

ESSEX FELLS RANGE

A LONG TIME COMING

By Brendan Prunty

“You need a range.”

This was the familiar refrain that anyone who brought guests to Essex Fells Country Club had heard for years. The place was nice — a sneaky-tough layout crammed into the postage-stamp plot of land bordered by Devon and Oval Roads, and Eagle Rock Avenue — but there was no getting past the fact that it didn't have a driving range. Players of all calibers, who found the shot-making skills needed to tame the 121-year-old club on par with the top courses in the area, felt that the place was great, but ...

“We needed a range,” says Niall Handley, one of New Jersey's top players — and a member at Essex Fells.

The solution was a simple, and an obvious one: Build the range. The problem? Well, that was an entirely different matter. Over the years, the club had tried to band-aid the situation, building short practice areas — mainly so its professional staff would have a place to give lessons to members.

The issue was that Essex Fells was landlocked. How in the world would they fit a driving range anywhere on the property? How could they build one without it being a bastardized version of what was needed? The questions seemed almost too great to overcome. Then, the leadership at Essex Fells did what was needed to get it done.

They got creative.

Nicholas Bozzo, Essex Fells' greens chairman, took the reins in spearheading the project. From the initial idea, all the way through the construction phase, proved to be a steady guiding hand. The result is exactly what the membership was looking for: a full, 300-yard, two-way driving range, without nets, walking distance from the clubhouse and locker rooms — within the confines of the club's existing property.

The solution involved a little creativity on the part of the club's architectural consultant — world-renowned designer, Rees Jones and his team — as well as some reimagining of existing holes. The entire

project is scheduled to be completed by the end of the spring, making the 2017 season at Essex Fells Country Club, one of the most anticipated in recent memory.

“The members can't wait,” said Essex Fells Country Club president, Chris Kinslow. “In addition to the driving range, there's a lot of talk about how much harder No. 4 will be, how much different No. 1 will be. There's a good amount of chatter back and forth. It adds to the excitement.”

While the surprise benefit to the project was the re-routing and changing — and in a couple of cases, the improvement of — some of the holes, the star of the show is the brand-new driving range. Essex Fells had watched for years as other local clubs had figured out ways to make their landlocked situations work for them. A number of club in the area, had added practice greens, short-game areas, and expanded existing driving range facilities.”

Yes, Essex Fells had been hampered by its past — being laid out in the 1920s



by legendary architect Seth Raynor — at a time where practice facilities at clubs were few and far between. Practicing before or after rounds was uncommon, and plots of land were bought and built upon with the express purpose of having 18 holes of golf and little else. But as it watched other clubs both in the area and beyond attract more members, more prestigious tournaments, and more attention, Essex Fells decided it was time to rewrite its history.

“Lack of a full-time range was known by all, but our members’ desire for one became crystal clear in a 2013 survey,” Howard Hansen, past president of Essex Fells, said. “The top request was for more golf practice capability. It was amazing. Members were writing things like, ‘I know we don’t have the space, but a full-time range would be great.’ Many had tried to find a solution without success. We had a special relationship with Rees Jones, so we approached him and asked him to take a look.”

The initial overture to Jones for the project was a quiet one. Frankly, no one was quite sure that it would be possible. The meeting in the Spring of 2015 — between Bozzo, head pro Brandon Gelo, and Jones and one of Jones’ top architects, Steve Weisser — was aided by a number of aerial shots of the course, as well as satellite images from Google Maps. Together, in Jones’ downtown Montclair office, the four of them hashed out some rough ideas. In order to keep the club at a Par-70, while maintaining its 6,476-yard length, there would need to be some concessions: Hole Nos. 1, 4, and 5 would have to be altered.

But the Essex Fells contingent left the meeting with the one piece of news they’d been hoping for — they didn’t hear “no.”

Once the project was approved internally last June, Jones and his team went to work on creating a 300-yard, two-way driving range where there was virtually no room for one. The majority of the range would have to be situated on the fourth hole, with parts of the opening hole — believed to be where the term “Mulligan” was coined — and the fifth hole. Some trees would be removed, but after all that, Essex Fells would have its driving range. And most importantly, to the specificities that it desired.

The finished product is one that Essex Fells is pinning to unveil. Handley, one of the top players in the metropolitan area — and a two-time MGA Mid-Amateur champion



The new short game and practice area at Essex Fells (top). The new green for the fourth hole (below).



— thinks that the new fourth hole is unlike anything else at the club. Every hole that has been touched by Jones and Weisser, has been made to feel and play as if it was part of the original design. The hope is that by making these changes, adding a practice range, Essex Fells will be able to open its doors to more major NJSGA and MGA events — showcasing itself as one of the top clubs and courses in the state.

It’s got the practice part of the equation down, now it’s time to make the rest of Essex Fells perfect.

“We wanted to remain competitive

with all of our neighboring country clubs,” Handley said. “We wanted to have a full-service club, with a driving range. That was really important to us, to be competitive and attract all levels of golfers — you need a range to go to, be uninterrupted, and practice. And now we have that.”

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