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Baltusrol regains its Tillinghast feel but still poses a stiff test

By Bradley S. Klein // Springfield, N.J.

The mantra for the 98th PGA Championship will be simple: hang on for dear life over the first 16 holes and make up for lost ground over the final two holes.

The advice derives from the basic character of Baltusrol Golf Club's Lower Course, home to the PGA on July 28-31. Unlike any other major golf venue, Baltusrol offers the possibility of delayed redemption: the only par 5s are Nos. 17 and 18. Members and guests play the first and seventh holes as par 5s, but the world's best players won't. The 7,428-yard layout clocks in as a par 70 (76.2 rating/146 slope).

Baltusrol's Lower Course, at No. 45 on the Golfweek's Best Classic list, derives from A.W. Tillinghast's 1922 expansion and redesign of the club's original 18-hole layout into two distinct tracts.

The club's "other" tract is no slouch. The Upper Course ranks No. 52 on that same

Golfweek's Best Classic list.

Tillinghast's work featured massive sand hazards, some in crumbly shapes, many scattered diagonally across the line of play. Several resemble huge doughnuts. The Lower Course got rationalized, cleaned up and buttoned down over the years, first by Robert Trent Jones before the 1954 U.S. Open and then by son Rees Jones. The U.S. Golf Association didn't help things two months before the 1967 U.S. Open, insisting that the club's distinctive "Great Hazard" on the long par-5 17th hole be transformed from nearly an acre of broken, sandy waste into four bunkers.

Recent work by Rees Jones, with course superintendent Mark Kuhns, championship general chairman Rick Jenkins and club architecture historian Rick Wolffe, helped restore much of the original Tillinghast character. That's evident in a reduction of superfluous mounding, restoring many lost bunker formations and simplifying bunker

shapes into Tillinghast's naturalistic style. They even got the doughnuts back, though not yet that frumpy Great Hazard on No. 17.

Nobody would mistake Baltusrol Lower for charming. It's more of a steady grind over flawlessly manicured turfgrass. Considerable tree management since Phil Mickelson won the PGA here in 2005 has helped open interior vistas and provided more sunlight for better agronomy. The removal of what had been solid walls of trees has created space for more naturalized rough areas plus greater landscape identity for the holes.

No hole shows more improvement than the 218-yard, par-3 12th. The greenside edge of a massive bunker has been peeled back, making the putting surface visible from the tee. A large short-cropped area back right of the green will take a slightly mis-hit approach and funnel it into a chipping area that ties seamlessly into a newly established back tee on the par-4 13th. Gone is the modernist conceit of isolated golf holes. The place feels more traditional.

That doesn't mean it's any easier. On the contrary, there are more choices and options. That's what makes the monstrous 17th hole so compelling. Even at 649 yards, it presents

alternative paths. If the tees are moved up, the green might be in reach in two for those long drivers willing to challenge an intruding fairway bunker. A new fairway cut on the left side of the second-shot landing area provides incentive for a more aggressive safe shot. Those brawny enough to challenge the green in two will find slightly more favorable odds because of an expanded front ramp to the elevated green. Visually, the hole presents more character, thanks to a newly opened skyline horizon line that serves double duty with the elevated fifth green behind it. The effect is to elevate the target and make it more visually intimidating while opening it up to more wind.

Players with length always have an advantage, but as Baltusrol proves with more verve than it has conveyed in decades, they will have to think their way around. **Gwk**

SCORECARD

Hole	Par	Yardage
1	4	478
2	4	377
3	4	503
4	3	196
5	4	425
6	4	482
7	4	501
8	4	380
9	3	210
OUT	34	3,552
10	4	460
11	4	431
12	3	218
13	4	451
14	4	430
15	4	453
16	3	230
17	5	649
18	5	554
IN	36	3,876
TOTAL	70	7,428

Baltusrol's long par-5 17th