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# Tired to Terrific

A renovation returns a venerable course to the top

by Bob Labbanace

PHOTOS BY CHRIS JOHN

The putting surface at Manor's 443-yard finishing hole was pulled down the hill, away from the clubhouse. The original green still exists as a practice putting green connected to the new 18th green.

**"T**hey had an old tired golf course," says Superintendent Randall Pinckney, speaking of Manor Country Club in Rockville, Md. "It had *Poa annua* push up greens; the drainage wasn't working very well; and they had a lot of trees, which shaded turf—and Arthur Hills took care of a lot of that for us."

Pinckney arrived at Manor a little over two years ago; his mission was to direct a major overhaul of the golf course according to a renovation master plan devised by Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates. "Manor was always a nice golf course—had been for 75 years," says Project Manager Drew Rogers of Hills/Forrest, "but it needed a major overhaul."

The work included an increase in length; dozens of tees and putting surfaces repositioned to create new playing strategies; bunkers rebuilt in a vintage, flat-bottomed, grass-faced style; and a massive tree removal program to create

wider playing corridors and allow the sunlight/air movement necessary to nurture the layout's new bentgrass fairways and greens. Landscape Unlimited was the contractor that implemented the Hills plan.

"The biggest issue here was the trees, and they still are," says Pinckney. "We still have large 100-foot-tall oaks, almost like an old oak forest, and very abundant. You could cut every other tree, and it would still be dark on parts of this golf course. The members are very open to listening to me and the advice of Arthur Hills and getting the trees down so the turf is healthy. They're giving me pretty much carte blanche to do what we need to do, and it will hopefully continue. We're making a list right now of trees we'd like to see removed over the next several years."

"You really can see the difference right there on the first tee," says Golf Course Architect Hills. "Most of the

holes on the front nine were seriously hemmed in by the dense wooded framework; that's where most of the tree work occurred, and it has made all the difference in the world."

The original 18 holes were laid out by Englishman Harry Collis in the early 1920s, and William Flynn worked with the club in the 1930s. However, while Flynn's plans remain preserved for all to see, looking at the course, it's unclear how much of his designs were ever carried out.

"In the course of devising our master plan, I think we all came to realize that Flynn was not as influential at Manor as the members may have originally thought," Rogers said. "Many of his design ideas were simply never implemented—and if they were done, they were undone or lost over time. But, because we have his plans, on several holes we were able to move forward in a way consistent with those plans."

The 13th is one hole where the fairway bunkering was nothing like Flynn had detailed, "So, we integrated his bunkering back into the hole. It's bold, strategic and entirely visible from the tee—and the intricacies around the green now respond to his fairway bunkering strategies. It's a clever little hole now that players will appreciate immediately."

Although 360 yards was added to the overall length, not every hole at Manor was extended. In fact, the new fifth measures 170 today—20 yards shorter than the original—for reasons related to strategy, drama and sunlight. "We're awfully pleased with the new fifth, which plays from an elevated tee over a creek to a green carved into a hillside, just beyond the hazard," Rogers said. "The former tees were slotted into a shaded area where turf health was always going to

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be problem. We moved them forward, into the sun, to address this issue. At the same time, the new tees allow players to a better view of the putting surface, where we came up with some very bold, deep bunkering that creates a striking pedestal green. It's a shorter hole now, but more agronomically sound, more visible and far more dramatic."

Although everyone is pleased now that the project is completed, work got off to a slow start in 2004. "This project got a fairly late start. We didn't start digging in the ground until late August; and we initially planned to seed all the fairways, roughs, greens and tees with only about 20 acres of rough sod in the budget," recalls Pinckney. Between October 12 and January 12, 2005, the front nine greens and 8 acres of fairway were planted, and the superintendent worried about the time frame in relation to the scheduled reopening date in the fall of 2005. "Thank God the Club listened to me and, because it was so late in the



Randall Pinckney, superintendent of the Manor Country Club in Rockville, Md.



The second hole used to play 350 yards straightaway. Today, it's a 383-yard dogleg left.

year, made a decision to go with sod, except for the greens. Sodding started in late December; we did the first hole, which you can see from the clubhouse, and I think that was the selling point. Once the members saw that first hole sodded, they didn't want to go back to seeding. We basically sodded everything and were finished with that process by July 2005, and the grow-in continued through into October, when we opened October 15, 2005." Pinckney stuck to the plan of seeding greens; the back nine greens were planted between April 12 and May 1.

Pinckney was responsible for all grassing choices, including a 50/50 combination of A1 and A4 on the greens; L93 for approaches, fairways, tees and collars; the first cut of rough around the fairways in ryegrass; and all the rest in 90 percent turf-type tall fescue and 10 percent bluegrass. Pinckney received bentgrass sod from East Coast Sod out of New Jersey, the rough sod from Lucks Sales out of Salisbury, Md., and was happy with the integrity of both products.

Generally satisfied with his grassing choices, Pinckney would make two tweaks if he did it over again. "I wasn't really happy with the performance of

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By moving the green back and up onto a natural shelf, the opening hole at Manor CC was lengthened some 50 yards as part of the renovation. It now measures 413 yards from the tips.

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turf-type tall fescue in the shade on the front," notes the superintendent. "We have overseeded ryegrass this year into it, and if I were to do it all over again, I'd make my collars ryegrass collars rather than bentgrass. You get a lot of traffic that goes over your collars between green mowers, push mowers, topdressers and people walking. We cut the collar at .25 inch because it doesn't do well above that, and we started to interseed ryegrass into the collars. I see they're much better than they were as bentgrass collars, because they take the traffic wear better."

The weather was generally cooperative during the winter when sod and seed was being laid and during grow-in period the following spring. "The worst part was in the middle of July,"


remembers Pinckney. "Here, in the mid-Atlantic, we usually get some pretty awful weather, but that summer we got a ton of rain and it got up near 100 degrees for quite some time. Pythium went rampant on pretty much every course around here. Being very high on the nitrogen end myself, we got a little bit, but nothing that hurt us all that much."

None of those problems were evident when Manor CC officially celebrated its newly refurbished course with a gala celebration on May 25, and Governor Bob Ehrlich blessed the proceedings by proclaiming May 25, 2006, Arthur Hills Day in Maryland. More than 100 dignitaries gathered at Manor CC to fete the handiwork of Hills and his design team. Governor Ehrlich presided, wielding his executive authority to praise the course and honor Hills, whose original designs in Maryland include Blue Mash Golf

Club in Olney, the Links at Lighthouse Sound in Ocean City and Maryland National Golf Club in Frederick. Hills has also renovated more than 100 courses worldwide, including some of America's finest.

Now that the work is over, Manor's crew of 28 greenkeepers are keeping up with routine maintenance. Pinckney thinks the A1/A4 greens do well at lower mowing heights. "I don't see it being as aggressive as most people say. My thatch has been very minimal all year-round; we're still at only a quarter to a third of an inch of thatch in our greens, which is where I'd like to try and maintain that. Every two weeks, we put about a half-ton of topdressing on the greens; [we] do the approaches and fairways once a month, same with the tees."

The nine-hole Harry Pitt course allows Pinckney to close the 18-hole

layout in the winter. "We have nine holes that are still ryegrass with Poa pushup greens. We'll put a couple of cups in the green and rotate those around, and that will remain open through the winter. New course will be closed in January and February and weather dependant in December and March," says Pinckney. "We have projects to do: tree work, build some new tees, sodding some areas more drainage work." However, members have their course back, and everyone is pleased with the architectural changes and the new surfaces. That helps the memories of upheaval to fade quickly. 

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