

Banks Recovery Plan

Left: the bunker behind the first hole shows the course's Charles Banks influence.

Hackensack Golf Club will host this year's Met Amateur on its historic and carefully restored Charles Banks layout

BY MERRELL NODEN

PHOTOGRAPH BY RUSSELL KIRK

Hackensack Golf Club turns 110 years old this summer, making it one of a select group of Met Area clubs with roots in the 19th century. Like other clubs that managed to survive the Great Depression and World War II, Hackensack did so by, among other things, trimming maintenance costs (something that is *en vogue* again).

But a funny thing happened on the way to fiscal survival: As bunkers were grassed over and green surfaces shrank, the course drifted away from the magnificent one laid out by Charles Banks in the 1920s. At the club's centennial in 1999, it remained a beautiful golf course, with rolling fairways framed by giant trees. Yet the quirks that made it distinctly Banks-ian had been softened or removed.

Luckily, Hackensack has an active, golf-savvy membership with a nose for history. Enter Mike Greenan, who as club president in 2006 was rooting around in the clubhouse basement when he stumbled upon a plastic tube containing Banks's original blueprints. They made clear how much had been lost: Above all, Banks's distinctive bunkering was gone. The alterations seemed particularly egregious because Hackensack almost certainly was Banks's first solo design, coming shortly after the death of his mentor, Seth Raynor. The members voted, by an overwhelming margin, to do everything possible to bring the original Banks course back to life.

"Why wouldn't you bring it back?" asks Bill Brightly, the club's in-house expert on Banks. "That's our history. Our lineage back to C.B. Macdonald and Seth Raynor is a link to two of the greatest golf architects ever." Rees Jones,

who in the 1990s had renovated the course, adding a pond on the par-three 17th and refurbishing the bunkers, was hired to oversee the restoration, which began last year.

Hackensack has been the site of numerous MGA championships, including the 1991 Senior Amateur and the 1973 Met Open. Two previous Met Amateurs have been held there — in 1964, when Bob Gardner won his record fifth straight title, and 1994, when Dennis Hillman held off a challenge from then-19-year-old J.J. Henry, now of the PGA Tour.

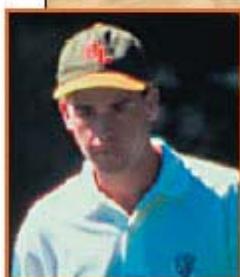
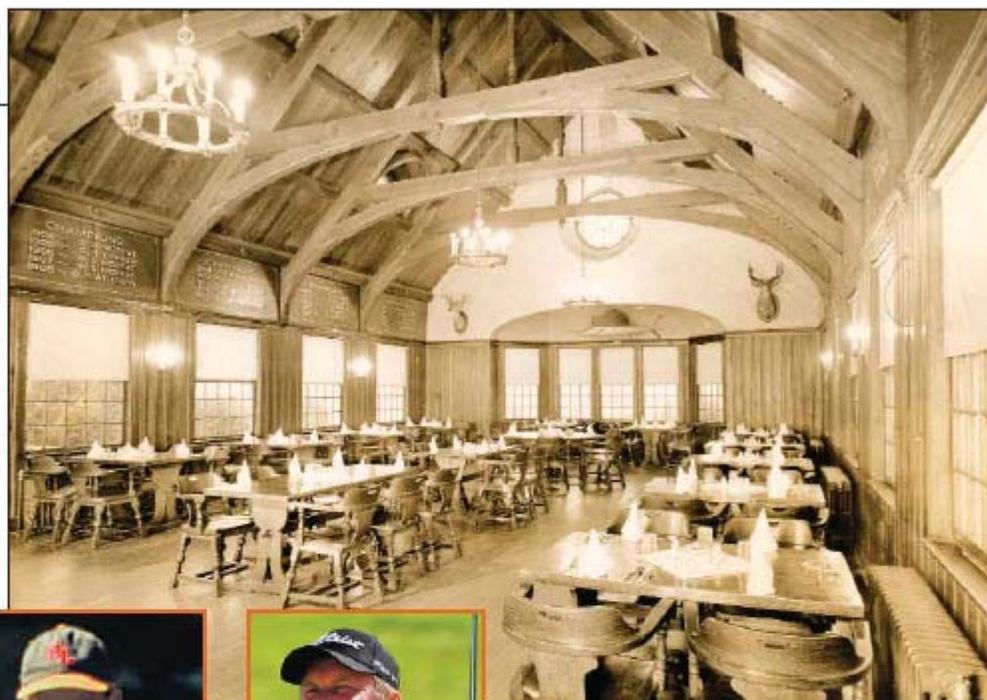
When a field of top competitors comes to Hackensack for the Met Amateur later this summer (August 6-9), they will find a course that manages to be endlessly challenging without feeling overly tricky or deceptive. Stretching nearly 7,000 yards, with most of that length in the par fours, it is not a brute in the modern sense. Big hitters will be tempted to go for all the par fives in two, since the longest, the eighth, is a manageable 546 yards.

"It's not one of these souped-up courses," says Tom McGovern, who grew up on the course with his six golfing brothers, including PGA Tour winner and 1987 Met Open champion Jim McGovern. "It's just a good, solid layout."

The course is not actually in Hackensack, though the club was founded there, on the border with neighboring Maywood. The original club had a railroad connection to attract families from New York City, and the clubhouse was designed with rooms for members to stay overnight or for the weekend. The attractions included swimming in the Hackensack River — which was clean at the time — tennis at the nearby Oritani Field Club, and sightseeing by foot, bicycle or horseback. Golf was almost an afterthought.

Right: the stately Grill Room in the Hackensack clubhouse, as it looked in 1943.

Below, from left: Bob Gardner captured his fifth consecutive Met Amateur at Hackensack in 1964; Dennis Hillman defeated J.J. Henry at the Met Amateur in 1994; PGA Tour pro Jim McGovern grew up at the club.



In the 1920s, rising real estate taxes forced the members to sell the club with an eye toward moving. A buyer was found — an eccentric publishing tycoon named Bernarr Macfadden, who made his fortune by churning out self-help books on such topics as virility, diet, exercise, and sex. Macfadden wanted to develop the Hackensack property into a community he called Garden Suburbs. But he overextended himself financially, and thus began a string of financial headaches for the club that only deepened with the 1929 market crash. (At one point, to pay for repairs to the dam on No. 13, the club instituted a 10-cent “dam tax” — perhaps spelled differently — every time a golfer walked over the bridge there.)

Despite its entanglement with Macfadden, the club was able to find a new site eight miles north, on a plateau just up the hill from the old Blauvelt Mansion hunting lodge. The

land belonged to the Kinderkamack Golf Club, which had formed in 1924. The plan was to merge the two clubs under the Kinderkamack name and build a new golf course on the rugged, heavily wooded land.

The club contacted the prominent architects of the day, including Donald Ross, who declined consideration, and A.W. Tillinghast. But the club chose Banks, who after 17 years of teaching English at the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut had met Seth Raynor when he came to Hotchkiss to design a new golf course. Raynor was impressed by Banks — and so swamped with projects — that he not only hired him but soon made him a partner. When Raynor died suddenly in 1926, the rookie architect inherited a slew of projects, including, most famously, Fishers Island Golf Club in Fishers Island, N.Y.

Banks had a wonderful site to work with at Hackensack. Today, as you make the short drive east from the Garden State Parkway through the neat split-level homes of Oradell, it’s easy to miss how much you travel uphill to reach the club. But to the left of the practice area, it’s all open sky to the Ramapo Mountains. Behind the par-three sixth hole, you look out across the Oradell Reservoir to the Manhattan skyline.

Banks planned 27 holes for Hackensack, but the third nine (west of the club driveway today) was never built. Still, he was heavily involved with the project: There is a grainy

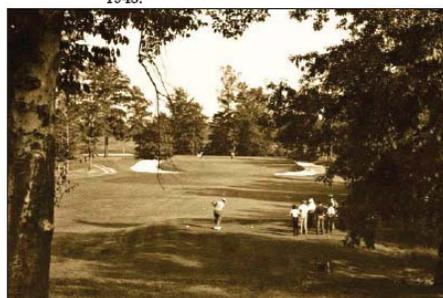
film of Banks at work, building a little tree-house from which to study the property and then overseeing the removal of rocks and trees, which back then involved teams of men with two-handed saws and horses to drag the timber away. The wood was milled on the property and used to build a clubhouse designed by Clifford Wendehack.

Though Banks was famously nicknamed “Steamshovel” for his readiness to move dirt, he was a disciple of Macdonald and Raynor. From that pair, he learned a “classic holes” approach to golf course design.

Macdonald preached that there was a finite collection of golf hole features that had been tested on the great Scottish links and found to be strategically challenging. An architect’s job was to fit those “template” holes into a site’s unique topography. Thus every Macdonald (and Raynor, and Banks) course draws from the same catalogue of distinctive holes, especially the par threes: They are “Biarritz,” requiring a long shot to a deep green cut in half by a swale; “Short,” with a huge, horse-shoe-ridged green almost completely surrounded by sand; “Redan,” in which the green slopes away from the tee (named for a style of fortification used in the Crimean War); and “Eden,” named for the river that runs behind the steeply sloping green of the 12th hole at the Old Course at St. Andrews. At Hackensack those four design styles are, in that order, the third, the sixth, the 12th, and the 17th holes.

In this most recent restoration, all these holes required considerable work to restore the key elements. Much of this meant undoing the “improvements” made by well-intentioned members and by the architect William

Below: Biarritz, the lengthy, par-three third hole, circa 1945.



Gordon, whom the club hired in the early 1960s to “modernize” the bunkering. Gordon, it seems, did not believe in putting bunkers behind the green, reasoning you were punished enough simply by being there. He took out the back section of the greenside bunker on 13, for instance. He also made all the bunkers shallower and flattened their sides. “He de-Banksed the course,” says Brightly.

In restoring these Banks flourishes, Hackensack has been lucky to have a resourceful golf superintendent, Rich Lane. Lately, Lane has been focused on the Biarritz green, the front half of which had been converted to fairway. That green is now back to its intended depth of 60 yards, and the three-foot swale running through the middle again delights and confounds golfers who have to putt through it. At one time a single long bunker guarded each side of the green, wrapping around the front like mutton chop sideburns. Playing as long as 230 yards, it will offer many challenging hole locations at the Met Amateur.

Jim McClave, the club champion from 1959–61, made the only hole-in-one of his long career on the Biarritz. When word reached the clubhouse, his fellow members, eager to toast him, dipped into the kitty that had been set aside for such an occasion. By the time McClave finished his round several hours later, it was gone. That led to a new club rule that any future celebration should not start until the guest of honor had arrived.

Despite its moniker as a golf club, Hackensack boasts a swimming pool, tennis courts, a popular paddle tennis program, and well-regarded dining. The membership comes from a wide range of backgrounds, and includes such characters as Charles “Chubby” Parcels, the father of former New York Giants and Jets head coach Bill Parcels. There is an Annual Chubby Parcels Gin Rummy Tournament that is a staple with all the card players at the club.

The man with the most club championships at Hackensack is Dr. R.H. Allen, who won 12 titles between 1966 and ’83. He is an obstetrician who delivered both of Tom McGovern’s sons, an example of the tight-knit community of families that makes up the Hackensack membership.

The McGoverns have been closely associated with the club for more than 40

years. The most famous member of the family is 44-year-old Jim McGovern, who along with his siblings grew up just off the fourth green — about as far from the clubhouse as you can get. That posed a problem, briefly, for a golf-mad family.

“Mysteriously, shortly after the McGovern clan moved in,” chuckles Tom, “a branch fell and took out part of the fence, and a gate replaced it. We didn’t have to go all the way around.” When family patriarch Howard McGovern, who passed away this past April, hired an electrician to install floodlights in the backyard, he saw that the light was being angled down into his own yard and ran out to set him straight: It was to be pointed *out*, toward the fourth green. “There were many a night spent by the brothers putting and chipping out there,” recalls Tom.

And it paid off. McGoverns have won 13 club championships at Hackensack, including four by Jim, whose résumé includes winning not only the 1987 Met Open (as an amateur) and the 1988 Met Amateur, but also the 1993 Shell Houston Open on the PGA Tour. Brother Rob played in the NFL before going to law school. After 9/11, he enlisted in the Army and is now a military lawyer.

The changes being undertaken at Hackensack include the slow evolution of the club logo. Legend has it that in the early 1950s, the club president at the time, Eliot Balestier, had his young daughter design a new club logo, and she drew one with a unicorn. The unusual

“That’s our history. Our lineage back to C.B. Macdonald and Seth Raynor is a link to two of the greatest golf architects ever.” —Bill Brightly

logo endured until three years ago, when the club’s original logo — a blue flag with HGC and gold trim — was uncovered by past president Don Caste, on the letterhead of club stationery from 1899. According to Brightly, “we began ordering some pro shop merchandise with the HGC logo and the members really liked it. This fit in perfectly with our efforts to return to our Banks roots.”

Even unicorns are not spared in the transformation of Hackensack Golf Club. You don’t mess with history, especially at a club that has worked so hard to reclaim it. ■

Merrell Noden writes from his home in Princeton, New Jersey.