



The One and Only

Among America's great courses, none say as much about our golfing character as Bethpage Black

There are so many spectacular courses in golf. I'm sure you could name them just as easily as I can: Pebble Beach, Augusta, Cypress Point, Shinnecock. Round up the usual suspects. But in its own remarkable way, tell me what compares to the host of this year's PGA Championship, the Black course at Bethpage?

"You don't have to know someone to get on," says Justin Leonard. "You don't have to get invited. You just have to sleep in your car."

We're now 17 years removed from the 2002 U.S. Open, when the Long Island muni made its first appearance as a major championship venue, so some of the novelty has probably worn off, but it shouldn't.

"The land is amazing ... the design is as good as it gets ... it's pure," says PGA Tour pro Len Mattiace, who grew up "seven minutes" away from Bethpage in the early '80s.

"We'd come and there'd be a 75-minute wait for the Blue (course), a 50-minute wait for the Red, and only 5 minutes for the Black."

There was a reason for that, and it wasn't only because the Black was an ego killer.

"It just wasn't maintained," says Mattiace. "There were rocks in the bunkers – never any rakes. The rough was inconsistent. Some of the back tee boxes, you couldn't make a swing without hitting branches. Nobody had the mindset back then that you could hold a major championship here."

But the USGA's then-executive director David Fay—prodded by his lifelong friend Jay Mottola, who held the same position with the MGA—saw beyond the tattered exterior and took a chance.

"If it hadn't worked," he said, "they prob-

ably would have called it 'Fay's Folly.'"

Three million dollars was committed for a restoration. Forget about rocks in the bunkers, there were trees growing in some of them as well.

"Have you ever worked on a course that was in shape this bad?" I asked Rees Jones, who was brought in to restore the Black.

"Never," he says, hardly pausing a second.

Now it's about to host its third major championship, but among the rota of public-access major venues in the U.S., it clearly

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stands alone – because while you can certainly play at Pebble Beach, which has hosted five US Opens and a PGA Championship, it will cost you \$500. Torrey Pines (South) isn't quite as costly, but the green fee is still \$300.

On a weekend, The Black—not a resort course or a high-end daily fee facility but a muni in the truest sense of the characterization—costs half that.

"When you pay," says Mattiace, "you slip your money underneath a slot, and there's glass between you and the employee—a state employee—[and] the glass is probably bulletproof."

It is the game's great paradox: one of its most magnificent courses without even the slightest hint of country club feel. It is regular-guy golf.

"I remember when I played there in the Open in 2002," says Leonard, who finished tied for 12th that year. "All the locals were coming up to me and saying, 'How you like our *cawse*?' [Leonard trying a New York accent the best a Texan can]."

What Bethpage is, what it was, and the fact that the transformation was effected without compromising its character, has always made it special to me. One small esoteric detail, though, is the cherry on top.

Google Bethpage Black and you'll find A.W. Tillinghast as the architect of record. But Ron Whitten in *Golf Digest* in 2009 unveiled evidence to suggest a man named

Joseph Burbeck, the superintendent at Bethpage State Park during the course's construction, might have had an equal or greater hand in its creation.

And that would fit perfectly with the dichotomy of the Black: a state employee supervising a WPA project deserving credit alongside the Hall of Fame blue blood architect whose name is on the scorecard.

"Look," says Jones, who donated his services for the initial renovation, "every design is a combination of different people's efforts, but Bethpage is a remarkable place for not only what it is, but what it continues to be." ■