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Birdies will be tougher to come by on the par-5 18th at Baltusrol as players face a tougher tee shot than when the course last hosted the PGA in 2005, and a green that will be less receptive.

Voices

By Ron Whitten

It's a different Baltusrol for this year's PGA Championship, with different dates and a different finish. Yet the Lower Course at Baltusrol Golf Club in Springfield, N.J., is poised to deliver what the PGA has consistently delivered over the past decade: the most exciting and entertaining competition, year in and year out, of any of the four majors.

Let's start with the different dates. The PGA has been bumped from its traditional hot-and-humid mid-August slot by the Olympic golf competition. So this year it will be contested July 28-31, just 11 days after the Open Championship wrapped up in thrilling fashion at Troon. That could bode well for the winner of the claret jug, Henrik Stenson, if one believes in momentum. Or it could spell trouble, if jetlag and fatigue are factored in.

How the date change impacts the tournament from a weather standpoint is similarly uncertain. The earlier dates don't guarantee there won't be dog-day afternoons at Baltusrol; as the current forecast would suggest. "During our PGA Championship here in August 2005," says Mark Kuhns, the club's veteran course superintendent, "the temperature hit 100 degrees every day. July can't be any worse. It's a crapshoot. There are some Julys where the temperature never exceeds 80. But some years, we've seen it hit 100."

It can also be stormy in New Jersey in July, but indeed no worse than it was at Baltusrol's last PGA in 2005, when an early Sunday evening lightning storm delayed the tournament conclusion until Monday morning, when 12 players had to return to finish their final rounds.

One of the lucky ones to finish before the storm was Tiger Woods, who posted a two-under 278 late Sunday afternoon to trail leader Phil Mickelson, then on the 13th hole, by two shots. Unbeknownst to tournament officials, Woods flew home to Orlando that evening rather than stay over for a possible playoff. His reasoning was that there were five players between him and a win and it was unlikely all five would collapse with less than half a dozen holes remaining. In retrospect, that stands as perhaps Woods' first acknowledgement that his intimidation factor was starting to wane. It conjures up the amazing possibility that Mickelson, or one of the other four, could have been declared a playoff winner by default, merely over the price of a hotel room.

The silver lining Kuhns finds in this year's July dates is that it provides three extra weeks of turf recovery to Baltusrol's Lower Course, where greens will be mowed and rolled to achieve tournament speeds of 14 on the Stimpmeter. Fairway crosswalks and rough will be worn to nubbins, as it will for much of Baltusrol's Upper Course, where some 5,000 cars will be parked daily on 10 of its fairways. Early August provides plenty of sunlight and heat to regrow grass, Kuhns says. In late August, the angle of the sun is lower, the days get shorter, and the tasks get tougher. He predicts he'll have both courses back in shape for member play in record time.

Another factor in the rapid recovery will be the absence of shade. Over a thousand trees have been removed along many holes at Baltusrol since the last PGA, not as the result of any architectural tree-removal program, but rather as the consequence of Hurricane Sandy in 2012. More sunlight has also helped Kuhns develop thicker, denser primary rough along fairways in preparation for this year's PGA.

Baltusrol's different finish is the product of both brawn and brains. The Lower has long been known for its unique back-to-back par 5s at 17 and 18, the only par 5s on the championship par-70 set-up. (The first and seventh holes, normally short par 5s for members, play as par 4s for Baltusrol's championships.)

Throughout its history in championships, the 647-yard 17th was a true three-shot hole, with only John Daly in the 1993 U.S. Open ever having hit the green in two. Even in 2005, only a handful attempted to reach the green in two; none succeeded. This year, it's a distinct possibility many players will reach the 17th green in two, partly because there's now a narrow neck of fairway mown between bunkers in front of the elevated green, an area covered in rough in championships past. But this is mainly due to the fact so many tour players drive it so far these days. In last year's PGA at Whistling Straits, winner Jason Day hit more than one drive longer than 380 yards off the tee, and Bubba Watson hit a drive past the green on the 404-yard sixth. For a portion of the field, Baltusrol's 17th is now thought of as a birdie opportunity than than a rigorous par.

The 553-yard 18th was traditionally the better birdie chance, with a downhill tee shot to an ample fairway guarded by a narrow lagoon in the far left rough, then uphill to a perched green that wouldn't reject many approaches. Six years ago Rees Jones, Baltusrol's longtime consulting course architect, toughened the tee shot considerably by expanding the lagoon into a long, wide pond that now edges the fairway landing area on the left. For good measure, he created a string of four bunkers along the right side, thus squeezing the landing zone from 280 to 340 yards. Where 18 was once an expected birdie, it's now a potential bogey or worse for those who can't hit the fairway. For those who can hit it straight, an inviting, receptive green awaits.

Bold bombers at Baltusrol could leapfrog players on the closing two holes this year. For tournament theatrics, one can't ask for more than that.

Back before the 1993 U.S. Open at Baltusrol (one of six that the Lower Course has hosted), this writer wrote a snide column ("The Longest Yawn," Golf Digest, June 1993) insisting that Baltusrol was a boring layout that sputtered down the home stretch. Chalk that up to the youthful indiscretion of someone desiring to draw attention to himself. Baltusrol didn't deserve such childish cat calls, and its closing holes hardly sputter. If it ever was, it's definitely a yawner no longer.



