

Mission accomplished

Golf architect Rees Jones describes the development of Hazeltine National, the host of this year's Ryder Cup



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Substantial changes were made to Hazeltine National throughout the 1970s, including converting the par three sixteenth into a par four stretching along Lake Hazeltine

In the early 1960s, my father Robert Trent Jones and Minnesota businessman Totten Heffelfinger set out to build a bold golf course that they hoped would become one of the world's most acclaimed tests of championship golf. As they formed the club, the founding members shared this vision. It is spelled out in the mission statement of Hazeltine National Golf Club that the club's goal is “to build and maintain a golf course suitable for the conduct of national championships.” In carrying out this mission, they also commit to “maintaining the playability of the course by ‘fine tuning’ the course as required to assure that it is, and continues to be, the pre-eminent golf facility in the region.”

People tend to forget that many of our great courses, including Augusta National, were built with limited finances. Alister MacKenzie, Bobby Jones and Clifford Roberts struggled mightily when creating that course during the depth of the Depression; early photographs reveal that it was far from the opulent masterpiece it is today. Hazeltine, completed in less than a year's time, was also created within the confines of a strict budget, costing about a million dollars, including the price of the land. There were a number of blind shots, the irrigation system was limited, and the large trees that now frame the course were mere saplings. The course was long and demanding. In 1970, it played as the second longest US Open course up to that date at 7,151 yards. My father called himself a ‘defender of par’ and regarded length as an important way to accomplish this.

Hazeltine was not fully mature when it hosted its first US Open in 1970. Almost immediately after the Open, the club –

architecturally directed by my father and later by me – dedicated themselves to improving the course, an undertaking that has essentially never stopped. The major men's championships the club has hosted since that time – the 1991 US Open and the 2002 and 2009 PGA Championships – have served as milestones in the progress the club has made.

Throughout the 1970s, my father and Bob Fisher, a founding member, worked together to make substantial changes to the golf course. The best change, in my opinion, was converting the par three sixteenth (Ryder Cup hole number seven) into a par four stretching along Lake Hazeltine, while converting the very narrow par four seventeenth (Ryder Cup hole number eight) into a strong par three. He also straightened out three additional holes to relieve the severity and blindness of the sharp dog-leg fairways.

With these major changes complete, I was asked in 1987 to refine and add more definition in preparation for Hazeltine's next major, the 1991 US Open. Working with club official Reed MacKenzie, we re-graded a number of fairways and made significant changes to tee and bunker locations. The players at the 1991 US Open Championship were universal in their praise for the course, essentially giving us permission to continue with the work.

All told, since 1987, we have reworked, repositioned or added every bunker that exists on the course today. In 2010, working closely with club president Tim Rainey, we undertook the rebuilding of all 18 greens to USGA specifications. We retained all of my father's original hole locations and created or expanded others. Since that time, all of the bunkers have been improved by the use of the highest quality of liner and bunker sand.

The Hazeltine National Golf Club has been the site of many historic moments in golf. At the 2016 Ryder Cup, players will find that the course has progressed in pace with the modern game. In the club's ongoing pursuit to provide a venue that is regarded as suitable for the ultimate team competition, the founder's vision has been realised, and the mission goes on. **GCA**



Photo: Gary Kellner/PGA of America

Rees Jones has designed or redesigned more than 170 courses and has been president of Rees Jones, Inc. since 1974