

The Master Builder

C.B. Macdonald's legacy of creating memorable and enduring courses lives on in the Met Area

BY TOM CLAVIN

In the clubhouse at the National Golf Links of America in Southampton, N.Y., a bust and a portrait of Charles Blair Macdonald gaze across the library at each other. How fitting, because through eternity this is probably what he wanted most to see. There would have been American golf and American golf course architecture without Macdonald (though it was C.B. himself who coined the phrase “golf architecture,” in 1910), but very likely it would not be what we know it as today. The powerful man with a fairway-size ego was inducted last November into the World Golf Hall of Fame and certainly left his stamp on the golf landscape in the U.S., particularly in the Met Area, where most of his great designs were created and constructed.

“At the time when the game was being introduced to Americans, were it not for Macdonald and his passion for the game and his strong opinions, golf in the U.S. could have gone in any direction,” said Rand Jerris, a historian and the museum director of the United States Golf Association.

It is a misconception that Macdonald was a Scot who emigrated to the U.S. He was actually born in 1855 in Niagara Falls, Canada. His father hailed from Scotland; his mother was Canadian and part Mohawk Indian. He grew



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A 2007 course redesign at Sleepy Hollow included the return of the horseshoe bunker at No. 16 (above), to match Macdonald's original design in 1912 (inset).

up in Chicago, and at 16 he was sent by his parents to study at St. Andrews University in Scotland. He was not immune to the charms of the game there, and in fact became very enthusiastic about it after forming friendships with Old Tom Morris and Young Tom Morris. When Macdonald came back to America in 1874, he was a golf preacher looking for a congregation, though he had to bide his time. He became a successful stockbroker and plied that trade for 17 years, a period he referred to as the "dark ages."

Macdonald initially earned his golf spurs here by being the first U.S. Amateur champion. How he arrived at that was a tad rocky, but the road did lead to the formation of the USGA. In 1894, Newport Country Club in Rhode Island and the Saint Andrew's Golf Club in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., held their own "national championships." Macdonald finished second in both, but lamented the tournaments' dual existence.

"Of course there was ego involved, but it wasn't sour grapes that prompted Macdonald to call for a true championship," said Jerris. "His thinking was that a national championship should be overseen by an objective,

independent body rather than one club, or having several clubs crown their own national champions. He was very vocal in campaigning for the U.S. Golf Association."

The USGA was formed that fall, and Macdonald was appointed vice-president. He added an exclamation point to his efforts in 1895 by not only winning the inaugural U.S. Amateur but doing so with a 12 & 11 thrashing of his opponent, which remains the record winning margin. He was a member of the USGA's first Rules Committee, and he stayed on that committee for 20 years. To this day, Macdonald's fingerprints are found all over the game we play.

In the 1890s, the first of what we now call "classic courses" were being built, and Macdonald wanted to be in on the action. Macdonald's first design was for Chicago Golf Club. The nine holes in 1892 comprised the first golf course west of the Allegheny Mountains. The following year he added nine more, creating the first 18-hole course in the U.S.

It was in the early part of the next century that Macdonald had a profound impact, especially in the Met Area. With engineer Seth Raynor, he created what is considered his

Macdonald's Greatest Hits

The work of C.B. Macdonald was not as prolific as other architects, but it is renowned for its architectural innovation. Here are his finest course designs:

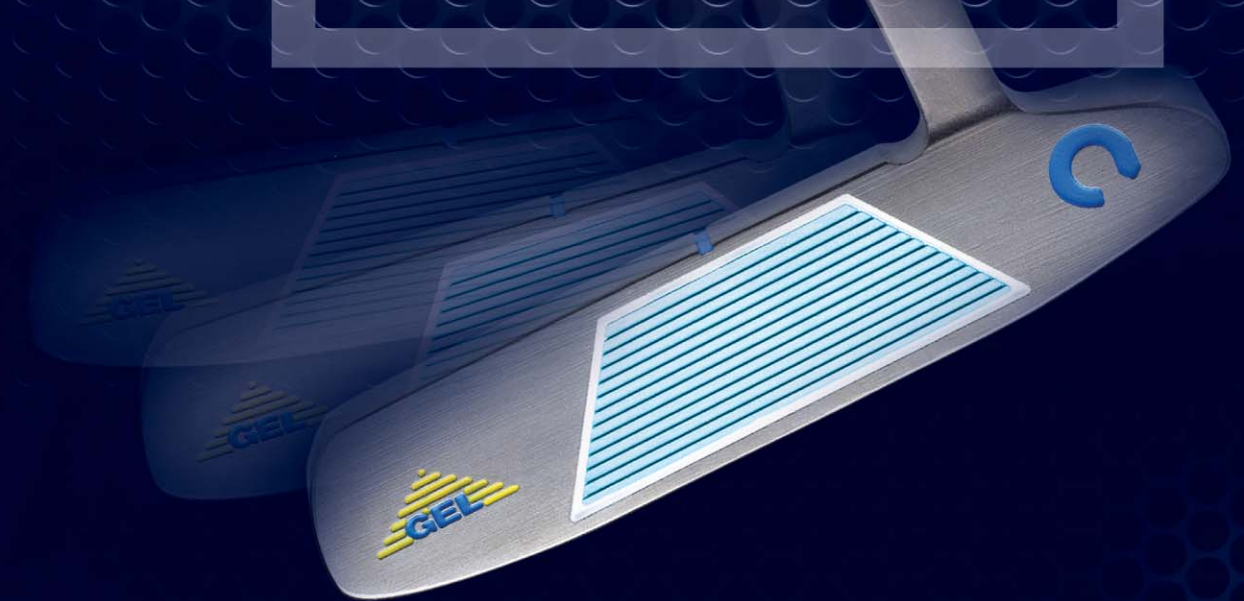
- National Golf Links of America, Southampton, N.Y.
- Piping Rock, Locust Valley, N.Y.
- The Creek Club, Locust Valley, N.Y.
- Sleepy Hollow Country Club, Sleepy Hollow, N.Y.
- Lido Golf Club, Long Beach, N.Y.*

- Yale University Golf Course, New Haven, Conn.
- Mid-Ocean Club, Bermuda
- Old White Course at The Greenbrier, White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia
- Chicago Golf Club, Wheaton, Illinois
- St. Louis Country Club, St. Louis, Missouri

*Original course no longer exists.



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The front gates at National bear the name of the father of golf course architecture, who lived close to the club for much of his adult life.

crown jewel, National Golf Links of America, in 1911. It hosted the inaugural Walker Cup in 1922 but has otherwise remained very private, content to reside in the shadow of its neighbor, Shinnecock Hills.

“He brought the British links style and the character of golf holes to America. Before Macdonald, golf design, such as it was, was pretty rudimentary,” says acclaimed architect Rees Jones. “Macdonald really brought a style here that was emulated by others. He inspired and influenced the first full generation of golf architects in this country.”

Macdonald’s next triumph was in 1915 when he took a marsh-filled stretch of ocean-front property on the south shore of Long Island and, after back-breaking dredging and filling operations, built Lido Golf Club. Two other highly regarded Long Island courses of his creation are Piping Rock (1913)

and the Creek Club (1925). He may have advised Raynor when the latter built Fishers Island Golf Club in 1925, and some believe he unofficially helped design the original Montauk Downs course in 1927.

Also considered a triumph — albeit a slightly accidental one — was the Yale University course in New Haven, Conn. He was shown 500 acres, given \$475,000, and asked to create 36 holes. On paper, he did. However, after 18 holes he ran out of dynamite and, with the money he had left, went back to work on what had already been constructed. Instead of 36 holes, the club received bunkers that were 30 feet deep and greens as large as 10,000 square feet. Opened in 1926, it was his last great work.

“You have to play his courses several times to really know how to play them,” said Jones. “When I played on the team at Yale, we had a big home-course advantage, especially on the blind holes. We rarely lost a match. Macdonald has certainly stood the test of time as far as shot options, steep slopes, and deep bunkers. It is a lot of fun to play a Macdonald course.”

Macdonald also championed golf and course design through writing. His *Scotland’s Gift: Golf Reminiscences 1872-1927* was published in 1928, and a revised edition was titled *Scotland’s Gift: How America Discovered Golf*. Both books extol the art of the proper routing of a golf course and the shaping of holes.

He entered his 70s living in his house across Bull’s Head Bay from National Golf Links — close enough to gaze upon the statue of himself which he had commissioned! Until his death in 1939, Macdonald tinkered with the course in an attempt to achieve perfection. He has been called the “father of American golf architecture” even though he is credited with less than two dozen courses. But the ones he designed had a profound impact on the next generation of architects. And through his stellar play and lasting accomplishments, Macdonald helped make America a “golf nation.”

“The game needed a strong individual in the early 1900s,” Jerris said. “He was dealing with wealthy, influential people at the early USGA clubs, and a strong personality was needed to bring them together for the common good of American golf. That is the pivotal leadership role Macdonald played. Were it not for Macdonald, his passion for the game and his strong opinions, golf in the U.S. could have gone in any direction.” ■

Tom Clavin is a frequent contributor to *The Met Golfer*. He writes from Southampton, N.Y.



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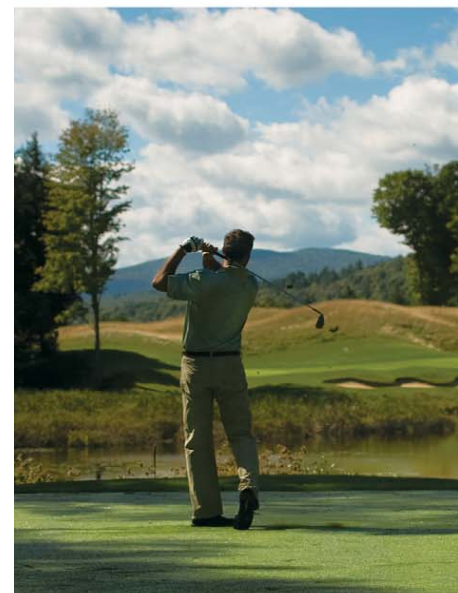
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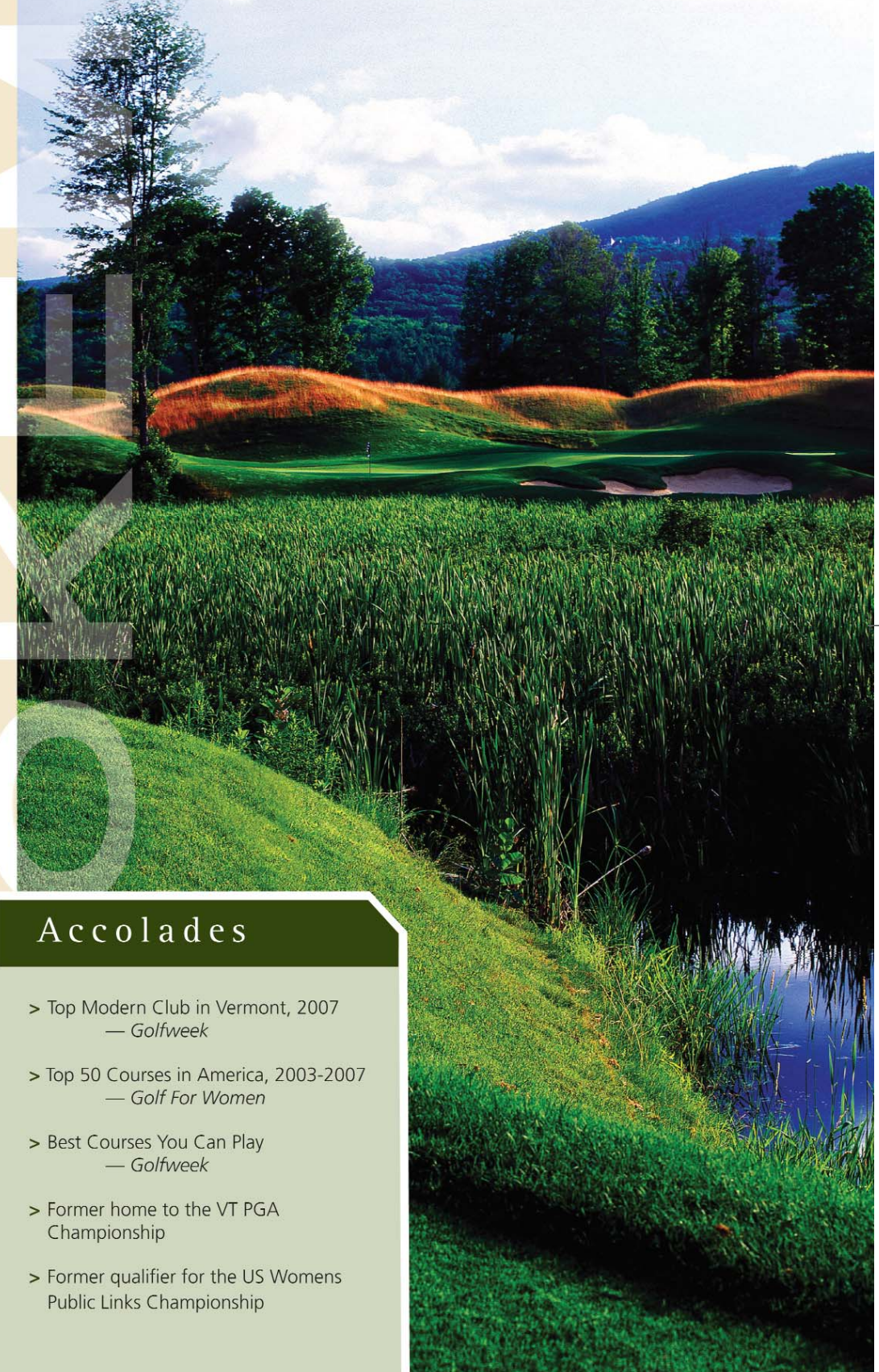
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