

A very precise restoration

At Medinah Country Club in Chicago, Rees Jones and his team have just completed a restoration of Tom Bendelow's design of the No. 2 course. Adam Lawrence explains what makes it unusual

Restoration, renovation, rebuilding, reconstruction, reimagining: the list of words that can be applied to a project that involves doing work on an existing golf course seems to get longer by the week.

The truth is that, much of the time, whether a project is judged to be a restoration or a renovation is more of a PR calculation on the part of architect and club than a real story of what actually happened on the job. As golf architecture has become more of a mainstream interest in recent years, and 'pedigree', in the sense of being able to claim a link to a famous old architect, has become more highly valued, many projects have been tagged with the restoration label that in no way warranted it. Gracious, the initial Ernie Els Design-led rebuild of Wentworth's West course about five years ago was called a restoration of Harry Colt's original design in the club's PR effort, despite the fact that the project included the creation of a fake stream in front of the home green and the

elevation of several other greens way above the level that Colt had them.

This PR shemozzle aside, even projects that are more authentically restorative in intent often struggle to justify the label. Colt, MacKenzie, Donald Ross and Tillinghast didn't have GPS units or CAD systems, and the result is that, on many jobs, the restoration architect is left guessing at what the original designer did in many areas. Even when good aerial images and the architect's original sketches survive – which is by no means always – there is much that is quite simply not known. Once in a while, there might be some drawings that give a general feel for how the original architect of record wanted his greens to look, but we know from their writings that most of the Golden Age greats made alterations themselves in the field, and also were prepared to allow their trusted construction guys to interpret their instructions quite freely. In short, most of the time a restoration is simply a best guess in many areas.



Photos: Fran Schiller © Medinah Country Club

Medinah's No. 2 course has been relatively untouched over the years, making it possible to achieve a faithful restoration to Tom Bendelow's original design. Pictured, holes seventeen, nine (below left) and thirteen (below)





Holes six (above), seven (top) and eight (right) on the restored No. 2 course at Medinah Country Club



As part of the club's 'Golf for Life' programme, there are now seven tees on each hole at Medinah's No. 2 course, allowing players of every skill level to enjoy the game

Photos: Evan Schiller © Medinah Country Club

However, at the famous Medinah Country Club in Chicago, architect Rees Jones and his associate Steve Weisser under the guidance of Medinah's director of golf course operations Curtis Tyrrell have recently finished a restoration project that is a little different from most. Medinah Country Club is best known for its No. 3 course, a massive and brawny layout that has hosted three US Opens, two PGA championships, and, of course, the 2012 Ryder Cup, legendary as the 'Miracle at Medinah', when the European team came back from a four point deficit at the start of the Sunday singles matches to win possibly their most spectacular victory in the event.

Jones and his team reworked No. 3 for that Ryder Cup, turning it into a 7,600 yard behemoth. More recently, Tom Doak and his crew at Renaissance Golf Design rebuilt Medinah's No. 1 course, leaving No. 2 the only one of Tom Bendelow's three original creations at the club that had not been touched in recent years. After this project, that is no longer the case. Yet, in a sense, it still is. For, as restoration projects go, this one is

very unusual: we basically know it is accurate, because the course was untouched and all the features were still there, in the ground.

Reviewing the work on No. 2 this May with Rees, Steve and Curtis, it is easy to see why the club again tapped Jones to assist with the project. If there is anyone who

“The trees were overgrown, the greens had shrunk, and several bunkers had been eliminated”

knows about golf course restoration it is Rees Jones, who some consider to be the father of the restoration movement starting with his work at The Country Club in Brookline and continuing with the work at such places as Bethpage Black, Baltusrol's Upper and Lower Courses, East Lake, Golden Horseshoe's Gold Course and Tulsa Country Club.

“I think the term restoration is sometimes overused, but this project in my opinion is a true restoration of Tom Bendelow's

design,” says Jones. “We have modernised it by adding or relocating a few bunkers and adding tee locations, but the green surfaces and the surrounding slopes are Bendelow's original design. I would say this is a bona fide restoration with a few implementations of design ideas for 21st century play.

“No.2 hadn't been touched for a very long time so the original design ideas were evident,” Jones continues. “The trees were overgrown, the greens had shrunk, and several bunkers had been eliminated. So we were able to restore it back to how Tom Bendelow originally designed it. Tom Bendelow lived in Chicago and spent a lot of personal time designing this course, and so subtle nuances can be found because of that.”

There have been no major routing changes, notable grading, or topography

changes made to No. 2. Rather, most of the work was focused on green complexes and bunkers, relying on aerial photographs from 1938 to determine their original sizes, shapes, and locations.

The total area of fairways and approaches increased by more than 50 per cent, from 21 to 34 acres, with some of the widened corridors connecting on adjacent holes – unusual today, but not uncommon during golf architecture's Golden Age nearly 100 years ago. Greens complexes were restored to feature Bendelow's original contouring, accentuating generally longer, deeper, taller and more pronounced putting surfaces.

Jones says that though the club's three courses have differing design attributes, the greens on No.2 really stand out. “Bendelow had some very interesting green surfaces which we were able to restore back to the old shapes and contours which are unique. Most of the greens have open entrances so they are easy to access. The bunkers are scattered much like you would find from many courses from that era, when architects tried to build British links-style courses inland,

and so many of the bunkers are located farther away from the surface of the greens.”

The work on Course No. 2 also included the ongoing improvement of the club's infrastructure, including enhancing draining and storage capabilities and the overall growing environment.

So what Medinah Country Club has now is a course built to modern standards, with greens built to USGA specifications, equipped for sub-surface vacuuming and gas-exchange capability, tees built on a sand mix that allows for internal drainage, reseeded fairways, bunkers equipped with subsurface draining and erosion liners, and greens, tees, and fairways all planted with the same strain of creeping bentgrass.

Another interesting aspect of the project is it addresses the future of the game with the addition of tees to each hole in what the club calls its 'Golf For Life' programme. “This type of program is being incorporated at a number of golf courses around the country to help the game grow and keep people in the game,” Jones says. “Medinah Country Club wanted to take a leadership role in

introducing this programme.”

A total of seven tees to accommodate every different skill level in Medinah's golfing community. The programme sorts golfers based on a number of criteria including, but not limited to, handicap, age, gender, distance, and level of interest.

Medinah's professional staff will segment members into appropriate groups, create teaching programs specific to each group, and organise tournaments, clinics, and other functions based on these one-of-a-kind segmentations. Perhaps most important, the multiple tees/skill segments will allow every golfer to record measurable data, see improvement and follow a comprehensive instruction plan.

“When a beginner takes up the game, they can play the forward tee and as they get better they keep moving back,” says Jones. “Then as you get older and you can't hit it as far, you start moving forward again. I think this is going to be a golf course that every calibre of player, from entry level to the young to the older, can enjoy if they play the proper tees.” **GCA**