

North Hills CC gets a traditional freshening

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North Hills Country Club in Manhasset. (Aug. 12, 2015) Photo Credit: Ian J. Stark

Mark Herrmann

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North Hills Country Club always has seemed like a perfect fit amid the rolling terrain and tall trees of Manhasset. It has been that way since the course was born in 1963, having been created by one of golf's master architects, Robert Trent Jones.

This year, the course was reborn, with completely rehabilitated bunkers, subtle contouring and a new short game practice facility. It was all done with utmost care for the original design, which was only natural because it was supervised by one of today's master architects, Rees Jones, the late Robert Trent's son.

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"There was no sense in going to an architect that wasn't in that company," said greens committee chairman Doug Martocci, who detailed what the club's selection process was like when members decided on the \$1.5 million project: "I think they made only one call."

Many Long Island clubs have done renovations in recent years, attempting to both keep up with current trends and restore original flavor. But not everyone has tapped a high profile hand such as Rees Jones, known as "the Open Doctor" for having reshaped courses — notably Bethpage Black — to host the U.S. Open.

Rees, who turned 75 this week, these days outlines his projects and turns over the nuts and bolts to his associates, including lead architect Steve Weisser, who did the North Hills work. It still is a family tradition.

“We have a term we usually use for it, we call it ‘sympathetic restoration.’ We try to tie it back together,” Weisser said. Of North Hills, he added, “It’s a nice piece of property. Mr. Jones built things a certain way. We see what he was trying to do here.”

The club was established in Douglaston in 1927 but struggled during and after the Depression, ultimately selling its property to Cathedral College. North Hills members bought land in Manhasset and hired Jones to build a new course in 1961. His layout always has been highly regarded. It hosted an LPGA event (won by Judy Rankin) in 1978. Current president Gregg Raffa said, though, that an upgrade was needed, particularly on the bunkers.

“They had deteriorated. They had become very, very hard. They were taking on water and rocks were coming up,” he said, pointing out that every bunker has been scooped out and refilled, starting with a base of gravel and polymer.

Bunkers are more important than most people think. Weisser said, “They become kind of the face of the golf course, they define the look.” The renovation began as a five-year plan, but once members saw the results on the first few holes, they wanted it accelerated, so it was completed in 18 months — all debt free. The result, Martocci said while standing near the new practice facility, is a course that is both more playable and more challenging.

Most important to the people who planned and did the work, it looks the way Robert Trent Jones wanted it to look. That is good news for Rees, too. “It’s something he really likes,” Weisser said of the man with whom he has worked for 25 years. “He enjoys keeping the style, the pedigree. We really enjoy doing projects like this.

“I think,” Weisser said, “it feels brand new.”