

Treasure ON THE Hudson

Sleepy Hollow turns 100 this year, and its revamped course is primed and ready to host the Met Open **BY DAVID GOULD**

PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM KRAJICEK

A golfer with the late lead in this year's Met Open Championship will arrive at Sleepy Hollow Country Club's 16th hole and study yet again the retro features of this magnificently perched par three. Beyond the moat-style bunkering will lie "some of the goodliest scenes of the mighty Hudson," as Washington Irving wrote in his iconic 1819 murder mystery, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Framing the tee shot is a backdrop that looked to Irving's eye like "the deep blue of the mid-heaven."

A century after its founding, Sleepy Hollow plays host for the first time to the Met Area's premier golf event, the Met Open, August 23-25; if you're free that week, you might figure on heading to Scarborough, N.Y., to take it all in. Or at least take in what you can—a few days' visit can only reveal the club's grandeur in glimpses. You will feel what visitors to Sleepy Hollow have always felt—welcomed, by a membership and staff who are proud to share the pleasures of their singular site. From its chateau clubhouse to its footbridge rails built of windfall tree limbs, century-old "Sleepy" presents a blend of opulence and modesty, competitive intensity and studied nonchalance.

It's odd that the look of the club's campus and the layout of its buildings so strongly recall a period in which children were seen but not heard, because passing through the club's stone-columned entrances these days are entire families. Even before it became a tactic for private clubs to attract Baby Boomer and Generation X members, the family element was strong at Sleepy Hollow.

Five-time club champion and 2011 MGA Senior Amateur champion John Ervasti, bred in Ontario, found this club to be "a place your family life could revolve around." In his 2007 club championship run, Ervasti had to get past his high school-age son, Jack, now a member of the Williams College varsity golf team. "I had to play my own dad for the club championship when I was growing up



The view up the 18th hole at Sleepy Hollow is crowned by the majestic clubhouse, a landmark whose gracious interior (right) is as much a part of the club experience as the golf course.

Sleepy Hollow's stables have been in regular use for nearly a century. Below: William Henry Vanderbilt commissioned the mansion that became the Sleepy Hollow clubhouse, designed by famed architect Stanford White (bottom).



back in Canada," the elder Ervasti points out. "That's just golf; it connects the generations." Ervasti, by virtue of his MGA Senior Open win last year, will be part of the Sleepy Hollow contingent competing in the Met Open.

Arriving to watch the tournament, a visitor could disregard that looming, Neo-Renaissance clubhouse with its sumptuously appointed interiors and skip past the silent-newsreel prominence of Sleepy Hollow's founders (Astor, Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, et al.). But why would they want to?

The eight children of William Henry Vanderbilt (deemed America's richest citizen when he died in 1885) conveyed their status through the commissioning of great estates, "Woodlea" being one of them. That was the title given by Margaret Vanderbilt and her husband to the present-day Sleepy Hollow clubhouse, which is an architectural sibling to residential landmarks that are still visited daily by a curious public. They include the Biltmore Estate in North Carolina (built by Margaret's brother George), the Vanderbilt mansion at Hyde Park (her brother Frederick), and "The Breakers" and "Marble House," in Newport, Rhode Island, built by William K. and Cornelius II, also Margaret's brothers. To admire the coffered ceilings, leaded windows and hand-fluted oak trim inside the former Woodlea, you'll need an invitation for golf, tennis, a swim or a day on horseback from a Sleepy Hollow member.

Few fine country clubs anywhere have McKim, Mead and White classics for their clubhouse, and even fewer have an equestrian tradition or facility like the one tucked in these uplands. The Sleepy Hollow Stables were always a point of pride for the club, but a nearly completed renovation—along with the recruitment of a Grand Prix

training staff—has yielded a club amenity equal to just about any in the entire region. The instruction program alone is formidable, and if you own your own mount, a 45-stall boarding stable is right there on property, with grass paddocks and full grooming service as a bonus.

As impressive as the equestrian facilities are, other diversions await. Skeet shooting, tennis, swimming, a workout facility, and fine dining are why Sleepy Hollow often feels like a resort that you'd never want to leave.

And then there is the golf course, which is both manicured and untamed, both attackable and well-defended, both a Macdonald-Raynor and—far less so—a Tillinghast design. The two holes you can see from the clubhouse—Nos. 1 and 18 of the championship course—have a well-upholstered, handsome look (Tillinghast). But don't judge this book by those covers. The rest of the layout, newly restored, cavorts through mighty, muscular upland where igneous rock formations bulge menacingly through turfgrass and swift brooks cleave the terrain.

Sleepy Hollow has been the host of a number of regional and national events, including three Met Amateurs (1944, '65, and '83), the 2002 U.S. Women's Amateur, and from 1986 to 1993, the Senior Tour's Legends of Golf event. But the 2011 Met Open will be the first at the club, and will serve as the "coming out" for the new golf course.

Defending Met Open champion Bob Rittberger is the head professional at Garden City Golf Club, and won his title at Bethpage Black. Both are on Long Island, the place to go in this area for a look at the greensite theatrics and greatest-hits design scheme of Charles Blair Macdonald and his protégé, Seth Raynor.



COURTESY SLEEPY HOLLOW

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INSIGHT THAT MATTERS

The General of the Caddie Corps

On hand to provide “institutional memory” at Sleepy Hollow and set you up with a caddie is Joe Barreiro (*below, with some of his charges*), who first worked at the club as a youth in the 1960s and became caddie master in 1973. Now officially the golf services manager—“they gave me a jazzed-up title,” says Barreiro—he is one of those people who helped in some way to keep golf a walking game during the late-20th century invasion of the golf carts. Sleepy Hollow’s deep roots in early American golf have kept its traditions flowing like the Hudson tides below, according to Barreiro.



“The basic feeling of the club hasn’t changed at all,” he says, even if the clientele has. “In my earlier time here we were more of a weekend club, and the membership was older. In the last 15 years or so we became much more a family club.”

Barreiro gets high praise from the members for his polished skills and intimate knowledge of the how the club runs, but in turn he praises the people in charge. “The membership committees have done a great job getting

people who fit the Sleepy Hollow character,” says Barreiro. “It’s a rare mix of someone with [the resources] to join but who doesn’t put on airs.”

The training of caddies is more meticulous than in prior eras, and it’s a task Barreiro takes seriously. He rates green-reading as the skill that separates the good from the very good. “When it comes to reading break and speed of a putt, I’ll put my guys against any caddies in the Met Area,” he affirms. “That was evident during the years when the Senior PGA Tour guys would compete here.

“My guys got some of those bags, and I have to say they were so superior to the tour caddies.” He is either being loyal or accurate with that statement—so, just how was it his own corps gave so much better reads? “No matter who you are, you’ve got to know where the river is,” Barreiro explains. “The mighty Hudson is a factor in just about any putt.” —D.G.

hole and the intriguing, upslope 15th, which are patterned after British archetypes in the C.B-and-Seth manner. No. 7 is a “reverse” Redan hole (tee shot avoids a central bunker by kicking off a sidehill) and No. 15 is a classic Punchbowl design (green hidden in a deep, rounded hollow that collects slightly wayward approaches).

In the Macdonald-Raynor songbook, a Short Hole is what you would call the 155-yard 16th. Other standards, like the Biarritz, the Eden and the Cape, are not in evidence. That said, we know that several Macdonald-Raynor holes on this 338-acre site were plowed under, and one might readily imagine the ghosts of those hole styles tucked somewhere on the landscape. Not quite as eerie as a Headless Horseman pursuing a terrified schoolmaster by moonlight—as the Irving tale relates—but disturbing nonetheless to course-design aficionados.

One such enthusiast, George Bahto, began casually researching Macdonald-Raynor architecture years ago and evolved into a published expert on the subject. Bahto closely assisted golf architect and restoration specialist Gil Hanse in his 2006–07 rediscovery of Sleepy Hollow’s original spirit. They resolved the split-personality dilemma by declaring, with the club’s assent, that this was not an assignment into which Tillinghast poured his creative powers. Poured is the operative word, according to Hanse.

“With Tillinghast,” he explains, “the outcome of his work came down to whether he was drinking at the time. If he was, the result would be complex and imaginative course design. At the time Tillie worked on Sleepy Hollow he must have been on the wagon.” The decision was made to emphasize the Macdonald-Raynor aspects of the course.

Lots of venerable Met Area clubs have undergone restorations. Few if any have been forced to comb through their archives in such a clear-eyed, unsentimental way, so as to untangle the historical threads. Sleepy Hollow’s own website acknowledges that the golf course had “lost its soul” and become “lifeless.” This was partly

Think Piping Rock, The Creek, and The National Golf Links, primarily. At Sleepy Hollow, the Macdonald-Raynor imprint was first applied in 1911, but just two decades ensued before sizable changes came about, with A.W. Tillinghast the central figure in the makeover. When the dust settled, the golf property was expanded to 27 holes and four of the original 18 holes were sold off.

Met Open contestants who are fans of Macdonald-Raynor will feel a particular tingle not just at 16, but on the downhill par-three seventh

Below; the famed 16th hole in the 1920s, 1980s, and today, following a restoration that brought back many of the original design elements.



LEFT: COURTESY OF SLEEPY HOLLOW; MET GOLFER ARCHIVES; JIM KRAJCEK; ABOVE: JOHN DETEMPLE

through natural evolution of the site, but partly through a 1990s renovation program not in keeping with the original bones of the design. In the end, lacking photography of the original course, and not inclined to change the routing, the club asked Hanse to redo ground features in the Macdonald-Raynor style, and to extend it by several hundred yards while cutting back the treelines.

Hanse brought the chainsaws out in force, especially along the plateau of acreage containing the fourth through 15th holes. This was much to the relief of golf superintendent Tom Lahey, whose wizardry could not have carried Sleepy Hollow much farther if additional sunlight and air movement weren’t provided along that stretch. Trees are a protected species at most clubs, such that they often overwhelm.

When the course reopened following the restoration, members found to their shock how much the vistas had reopened, too. Caddie master Joe Barreiro [*see sidebar, opposite page*] was an immediate fan of the changes, in part because encroaching forests had led to more ball-search delays than this walking membership’s fast-play DNA could abide. Bear in mind that noted speed-golfer George Peper, at a point during his long tenure as editor-in-chief of *GOLF Magazine*, headed up the club’s golf committee and used that pulpit to preach a relentlessly swift pace of play.

For the subject of tree removal to receive so much buzz at Sleepy may have sparked ironic thoughts of Jim Hand, one of the club’s most renowned members and the man behind one of the most famous trees in all of golf. Hand was a Sleepy Hollow club champion and MGA Executive Committee member who became USGA president in 1984. When the U.S. Open was contested at the Inverness Club in 1979, Hand was chairman of the USGA’s Competition Committee. That year saw tour pro Lon Hinkle take a shortcut down an Inverness fairway that paralleled the par-five hole (No. 8) he was playing. Hinkle’s drive through a modest gap in the treeline cut off enough yardage to make birdie a relatively easy feat for him. Apprised of these hijinks, Hand ordered the gap to be filled immediately by a 20-foot spruce forever since known as the Hinkle Tree.

Integrity at all costs, is the approximate theme of that tale. If it created a latter-day legend we can link with Sleepy Hollow, that makes sense. And with the club hosting the Met Open for the first time, a new legend is ready to be created. ■

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