launching the drive far enough to set up a second shot that will clear the “Sahara Desert,” a line of cross-bunkers, and then judge the distance properly on the third to find a green that is well above the fairway, out of view, and protected by still more sand.

Both the 12th at Plainfield and the 17th at Stamnich are par fives that make you think before you hit, as simply trying to bust a long drive is neither good enough nor very smart. Both tee shots need to be properly placed to set up a precisely struck second shot that will finish on the correct side of the fairway to approach the green. Before the hole at Stanwich was stretched to 586 yards from the gold tees and more than 600 from the tips, there was a chance to go for it in two. At Plainfield, that is still the case, however, if one gets to thinking about an overly aggressive play on either of the holes, it’s wise to remember that the putting surfaces are small, sloped, and angled so as to accept nothing less than 100 percent contact.

Distance is perhaps most important on this course when facing the par threes. Or more accurately, distance control. At Shinnecock Hills, the dauntingly wonderful 13th has named a “Dream 18.” However, when the idea first took flight — 25 years ago, in 1982 — flight actually was part of the program. Here, as recorded in the August 1982 edition of MGA Golfing News, a newsletter that was the precursor to The Met Golfer, is what happened:

“On June 2, 1982, a unique foursome composed of touring pro Ben Crenshaw, Golf Magazine Editor George Peper; MGA President Joe Donahue; and MGA Executive Director Jay Mottola played what has been called the craziest round of golf ever. The group, with an air of a helicopter and some quick getaway cars, played 18 holes of golf at 18 different golf courses around the Met Area in one day. The group began at 6:00 a.m. from Shinnecock Hills and finished some 13 hours later on Baltusrol’s fourth hole.

“Looking back, Peper, who retired from Golf Magazine in 2002, recalled the wild ride.

“We had it calibrated down to the minute and calculated that if all went well we could make it from the 14th at Shinnecock to the fourth at Baltusrol with at least an hour of daylight to spare. Then, on the appointed morning, a bank of fog rolled into eastern Long Island — meaning no helicopter and we couldn’t take off.

“Finally, after more than an hour, everything cleared. Joe Donahue actually outplayed Ben on the Long Island holes, but then Ben one-putted seven straight holes in three different states. “I remember feeling sick on the chopper; and hoping I wouldn’t vomit on Crenshaw. But all went smoothly, and when we putted out at Baltusrol there was even time to do an interview for one of the local network TV stations. “My proudest moment was the next morning when I opened the New York Times and saw a five-column story on our adventure, including a cartoon of the four of us.”

There were four holes from the original list that made it again. Here is the original “Dream 18” in the order it was played. To all 32 clubs (and holes), our congratulations and thanks. — J.A.F.

The fabulous foursome just before they took flight in 1982.

The Dream 18 1982

Course Hole Par
Shinnecock Hills 18 4
National 14 5
Inwood 4 3
Woodmere 16 3
Garden City GC 18 4
Meadowbrook 8 5
Stanwich 15 6
Westchester 13 4
Knollwood 18 4
Metropoli*s 6 4
Quaker Ridge 4 4
Winged Foot (West) 17 4
Ridgewood (West) 9 4
Upper Montclair 5 3 4
Fiddlers Elbow (Bl) 9 5
Somerset Hills 12 3
Plainfield* 12 5
Baltusrol (Lower) 4 3

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from the tee. Though it looks like a relatively benign par three on the scorecard, Lee Trevino once quipped, “It’s the easiest par five you’ll ever play.” The tee shot at Essex County’s 11th is struck with a long iron (or, nowadays, a hybrid) and must carry a vast chasm to a green that is higher than it appears from the tee; again, many misses are short and trickle down the long, sloping false front into sand, water, or a position requiring a long chip back up the hill.

The other two par threes are among the world’s finest largely because they demand mastery of distance. The 10th on Winged Foot’s West Course hides nothing from the golfer, positioning its hazards — notably one bunker below the green and two on its flanks — in plain sight. But they also make the green seem closer than it is, and the front of the green slopes more than it looks, so many second shots are played from well short of the surface, and sometimes from sand.

As for number four at National, this “Redan” hole is a small piece of perfection. Based on the Redan 15 at North Berwick in Scotland, most consider the copy superior to the original because of how the green

**Only one architect has more than one hole on our list, and that man was involved in eight of them. That says something about the Met Area, but a lot about Albert Warren Tillinghast (1874–1942). Born to wealth in Philadelphia and spoiled rotten (the nickname “Tillie the Terror” followed him from childhood), he tried a number of other professions — including artist, photographer, musician, writer, and antiques dealer — before finding his true calling as a golf course architect.

Tillinghast took his first golf lesson as a teenager in St. Andrews, Scotland, and his teacher was none other than Old Tom Morris. A good player, he competed in three U.S. Amateurs and finished 25th in the 1910 U.S. Open, held at his hometown Philadelphia Cricket Club. He also is credited for coming up with the term “birdie.”

His first attempt at course design was for the resort at Shawnee-on-the-Delaware, Pennsylvania, which opened in 1917. From that beginning, his résumé includes San Francisco Golf Club, Baltimore (Five Farms), Brook Hollow and, in our area, Somerset Hills, Fenway, and the ones on this list — Baltusrol (Upper as well as Lower), Ridgewood, Bethpage (Blue, Red, and Black), and Winged Foot. Plus he was instrumental in redesigning Essex County, Metropoli, Quaker Ridge, and Rockaway Hunting Club.

Once he began succeeding as an architect, Tillinghast moved to the Met Area, living in Harrington Park, New Jersey, and maintaining an office in midtown Manhattan. That might have something to do with the preponderance of his holes on our list, but he worked around the country until the Depression hit. But even then, he tried to keep busy, designing the courses at Bethpage State Park as part of a Work Relief program.

A few qualities are evident in all the Tillinghast holes on our list. He was a believer in strategy, making the golfer think his way around. He used the natural flow of the land and put a premium on getting to the green. Holes such as the 10th at Winged Foot, the sixth on Ridgewood Center, and the 11th at Quaker Ridge are proof of his oft-quoted maxim that “a controlled shot to a closely guarded green is the surest test of a man’s golf.”

Another Tillinghast quote could sum up this entire Dream 18 project: “A round of golf should provide 18 inspirations.” — J.A.E.

**“Length doesn’t just mean long; it means making the most of the distance.”**

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Tillie the Terrific

*Length doesn’t just mean long; it means making the most of the distance.*
angles sharply away from the tee, and the use of a mound short and right to shield the putting surface from view. How one plays the hole must be governed by how one plays the game, with only the best golfers firing at the flagstick; everyone else should aim to the right (the higher the handicap, the farther right the aim), using the big mound — which is much farther off the green than it appears — to direct the ball to the target. A bunker well below the left side of the green catches many a shot aimed too boldly.

So something else to remember about these great holes. What you see is not always what you get.

The best architects use changes in elevation to fool the player, making a hole look longer or shorter, hiding trouble, or just messing with our minds. The par-five fourth on Bethpage Black rises in three steps from tee to green, and with each rise comes another vastness of sand to cross. Ultimately, the shot to the green (probably the third) will be aimed at flag and sky, as the putting surface becomes harder to see as you get closer to it. Unless, of course, the hole is being played the way designer A.W. Tillinghast intended, hitting to the right and leaving a chip back from nearly level ground. So although modern equipment has made taking aim at the green a viable option for more players (even if you aren’t Tiger Woods, who was on in two with driver/6 iron in the 2002 U.S. Open), it’s a testament to this hole’s enduring qualities that it puts up a good fight no matter how it is attacked.

In the days before designers had bulldozers and steam shovels to push earth around, they employed horse-drawn dirt scrapers to give holes shape and direction. Adding a little bend to a fairway can dramatically alter how a hole is played, and the capacity of the golfer to play it properly. That usually means aiming to a particular side of the fairway if he hopes to get to the green, which is usually back across the fairway to the other side.

On the 17th hole at Westchester’s West course (played as the eighth hole during The Barclays), the drive should be close to the left side for the shortest approach to the green, but a large rock outcropping and angles sharply away from the tee, and the use of a mound short and right to shield the putting surface from view. How one plays the hole must be governed by how one plays the game, with only the best golfers firing at the flagstick; everyone else should aim to the right (the higher the handicap, the farther right the aim), using the big mound — which is much farther off the green than it appears — to direct the ball to the target. A bunker well below the left side of the green catches many a shot aimed too boldly.

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and tilting a landing area almost always means there’s trouble to be found if the next shot follows the direction of the tilt. The fairway of the third at Trump National-Westchester falls from right to left, so it should be no surprise that water lines the left side of the hole (but over-correct off the slope and there’s a steep bunker as well as a patch of long grass short and right of the green). The sixth green at Metropolis might be big, but it’s still a tough task to hit from the sharp angles of the fairway.

The fairways on this Dream 18 almost all share another characteristic: slope. It’s nearly impossible to find a level lie on the par fours, going well right can bring dunes, trees, scrub, and even the beach into play.

The tilting fairway lines make it hard to hit the long, undulating green, which is guarded short right by a deep, humped bunker and a grassy bowl, and on the left by water.
many one side to the other, some are crowned so they run off on all sides, with all the movement dictated by the expected nature of the approaches. The 12th at Plainfield features a typical Donald Ross green, small and steeply banked, with a ridge dividing its rear portion; the 17th at Stanwich actually had some of its slope removed in a recent renovation, but it’s still about as level as a skateboard track, with a ridge that separates back from front. Walter Travis fashioned a pitched green at Westchester, as did Tillinghast at Quaker’s 11th and the Parks at Maidstone’s ninth. But it isn’t only the old-timers tilting the tables: Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore put most of the trouble on and around their green on the 13th at Friar’s Head (which, although it’s a par four, is likely reached on the third shot by many players), and the same goes for Jack Nicklaus and Tom Doak at Sebonack’s 11th and Jim Fazio on Trump-Westchester’s third.

And when a green slopes, look for water, sand, and false fronts placed so as to turn a small mistake into a big headache.

Beauty, length, distance control, elevation, slope. With those covered, we now throw in history (four of these holes have hosted majors), reputation, timing (where in the round a hole falls), memorability, and, for good measure, good old-fashioned difficulty. Every hole described has used at least one of these features, and usually more than one. So just about now it should be obvious what the true test of greatness is: It makes you think, and on every shot. That’s called strategy, and if greatness has a common denominator, that’s my nomination.

Or look at it this way: How hard is the hole fighting back, resisting our attacks? If it makes us hit a damned-near-perfect shot with every swing, that’s great… and greatness.

James A. Frank, former editor of GOLF Magazine and Golf Connoisseur, is based in New York City.