

# The Golf-Course Doctor Is In

*After years of 'improvements,' prominent clubs  
around the country are restoring their original designs*

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT

*Scarborough-on-Hudson, N.Y.*

**W**HEN I FIRST located Gil Hanse, the course designer heading up the restoration of the historic Sleepy Hollow Country Club golf course here, he and a dozen other men, most of them in boots and hooded jackets against the autumn cold, were circled around a gigantic boulder immediately to the right of the ninth green in the farthest corner of the property. Using a backhoe, they had just unearthed the rock, and were staring at it much like the astronauts stared at the black monolith in "2001: A Space Odyssey."

The problem was that the plans called for replacing the two existing, green-level bunkers with a single, much bigger one seven

feet lower. Using a pneumatic rock hammer and crew to demolish the boulder would cost a pricey \$2,500 a day. Mr. Hanse, a lean, limber 43-year-old, clambered up onto the boulder and then down into the partially excavated pit below the green. His decision: pound away with the rock hammer for at least one day, and see how far that would get them.

Most of us, when we play a golf course, are so concerned simply about keeping the ball in play that we seldom think about who designed the course. In some cases, there's not much reason to think about it. The holes were laid out, back and forth, years before by some unnamed practitioner or the local pro and have been altered so many times since in response to sugges-

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tions by club greens committees or course owners that no sense of authorship remains.

But the best golf courses, such as Sleepy Hollow and almost all of those that populate the top 100 or best-in-state lists, were carefully crafted by golf architects, the best of whom have come to be recognized in recent years as artists.

And restoring the classic old courses of masters such as Donald Ross, A.W. Tillinghast and Alister Mackenzie to their original style is now the hottest thing going in golf-course design—especially since the number of commissioned new courses has shrunk by more than a third in the last six years. Even the great crop of current masters, like Tom Fazio, Tom Doak, Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw, are spending some of their time paying homage to their predecessors by fixing up old courses.

But as Mr. Hanse (who also does original designs) and other A-list practitioners of the restoration arts know well, you don't have to dig very deep—literally or figuratively—to run into problems. They encompass not just practical issues like hidden boulders, but aesthetic, philosophical, financial and, especially, social issues involving the members and committees of the sponsoring golf clubs.

Take that ninth hole at Sleepy Hollow. It would be easy enough to fashion a shallower bunker there, but that would stray from the design "palette" of Sleepy Hollow's esteemed creator, Charles Blair Macdonald. The existing green-level bunkers got there because about 20 years after Mr. Macdonald completed his design in 1911, the club (whose members included Rockefellers, Astors and Vanderbilts) brought in Mr. Tillinghast to expand the course, and the current ninth hole is one of his. On top of that, Sleepy Hollow hired Robert Trent Jones to spiff things up a bit in the 1960s, and summonsed his son, Rees Jones, to make further changes to the course in the 1990s.

As a result, Sleepy Hollow seems a bit disjointed. "Basically you have three different looks and feels out here," Mr. Hanse says. "Part of our presentation to the club was to try to make the course feel as if it was the work of just one architect."

Mr. Macdonald's style was chosen in part for competitive advantage: Westchester County in New York, where



David M. Russell (2); Getty Images (Lynch)

**Do-Overs:** Gil Hanse (top) at Sleepy Hollow's 16th hole, where he is rebuilding the bunker to surround the green; below, renovations on the 12th hole.

## Mr. Fix-Its

A look at some of the better-known restoration efforts.

COURSE	ARCHITECT	SIGNATURE STYLE	COMMENT ON RESTORATION
<b>Bethpage Black</b> Farmingdale, N.Y.	A.W. Tillinghast (1936)	A tricky course with natural waste areas and Mr. Tillinghast's distinctive, <b>sculptured bunkers</b>	<b>Rees Jones</b> moved many fairway bunkers to accommodate modern distances, but refashioned them in the old style.
<b>Yale Golf Course</b> New Haven, Conn.	Seth J. Raynor (1926)	A highly original, expansive design over <b>rugged terrain</b> by C.B. Macdonald's partner.	Many distinctive features were lost due to poor upkeep and substandard renovations, but <b>Roger G. Rulewich's</b> recent restoration undid most of the damage.
<b>Augusta National</b> Augusta, Ga.	Alister Mackenzie and Bobby Jones (1933)	Green, hilly and flower bedecked in spring, Augusta has greens that may be the <b>fastest and trickiest anywhere</b> .	<b>Tom Fazio's</b> work before this year's Masters Tournament added yet more length and some controversial trees.

Sleepy Hollow is located, already has several great Tillinghast courses (including Winged Foot, the site of this year's U.S. Open), but no others by Mr. Macdonald, who is most famous for his ground-breaking National Golf Links of America on Long Island and Mid-Ocean in Bermuda.

"Clubs have discovered that being associated with one of the recognized greats carries a lot more cachet than it used to," Mr. Hanse says.

One of the most difficult challenges course restorers face is accommodating the distance that clubs these days can hit a golf ball. Tee boxes must be pushed back or fairway hazards relocated to challenge 280-yard drives. Wrangling over a course designer's original intent is golf's version of Constitutional debate.



But in channeling Mr. Macdonald, Mr. Hanse has the help of George Bahto, a burly 76-year-old architect who supervises the day-to-day work at Sleepy Hollow, and who wrote the definitive Macdonald biography, "The Evangelist of Golf." If the plans call for a flat-bottomed bunker with a steep grass face (a Macdonald specialty), Mr. Bahto knows better than anybody in the world what it should look like. "What's drawn on the blueprint is one thing," Mr. Bahto says. "But it's not until you get down in the dirt that you really know how things are going to turn out."

Messrs. Hanse and Bahto also spend a lot of time mulling over aesthetics, such as the proper width of a new bunker on the eighth hole. They twiddled with its exact form until, from the tee box, the sandy thumb visibly extended into the fairway just so.

Not everybody at the club was happy about the restoration project—not by a long shot. When George Sanossian, the current head of the club's greens committee (which oversees changes to and maintenance of the course), took charge in 2003, he and a few other committee newcomers felt that a recently approved plan to modernize the course didn't

do justice to the club's legacy. But getting the club's membership to agree wasn't easy.

One fact of life in most clubs is that many members don't like change—especially when, as in this case, it comes with a \$2.3 million price tag (including revisions to the club's short, nine-hole Lower Course). "Honestly, if God came down here with C.B. Macdonald himself at His side and said this is what we have to do, a lot of the members would still refuse," says Mr. Sanossian.

Tree removal is always a hugely emotional issue in course restorations. At Sleepy Hollow, the plan's most controversial element was slightly rerouting the par-four 12th hole and converting it into a par five—necessitating a new green in the middle of a former thicket.

Mr. Sanossian gives a lot of credit for swaying opinion to Mr. Hanse, who three times gave PowerPoint presentations at the club and never lost his cool despite being hammered by unsympathetic interrogators. One of them, initially, was Mark Duffy, 34, a former two-time club champion whose mother (17 times) and grandfather (seven times) were also club champions. "I didn't see why we needed to make any changes at all," Mr. Duffy says. "But after listening to Gil talk about the best angles into the green and bunker placement, I realized I didn't really know that much about course design, and now I'm totally in."

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