



Good Neighbor

Laurel Links Country Club is steadily making a name for itself on Long Island's storied East End

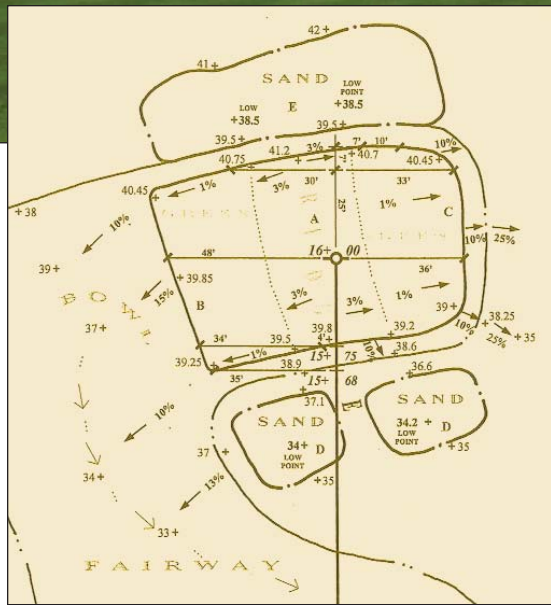
BY GREG MIDLAND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM KRAJICEK

The principals behind the creation of Laurel Links Country Club could have taken the easy way out. When a large-scale real estate and golf development on former potato fields in the North Fork hamlet of Laurel, N.Y., just outside Riverhead, was proposed in 1999 and later rejected by the town, they could have walked away. They could have gone back to their weekend homes and memberships at other East End clubs and said, 'Hey, we tried.'

Instead, they continued to pursue their dream of building a member-owned course in one of the most golf-rich environments anywhere. Eight years after opening, Laurel Links has firmly established an identity — challenging course, family atmosphere, friendly people — which is no small feat in a part of the Met Area where there seems to be a famous course around every turn in the road.

Kevin Crowe, who served as the club's first president, recalls that the more golf-savvy members of the development team took control after the rejection of the larger real estate component, which called for more than 100 homes. "The town was looking for less density, and was in favor of having a golf course with fewer homes," he said. "We worked closely with the town to get all the permits, and bought the land outright in March 2001. At that point, we had more than 100 members who had put in deposits — they bought on faith."



The par-four sixth hole winds through native grasses (top) to a large but sloping green, seen here in an architect sketch.

That show of support was rewarded with an accelerated construction schedule and the opening of the golf course on Labor Day weekend of 2002.

Like any new club, the course is the hook to attract potential members. Luckily for Laurel Links, its course, designed by Pennsylvania-based Kelly Blake Moran, is a strong draw.

Moran's previous Met Area work includes Hawk Pointe Golf Club in central New Jersey as well as the back nine at Calverton Links, a public course less than 15 miles from Laurel Links. His hands-on approach suited what the club's founders were looking for.

"Kelly was here pretty much every day with the shapers and the workers, and that was

something we felt we'd get from him rather than hiring a bigger name and not getting that presence," recalls general manager Joe Pfaff, who, along with head pro Steve Haggerty and superintendent Bill Shuford, have been employed by the club since it opened. "That was a real asset when it comes to how the course came out in the end."

It was Moran's work at Calverton that caught the eye of the Laurel Links brain trust.

"I went up and played Calverton, and the back nine was a lot of fun," remarked Crowe. "He [Moran] has visited Laurel Links each year since the course opened and we've talked to him about ways to do minor improvements, especially around the greens. It's been a very good relationship."

The par-71 layout tops out at 7,018 yards, but most players have all they can handle from the 6,519-yard middle tees. The front nine, fairly open and exposed to the ever-shifting winds, has well-placed bunkers, tall fescue grass, and numerous mounds covered by sand and vegetation. The green complexes present a variety of short-game options but also demand a high degree of skill. The greens themselves? They have a well-deserved reputation for being smooth and lightning-fast.

Starting with the par-four eighth hole, the course takes a turn toward the woods for a stretch of holes that favor accuracy and game management over distance. The final three holes are grip-and-rip fun, with No. 16 being a short par four that big hitters can choose to challenge with driver, 17 a dogleg par five over water, and 18 a classic par-four finish, with rounds often ending in front of an audience on the clubhouse porch.

That last green is the only time golfers play directly in front of the clubhouse, thanks to the course's out-and-back routing. Moran recently recalled the process by which he laid out the course.

"I just walked the land and tried to get a feel for where the golf holes could be," he said. "There were some challenges as far as wetlands, so with the routing, we had to get in and out and also tie together the residential element [the property has 29 lots, with 16 homes currently built]. It would have been difficult to get back to the clubhouse at the turn."

Moran has built courses around the world, and hesitates to rank or compare them with each other. But it's clear he has a fondness for Laurel Links. "Each course I build is a reflection of what I was thinking about course design at that time," he says. He then points out modestly, "when I go back to play Laurel

Links, I think, 'you know, this is not bad,'" he says with a smile. "It's definitely important to me because of where it is [on the East End]."

The location, and quality of the course, has caught the attention of area golf associations. The MGA held U.S. Open Local Qualifying at Laurel Links in 2007 and 2009, and in both those years only one player, Bob Rittberger of Garden City Golf Club, managed to break par (a four-under 67 in 2009). The MGA will return to hold U.S. Amateur Sectional Qualifying this summer. Laurel Links also hosted the 2007 Met PGA Head Pro Championship, won by Carl Alexander. These events have been springboards to a club that is still growing.

"One thing I've really enjoyed is the aspect of building tradition," said current club president Peter Sartorius.

One tradition that has caught on is the Forking Tournament, a Walker Cup-style event pitting members who live on the South Fork against those from the North Fork. What started as a casual outing has evolved into a spirited competition — most likely, Crowe jokes, because the South Forkers "lost the first year and then got serious about it." The tournament now includes uniforms, a large trophy and an abundance of camaraderie.

Camaraderie, in fact, is a recurring theme when speaking to anyone involved with Laurel Links. The club opened its swimming pool and tennis facilities in 2005, after some initial consternation.

"They were expensive to build and we had to go through all the permitting, but they've proven to be very popular amenities for young families," said Crowe, a membership group that Laurel Links, like many clubs, is seeking to attract.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Laurel Links's development as a club is that they accomplished it by convincing a number of initial investors to take a leap of faith.

"Remember, there's no one person or one entity that owns this," says Crowe. "This was all owned, and has been from the beginning, by the members, who actively participate in the management of the club and its activities."

With that kind of strategy, and a gem of a golf course as its prime attraction, it's a good bet that Laurel Links will build tradition for years to come. ■

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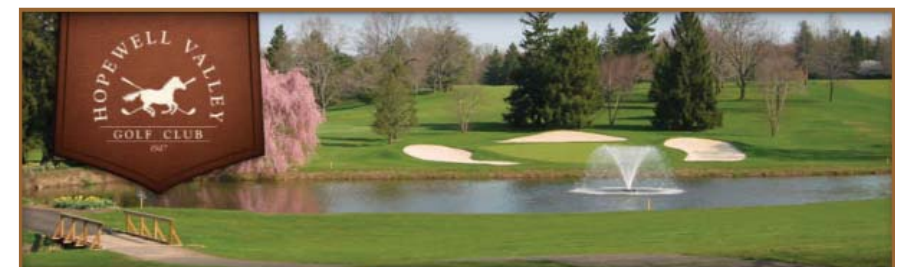
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