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Two Granite State events highlight differences in golf course design

By WAYNE MILLS

Putting Around

The two major golf events on the competitive calendar in New Hampshire this season – the New Hampshire State Amateur, that starts tomorrow, and the United States Junior Amateur the following week – are being contested on golf courses from completely different eras.

The New Hampshire Am will be at Concord Country Club and the U.S. Junior Am will be at Golf Club of New England in Stratham, and although the golf courses each have 18 tees and 18 greens they couldn't be more different.

Concord Country Club was a Depression-era club that opened its first nine holes in 1930 high on the hill overlooking the city of Concord and the state capital building.

The course architect for the original nine was New Hampshire native Ralph Barton who came to golf design rather late in life. Born in Newport, he attended Phillips Exeter Academy and then Dartmouth College. Barton pursued a career in academia teaching mathematics that led him to the University of Minnesota where he became in charge of the schools Seth Raynor designed golf course.

He became so enamored with golf course architecture, he quit teaching math and went to work under Raynor and C. B. Macdonald building the Yale Golf Course in New Haven, Conn. In 1923 he started his own design practice based in New Hampshire.

Although not as well known as other New England architects such as Donald Ross, Wayne Styles or Geoffrey Cornish, Barton designed some fine courses in New Hampshire that have stood the test of time such as Hanover Country Club, North Conway Country Club, Newport Country Club and Laconia Country Club, as well as Concord.

In the history of golf course design and construction there are two basic eras – those courses built before the advent of large earth moving machines such as steam shovels and bulldozers and those built after their introduction after World War II.

Prior to the use of heavy machinery the golf course architect had to use the existing land forms on the site to determine fairways. Tees and greens were constructed using horse drawn scrape pans to gather soils and shaped by hand with graders and shovels. Fairways were and are just the way they were found and that is why old golf courses have these wonderful and quirky shapes that cause tee shots to often bounce on random ways. Concord Country Club has many such characteristics.

An additional nine holes were added to Concord in the mid 70s by a couple of members who happened to be in the heavy construction business and Geoffrey Cornish was brought in during the late 80s to refine many of the holes.

Cornish toughened up many holes with additional bunkers and some new tees. As he told Charley Blossom, a member since 1965, “You don’t design a golf course for those who can’t play. You start building it for the scratch golfer and work it back from there.”

Derry-based architect Ross Forbes has been working on Concord the past few years helping with some fairway and drainage work.

Concord may be old and rather short from the back tees at only 6,539 yards but it will still be a good test for the state’s best amateurs.

On the other hand, the only limitations to modern golf course design are the architect’s imagination and the size of his budget. Basically if the designer can envision it, it can be built to match his eye.

The Golf Club of New England is the epitome of the modern golf course. Envisioned as a high-end, private club – the brainchild of former New Hampshire Governor Craig Benson – it opened in 2003.

The course was designed by the Arnold Palmer Design Company, which also built the TPC Boston in Norton, Mass., home of the PGA Tour’s Deutsche Bank Championship.

Now Arnold Palmer is about as decent and honest a man as you will find in golf, but the truth of the matter is that he normally has little to do with the actual design work at his firm and a lot to do with the promotional efforts.

However, Palmer does attract very talented employees and the Golf Club of New England is a gem of a design. Built on a lightly rolling old farm site of 450 acres the course very much follows the lay of the land and in the style typical of Palmer Design is quite straight forward and right in front of you.

Like many other sites in New England, GCNE has tall pines and oaks, boulders, sand and wetlands. The wetlands are incorporated in the design and come into play on many holes and will be a distinct challenge for the U.S. Junior Am competitors.

GCNE is set up to play tough for this national championship. The age 17 and under juniors will play at almost 7,200 yards and there a couple holes that require tee shots to carry over 240 yards. There will be several par 4s playing around 480 yards. Combine that with fairways that have no intermediate cut – you're either in the fairway or in the rough and this will be a very challenging week for the 156 junior golfers from around the world who descend on New Hampshire July 16-21.

The Golf Club of New England will be ready for them. If the boys are ready to take on a golf course with a 149 slope rating and greens reading 12 on the Stimpmeter remains to be seen.

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