



The Winds of Change

Alterations to the golf course accompany Medinah's preparation for another major championship.

By Tim Cronin

Editor's Note: The 88th PGA Championship will be played Aug. 17-20 at Medinah Country Club. This is the second in a series of articles related to the club and the championship.

When Tiger Woods returns to Medinah Country Club in August for the PGA Championship, he'll notice on his first practice-round inspection of Course No. 3 that one of the scenes of his triumph in the 1999 PGA has been obliterated.

Gone is what Woods will recall as the par-3 17th hole, especially the green, where he saved a critical par on Sunday afternoon. That par, while not the stuff of legend, ensured Woods a one-stroke margin over Sergio Garcia while playing the final hole. It was Garcia who had been breathing down Woods' neck for the better part of the day.

In place of a 206-yard par 3 to a narrow green on the side of the hill, traversing Medinah Creek but without a hint of the water coming into play, Woods and the rest of the field will instead play the tee shot at 197 yards, to a wide green resting snugly against the water on an angle. The tee is on a bluff well above the hole rather

than adjacent to the shore, with all the vagaries of the swirling wind at work—much, those with good memories will recall, as it was for the 1990 U.S. Open. Only 29 yards longer.

Tiger's 17th? It's a memory. Spectators and skyboxes will be sitting where the green had been.

What goes on here?

It's Medinah's continuing quest for perfection, that's all. For the last two decades, the membership has encouraged, then endured, change after change on the course designed, and then redesigned, by architect Tom Bendelow beginning in the mid-1920s.

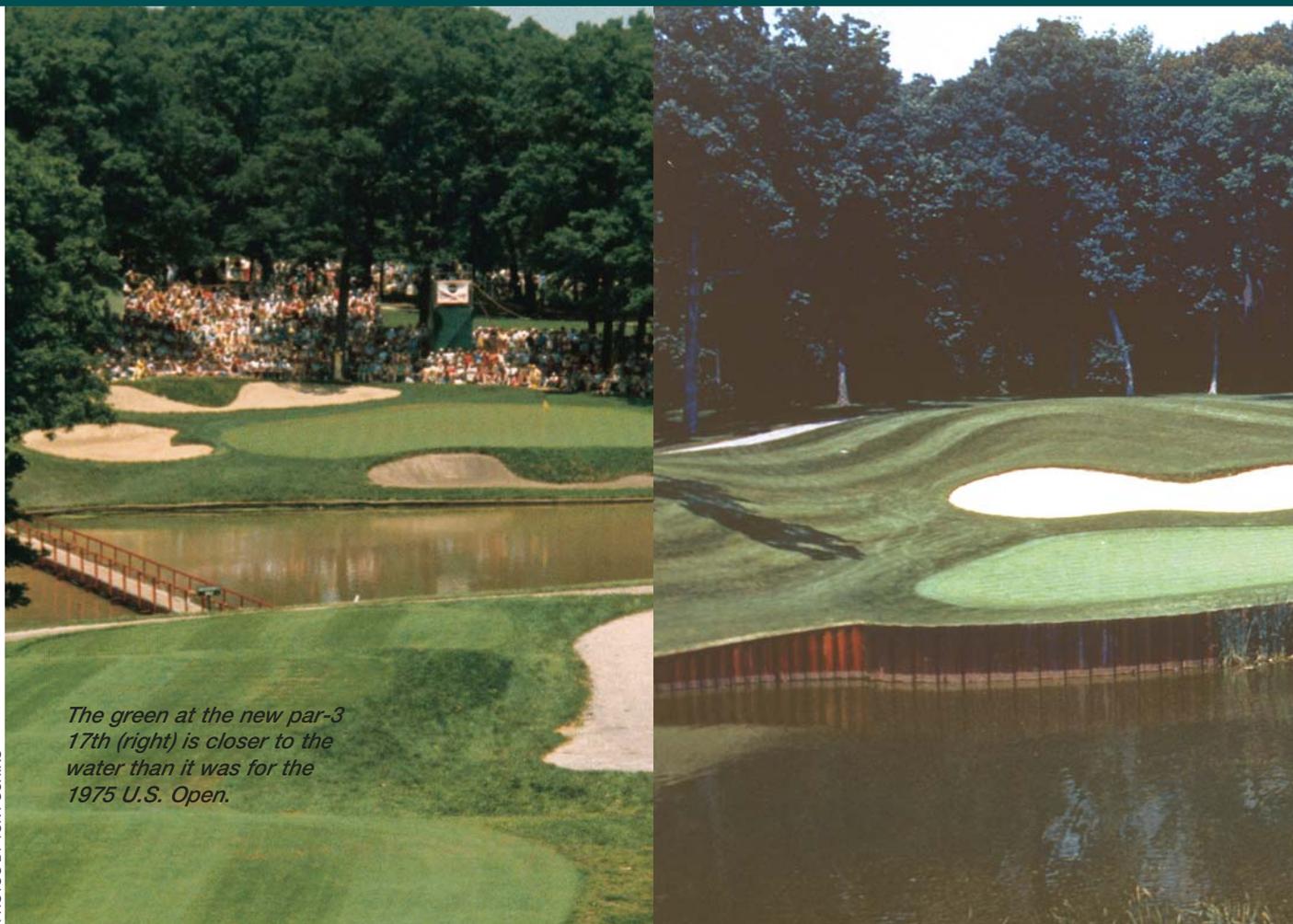
Overseen by architect Rees Jones, the new 17th is the most obvious difference in his wholesale revamping of the course and extends a trend. Tiger's 17th was designed by Roger Rulewich in the mid-1990s, replacing one dreamed up by Roger Packard in the previous decade. Packard's edition of the 17th was one of the key elements of the major revamping triggered by the United States Golf Association's

awarding of the 1988 U.S. Senior Open and 1990 U.S. Open to Medinah.

Since then, the membership has gone back and forth on whether the 17th green should be near the water, much like the greens of two other par 3s on the No. 3 Course: the second and the 13th (the original 17th). The answer was yes, then no, and now—and perhaps permanently—is yes once again.

"We needed someone to come in to preserve our tradition, make it tougher, and provide the authenticity which our members are proud of and want to maintain," said Medinah member Art Frigo, Medinah's general chairman. "Rees Jones was the right person for the job."

Jones, known as the Open Doctor for his work on courses prior to their welcoming major championships, gave No. 3 a thorough going over. While much of his work is subtle, including the repositioning of fairway bunkers to challenge today's long-hitting players, even a neophyte can tell that No. 3 is a more open golf course today.



The green at the new par-3 17th (right) is closer to the water than it was for the 1975 U.S. Open.

For one thing, it can see its shadow. Medinah's famed forest has been cut back a bit. In an effort to get more light on several greens, overhanging trees have been removed from key areas, especially on the east and south sides of greens. (Morning light, agronomists will explain, encourages grass to grow, while shadows in the heat of the afternoon protect the putting surfaces from sizzling.)

In all, 300 trees have been removed, and while that's not nearly as many as have been taken out at a famed course like Oakmont, it's a substantial number, similar to pruning projects at Olympia Fields and Beverly Country Club, and has made a difference.

"We wanted to bring the . . . golf course back to where it had been in the past," Jones explained. "I think the players will notice a different golf course from 1999 to 2006. It has more definition. What's so great about Medinah is that it has an ebb and flow. There are chances to make birdies. There are long and short par 4s. The scores will swing."

One reason Jones was brought in, quite frankly, was the disappointment of the membership with the scores in the 1999 PGA. As in the 1990 Open, soft conditions early in the week led to a wholesale bashing of par. Even with a lengthened course playing at 7,401 yards, 34 players broke par in the first round. Woods finished at 11-under-par 277, three strokes lower than where Hale Irwin and Mike Donald tied after 72 holes in the 1990 Open, another adventure that saw the members turning red even as the scoreboard did.

The celestial odometer hadn't clicked over to 2000 before Jones was hired. His charge: to toughen the course called "The Monster" once upon a time—preserving the tradition, as Frigo puts it.

That may or may not result in higher scores. Professional golfers are better than ever and hit it farther than ever. But the course is better as well. At least it will be able to counter punch. The new-look No. 3 will stretch to 7,561 yards, most of which set-up supervisor Kerry Haigh, the PGA of America's managing director of

tournaments, will use.

"We added yardage, but not as much as we added at Torrey Pines or Baltusrol, because Medinah was already ahead of the curve," Jones said. "It had the length, the green contours, great golf holes. For the most part, we've given the course an entirely new look.

"We have classic, old-style sculptured bunkers, much like A.W. Tillinghast or (Alister) MacKenzie bunkers. It has much more character."

Most of the work was done in 2002, but last year, a back-back tee, for the lack of a better term, was added at the 11th hole, which will force the players to play the dogleg-left 438-yard hole as a dogleg—"That's going to make 'em play the hole the way we play it," Frigo grinned—rather than cut the corner over some trees. Additionally, another tee was constructed at the fifth hole, making the par 5 a 537-yard challenge, and the par-5 14th was extended to 605 yards.

Jones' changes included eliminating blind tee shots on the first and eighth

holes, adding collection areas behind the first and 15th greens, and stretching the 18th hole by moving the tee back into Medinah Creek and elevating the green several feet above the surrounding land.

"It'll probably be a short iron the way these guys are hitting it, but it's going to be a much more precise shot," Jones said.

Another detail Jones had to concern himself with was an accommodation to the extreme green speeds of the day. Medinah's No. 3 Course opened in 1928, two generations before the Stimpmeter brought on the rush to see whose greens were fastest. Medinah's have always been quick, but they also had been sloped, sometimes severely, up to 5 degrees.

That was especially the case at the par-3 second hole, one of seven greens that were rebuilt and sometimes reshaped. At the second, the potential existed of a runaway putt from above the hole rolling into the water, unless it fell into a bunker. Jones changed the green, flattening it slightly, moving it left and closer to the water, so it now hugs Lake Kadajah, but making back hole locations a chore by adding a bunker against the big hill. The result is a challenging hole that continues to be an early wake-up call in a round.

The greens on the first, 13th, 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th holes also have been rebuilt, generally following the previous contours, with the 17th the departure from the immediate past, returning instead to the earlier incarnation. Additionally, every putting surface has been reseeded with the new A4-A1 strain



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of bentgrass, more resistant to high humidity, which should help eliminate the woes that hit the course just before the 1999 PGA, when tropical conditions stressed several greens severely.

Curiously, the par-4 16th, always highly regarded in surveys of the best golf holes in America, has been made less difficult. The uphill dogleg left still checks in at 452 yards, but the tee has been moved to the right, lessening the angle ever so slightly, and the green has been lowered a few feet.

"They can cut the corner more easily," Jones explained. "We dropped the green to make it a little bit more receptive."

The two finishing holes are all-new in the case of the already discussed 17th, and revamped in the case of the 18th, where the tee was extended, a bunker has been

added on the right side of the fairway, tightening the landing area considerably, and the green has been elevated. The best bet for mere mortals is to aim for the right side of the green no matter where the flagstick is.

"I'm very pleased with the results," Jones added. "We'll see what happens."

Naturally, Medinah members also will be watching closely. Having endured wholesale revamps of the golf course twice along with an intervening tweak in the last 21 years, they want Jones' handiwork to be the best and last word in the evolution of Tom Bendelow's finest work. 🌿

Tim Cronin is the author of "The Spirit of Medinah," the club's 75th anniversary book.

Many Makeovers at Medinah

Long before Rees Jones arrived for a thorough makeover of Medinah No. 3, original architect Tom Bendelow had to make do with limited land in creating the course.

It was not the No. 3 members and visitors knew for some 50 years. Much of the empty acreage was untouchable, so most of the holes were jammed against Lake Street in the manner of a lopsided jigsaw puzzle. Medinah's four founders retained 77 acres in secret for Medinah Forest, a housing development they planned to profit from.

They bought that land with the members' money and didn't tell the members. The resulting lawsuit led to their resignations and the return of the land to the club. Bendelow then turned a

cramped 6,261-yard par 70 layout into a masterwork par 71 of 7,110 yards.

Bendelow's plan was approved before, but instituted after, Harry Cooper shredded the course with a 63 in the 1930 Medinah Open. There would be no 63s on the second iteration of No. 3. The course record was 66 until Scott Verplank scored 65 on July 31, 1985, the day before Roger Packard's major renovation began.

The facelift was forced by an 18th hole hampered by advancements in golf technology and by the game's growth. By the 1980s, the USGA wanted to return to Chicago, and the club wanted the U.S. Open. The 18th, a dogleg par 4 of 391 yards, turned too early to hit driver—"You have to hit a dive slice off the tee to hit the fairway," Dave

Marr once quipped—plus, the hole was so shrouded with trees, only a few hundred spectators could watch.

That would not do. The club was told by the USGA that without a new 18th hole, there would be no Open. So Medinah enlisted Packard to build a new 18th, a new 17th, and reroute the last eight holes, making the par-4 15th into the par-5 14th. The USGA promptly announced Medinah would get the U.S. Open in 1990.

All was well until the membership decided after Hale Irwin's triumph that the 17th was too much like the 13th, and ordered the green moved up the hillside. That lasted for less than a decade. It's back by the water now, presumably to stay.

—Tim Cronin