

# Belle Haven Country Club

## *A Case Study in Course Renovation*

**G**olf is a game of tradition and preserving a club's history during a course renovation is often a top concern. After all, so many memorable moments happen on the links. The Washington D.C. area is home to many traditional and distinguished courses, Congressional Country Club, Bethesda Country Club and Chevy Chase Country Club among them. But there are others that should be on that revered list.

Belle Haven Country Club is nestled along the banks of the Potomac River adjacent to the George Washington Memorial Parkway. It is just minutes from Old Town, Alexandria and 10 miles from downtown Washington D.C.

Founded originally in 1924 as a nine-hole course, the club has seen its share of progress all while maintaining its illustrious and rich history.

Over the years, the course has been slightly redesigned by a number of people. Notable golf course designers and even the green committee chairmen were involved in past renovations. Leonard Macomber was the original architect in 1924, then, in 1970, Eddie Ault was responsible for a renovation. Lester George renovated the first green and Joel Weiman did the driving range design.

In 1983, the irrigation system was updated and new heads were installed in 1990 and 1991. Also in 1990, the bunkers were rebuilt "in-house." A USGA practice and chipping green was built in 1994 and the first hole was rebuilt to USGA specifications in 1996. The tees were redone in 1999 and finally, in the same year, the driving range was renovated and remains unchanged today.

The old course was flat and faced drainage issues for quite some time. In fact, 70 percent of the course lies in a 100-year flood plain. A large storm could flood holes and keep them out of play for days. This poor drainage really prompted the club to consider renovating the entire golf course. But the drainage wasn't the only reason.

The irrigation had both poor coverage and pressure. The tees were not level and the course was too long for high handicap golfers and young children. The bunkering was inconsistent and sand depths varied. The Bermuda grass fairways created a poor playing surface in the early spring in the mid-Atlantic region, and the native soil greens had poor rooting. Lastly, the club realized that the course had grown tired and boring for many golfers, and in order to attract new members, something had to change.

This latest restoration, however, would be different than those of years past. In the mid-1990's, a long-range master plan was developed to improve upon the club's existing facilities. In addition to planned redesign and upgrades to the clubhouse, athletic facility, tennis courts and grounds, the master plan included a renovation to the golf course.

The green committee had been working on the golf course improvement plan since 1995 and decided to hire a golf course architect in 1997 to do the master plan. But the following year, the club let the first architect go and re-evaluated its future.

Belle Haven struggled with a number of questions: "Should we rebuild the greens, the bunkers and the tees?" "Should we re-grass the fairways?" "Install a new irrigation system?" "What else should change?"

Initially, the greens committee asked Mike Augustin, the course's superintendent, to assess the infrastructure of the golf course and make a recommendation as to what needed to be done.

Focus groups were then held, representing both sides of the renovation project: those that were in support of the project and those that were opposed to it.

Finally, it was decided to bring in a second golf course architect to develop a new master plan for the course with direction from the green committee.

The board then decided to take this improvement project a step further. In addition to the golf course, it explored what improvements could be made to the clubhouse and the indoor tennis courts. The board felt that a new entrance and expanded parking were also needed. But before the board got too far ahead of itself, the club hired a consultant to help put together a master plan for the clubhouse with information on the golf course as well.

The master plan was presented to the membership through "town hall" type meetings, with members' suggestions integrated into the plan. When it came time for a vote on the project in September 2000, the plan was received enthusiastically, and approved.

The club was debt free and had money in the bank, however, the project would still cost a significant amount. The master plan was approved at a cost of \$21 million dollars, \$5.8 million of which was for the golf course. A \$6,000 per member assessment was implemented.

The course architect was selected in October 2000 partly because the members wanted to hire a "big name" that spe-

cialized in renovations, but also because the management wanted an architect who could work equally well with the members, the politics associated with the project, and the golf course operations staff.

The chosen architectural firm had done a great deal of other work in the Washington D.C. area on other historic clubs and Mike Augustin had worked with the firm in the past. He knew the quality of work it produced.

Work began on the course in July 2002. The architect's goal was really to retain the mature look and feel at Belle Haven. It built upon the classic setting and concentrated its efforts on making the course appear classic in all elements.

This was achieved by squaring the tees, building bold bunkers that were grass faced with flat floors. The greens were varied. Some were elevated plateaus and others opened up to the fairway. The fairway bunkering added classic elements of strategy, like angles that now had to be challenged by players. The fairways were generally uniform in their width and shape and were enhanced by the addition of strategic elements to each hole.

The original routing of the course was not altered; rather, it was simply reworked to fit within the existing framework. It built upon the innate elements of the site.

Belle Haven always considered itself a family oriented club. Knowing this, the architectural firm emphasized variation of hole length by using different tee placements to encourage golf for all skill levels and ages.

Overall, the course was lengthened with varying tee placements; certain aspects of the course were made to feel shorter as a result of the creation of multiple options for Belle Haven's

members. For instance, the old course's pro tees played 6,700 yards while the renovated tees play at 6,910 yards.

Meanwhile, the old course's forward tees played at 5,715 yards while the new forward tees play shorter at 5,035 yards. Holes 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12 and 14 were all lengthened.

The course now has a pair of really great and short par 4's (numbers 2 and 5). Both holes now challenge a golfer to make choices.

The par 3's are very distinct. No. 6 is now dramatic in its setting against an enlarged pond. No. 9 is a tough, long hole, very similar to the original hole, but moved back to create space to lengthen the tees on No. 1.

Hole No. 10 is a gem with the tees elevated 30 feet above the green (which is also elevated as a plateau on otherwise flat ground). No. 17 is a classic par 3 over tidal wetlands off the Potomac.

From the first tee to the 18th green, the holes are each unique, begging players to examine every aspect of their game. The holes have a great rhythm and their variety sets them apart. Each is memorable.

Many trees and other vegetation that did not complement the course were removed. This helped improve the overall playability and maintenance of the course.

Numerous environmental concerns were also addressed in the renovation. These included the wetland mitigation, filling in of the 100-year flood plain and the archeological study of the property. Furthermore, care had to be taken with the Army Corps and Virginia DEQ because the work

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was being done along the Potomac Tidal Water Shed. The club also had to abide by the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act because the Potomac flows into the Chesapeake Bay.

Sodding was a real key to the success of the project. In fact, the contractor sodded every inch of the disturbed area while the club handled the grow-in. This required a substantial investment from the club and was not an easy task.

The selected grasses were chosen for their proven track record in the area. Bentgrass L93, Pencross and Putter were used to sod the 27 acres of fairways and tees. Bentgrass A4 was used to sod the three acres of greens and Tall Fescue and Bluegrass sodded the 45 acres of rough.

Now, with the completion of the master plan, Belle Haven members enjoy an 18-hole championship course complete with a driving range that features one acre of natural grass teeing surface. Around the rest of the club, amenities include five outdoor tennis courts, a fitness center, an outdoor swimming pool, two outdoor paddle tennis courts, eight outdoor Har-Tru tennis courts as well as elegant clubhouse dining and banquet facilities.

The new course opened on October 28, 2003 after a delay due to Hurricane Isabelle and record-setting rainfall throughout the renovation project time period. But unlike the previous course, the new course held up very well to these challenges. When the Potomac flooded in the fall of 2003, most of the holes opened for play only weeks after the

storm.

"Everyone loves it, including those who were staunchly opposed to the renovation project," explained Augustin. "Now all are enjoying the beautiful new course."

Drew Rogers, an architect on the project, was also very pleased with how everything turned out. He credited the team approach to overall success of the project.

"We had a great team. The club was cooperative, trusting, supportive and patient. The contractor was diligent, professional, dedicated to quality and a pleasure to work with. The superintendent and his staff orchestrated the tough details and many aspects of the project that went unnoticed."

The golf course at Belle Haven is now one of the Washington, D.C. area's finest. Perhaps it will soon be mentioned in the same breath as Chevy Chase, Bethesda, Congressional and other notable courses. G&G

*Special thanks to Mike Augustin and Drew Rogers for their participation in this case study. Mike Augustin, CGCS, is the superintendent at Belle Haven Country Club in Alexandria, Virginia. Drew Rogers, ASGCA, has been with Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates since 1992 and is a senior design associate with the firm. He has extensive experience in master planning for improvement/restorations to existing facilities, land planning for large-scale golf communities, as well as broad based ecological planning.*



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