

MGA Championship Preview, Edgewood Reinvented, Bewitching Bermuda



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THE PGA COMES TO Bethpage

RODMAN W AMAKER

MAJOR

DOINGS

The PGA of America brings its biggest event to the grandest public stage in the country, Bethpage Black

BY ERIK MATUSZEWSKI



Anyone from the Met Area who has teed it up at Bethpage State Park knows full well that its Black Course is no walk in the... well, you know. The famous sign behind the first tee box provides ample warning of that, just one of the many reasons to look forward to the 101st PGA Championship being held May 16–19 at the revered Long Island layout.

Among the unique appeals of golf is that we mortals occasionally have the opportunity to play where the pros play. We might even get to boast to our golfing buddies about that one time we scored as well (or better) on a particular hole than the game's stars, whether it was Jack Nicklaus, Tiger Woods, or a journeyman pro who suffered a dastardly fate worse than we ever did.

-WARNING-

The Black Course Is An
Extremely Difficult Course
Which We Recommend Only
For Highly Skilled Golfers



Top: The approach to the dangerously slippery 15th green. Inset: A statue of the Bethpage logo stands near the entrance to the pro shop.

And this year, the PGA Championship is flipping the script, bringing the pros to where *we* play. “The Black” will be just the second municipal golf course—along with Tanglewood Park, Clemmons, N.C., in 1974—to host the tournament. The heralded muni, originally designed by A.W. Tillinghast, joins Pebble Beach and Pinehurst No. 2 as just the third public course to play host to both the U.S. Open and PGA Championship. The Black has also served as the site of the Met Open three times: in 1989, when Bobby Heins won the second of his back-to-back titles; in 2001, when amateur Johnson Wagner took the first of *his* back-to-back wins; and in 2010, when Bob Rittberger’s three consecutive even-par rounds put him in a playoff, which he won.

“Bethpage is the mecca of public golf,” says Danny Balin, the head professional at Fresh Meadow Country Club, about 20 miles east of Bethpage in Lake Success. Balin was the runner-up in that 2010 playoff with Rittberger; he has also won the New York State Open at The Black in 2012 and 2013 after losing there in a playoff in 2011. He’s played in five PGA Championships, most recently last August at Bellerive in St. Louis, where he missed the cut but finished ahead of touring pros such as Bubba Watson and Paul Casey. He’ll be trying to qualify through the PGA Professionals

Championship at Belfair in Bluffton, S.C., in late April, where a top 20 finish will put him in the Bethpage field.

Balin says there’s nothing he’d like more than to make another major championship appearance at a course he knows like the back of his hand: “The Black is one of my favorite courses in the world. It is brutally hard, but very fair. It is long, straightforward, and there is nothing goofy about it. It tests all parts of a player’s game.”

The five color-coded courses at Bethpage State Park are home to almost 300,000 rounds of golf a year. It’s public golf at its finest and most diverse. Show up on any Saturday morning and you’ll find a strikingly-wide assemblage of ages, races and income brackets.

“The best part about it is the average golfer, if they go out there and play, they can relate to us,” says reigning PGA champion Brooks Koepka. “You’ll probably see guys lose their head with how difficult it is. But they can have a sense of, ‘Man, I played that hole and I hit it there, too, and I know exactly the feeling he’s going through,’ and ‘Hey, I at least made the up-and-down when he couldn’t.’ It’s fun when you get on a public golf course and a lot more people are able to play it and they really know what we’re going through.”

The PGA of America said back in 2013 that this



which has traditionally been the last of the golf season's four majors—would be played in May rather than August. It's created a bit of a truncated preparation schedule for organizers, who also might have to deal with weather challenges so early in the season.

"For this one in particular, we lost a few months in our planning and sales cycle," says championship director Scott Reid. "With the last PGA Championship being held in August, it condensed the cycle for this first one and then May becomes the new norm."

The New York area is home to passionate sports fans and the deepest pool of golfers of any U.S. metropolitan area—almost 1.5 million strong, according to the National Golf Foundation. It's used to having a wealth of major events, sporting and otherwise—and that, too, presented a challenge for tournament organizers from an awareness and ticket-sales standpoint.

"A lot of the markets that we've gone to, the PGA Championship's been the biggest game in town. That's not necessarily the case in New York," Reid acknowledged. "There's a lot of other things

The 2009 U.S. Open, like its 2002 predecessor, was bedeviled by weather issues that forced a Monday finish.

year's PGA Championship (along with the 2024 Ryder Cup) would be coming to Bethpage, which was home to the U.S. Open in 2002 and 2009, as well as the opening event of the PGA TOUR's FedEx Cup Playoffs in 2012 and 2016. More recently, the PGA announced that its showcase event—

The PGA Championship at a Glance

Practice Rounds: Monday, May 13 through Wednesday, May 15.

Competitive Rounds: Thursday, May 16 through Sunday, May 19.

Size of Field: The PGA Championship is the only all-professional major championship, with a 156-man field.

Approximate Yardage and Par: 7,432 yards / par 70

Tickets: Limited daily grounds and upgraded ticket packages remain available (Saturday tickets are sold out). To learn more, or buy yours today, visit pgachampionship.com

How to Get There:

By Car: General Public Parking - complimentary parking is available at Jones Beach (1 Ocean Parkway, Wantagh, NY). Complimentary shuttle service will be provided from the parking area to and from the main entrance at Bethpage State Park. There is no overnight parking in any PGA Championship public parking lot.

UBER / Rideshare - Spectators using UBER, taxi, or another rideshare service will be dropped off at an off-site location about four miles away - 235 Pinelawn Road, Melville, NY - and then taken via complimentary shuttles to the main entrance.

Train - Spectators taking the Long Island Railroad (LIRR) to the Farmingdale train station will be transported to and from the championship main entrance by complimentary shuttles. There will be a special train schedule for the week of the PGA Championship.

Walk/Bike - For those opting to walk or bike to the PGA Championship, there is a dedicated walk-in gate available across from the Puritan Lane / Quaker Meeting House Road intersection.

NOTE: Quaker Meeting House and Round Swamp Roads will be closed during Championship week. Neighborhoods surrounding Bethpage State Park will have strict access restrictions.



Hospitality: The Empire Club will provide exclusive hospitality access to the Bethpage Clubhouse and to a private viewing suite overlooking the 18th green. Take advantage of the special benefit for Empire Club packages emailed to MGA members on March 19th or contact Rick Jenkins at rjenkins@pgahq.com for details.

Restrictions: Backpacks and drawstring bags are not permitted and cannot be stored. Bags larger than 10" x 10" x 10" are not permitted, with the exception of folding chair bags (chair must be removed at security checkpoint). Mobile phones must be set to silent or vibrate; camera flash must be turned off; no calls can be made or received within 100 yards of competition. Mobile photography is permitted during practice rounds only; text, email, social posting and other data use is allowed providing players are not in position and about to play their shots.

Past Performance: Eight players finished in the top 25 both times. The BARCLAYS (now the Northern Trust) was held at The Black: Jason Day, Rickie Fowler, Ryan Moore, Ryan Palmer, Bubba Watson, Dustin Johnson, Louis Oosthuizen, and Brian Harman. Moore and Palmer also finished in the top 25 at the 2009 U.S. Open.



happening here. It's been a slower market to respond than we're used to. We had to deal with that and be patient and smart about how we were promoting the championship and making sure people are aware it's in May."

This is the first time that the PGA Championship will be played in May since 1949. (See the box at right.) It will also be the first time the PGA has returned to Long Island since 1939, when it was a match play competition and contested at the now-defunct Pomonok Country Club in Queens during the New York World's Fair. That former golf course, about two miles southeast of Flushing Meadows-Corona Park and roughly 25 miles west of Bethpage State Park, is now covered by roads and public housing.

Bethpage State Park is a massive complex that encompasses almost 1,500 acres. Some outside-the-ropes logistics will be similar to the 2002 and 2009 U.S. Opens, said Reid, chief among them the planning required to move more than 200,000 golf fans around the property, including on-course fairway crossings and spectator flow to and from parking lots and the nearby train station. The location of bleachers, corporate tents, TV and camera towers, and other structures will also be similar to the other majors held at The Black. More than 550,000 square feet of temporary flooring will be constructed on site, the equivalent of almost 9½ football fields.

But what can we expect inside the ropes?

It Wasn't Always in August

The shift of the PGA Championship from August to May feels like an epochal change, but historically the event has been played in every month except January, March, and April.

Month	Years
February	1971
May	1937, 1942, 1948-49
June	1947, 1950-52
July	1934, 1938-39, 1941, 1945, 1953-64, 1966-68, 2016
August	1920, 1922, 1933, 1940, 1944, 1946, 1965, 1969-70, 1972-2015, 2017-18
September	1919, 1921, 1923-26, 1930-32
October	1916, 1928, 1935
November	1927, 1936
December	1929
Not Played	1917-18, 1943

Bethpage Black yielded just one under-par score after 72 holes at the 2002 U.S. Open, as Tiger Woods led wire-to-wire and finished 3-under to win his eighth major championship. Five players were under par in 2009, when Lucas Glover won at minus-4. While that's about right for the USGA and the U.S. Open, the set-up for the PGA Championship will likely be more akin to what the pros have seen at the FedEx Cup events there. Nick Watney won The BARCLAYS in 2012 with a score of minus-10, while Patrick Reed shot 9-under to win it in 2016.

Below: Bob Rittberger holds the trophy after winning the 2010 Met Open at Bethpage Black. Bottom: Ernie Els teeing off on the magnificent fourth hole during the 2009 U.S. Open.





Danny Balin with the winner's check and Mark Grossinger Etess Trophy after winning the New York State Open at the Black in 2012. Right: The fifth hole was named one of the 18 Greatest Holes in the World by *Golf Magazine* in 2000.

"I would expect between 8- and 12-under par to win," says Rory McIlroy, a two-time PGA champion whose wife Erica was a member of the PGA of America's championship department for eight years. "I don't expect even par. That's not what the PGA of America wants. They want some birdies and a little bit of excitement."

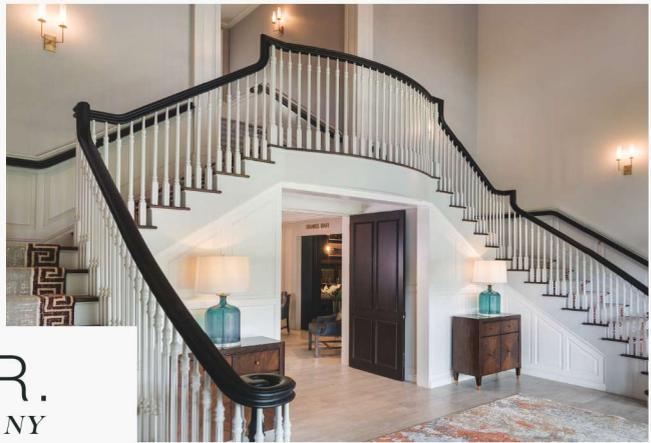
McIlroy believes the course set-up will depend in large part on the weather leading up to the event. Playing a major championship in New York in May could be "dicey," he says. "The rough could be patchy, it might not have grown in that much. And if it's colder weather, it's a very long golf course and that will only make it play even longer. That golf course plays into the longer guys' hands anyway, but even more so if it is a little colder."

Among those applauding the PGA Championship's move to May is Andy Wilson, who oversees all five courses as Bethpage State Park's Director of Agronomy. Wilson notes that Bethpage is a "cool season golf course" for grasses, including *Poa annua* on the greens, and said he's seen winter damage only twice in his 25 years at the facility. "May compared to August is a pretty inviting proposition," Wilson says. "We might have winter damage one out of ten years, but we have stress in August ten out of ten years. So I'd much rather have it in May. In August, the course would have been opened for three months and seen a lot more



rounds, which means more ball marks, divots, and wear and tear on the course."

The Black Course closed last year on Nov. 11 and will only be open to the public for two weeks, weather permitting, ahead of the PGA Championship before shutting down for final preparations on April 28. Those rounds will be limited to walk-



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Mother Nature will determine how firm or soft the course will play in May, but wet weather was a factor at both U.S. Opens played there, and those were in June. In 2002 it was the longest U.S. Open course to that time, a 7,214-yard par-70 layout. It proved to be an advantage for long hitters like Woods and Phil Mickelson, who finished 1-2, with rainy and windy conditions during the second round making it difficult for some in the field to even reach the fairway from the new back tees on the par-4 10th and 12th holes, each stretched to almost 500 yards. In 2009, rain hampered play the first three days at The Black and necessitated a Monday finish, with Mickelson notching another of his record six runner-up showings at the U.S. Open.

Koepka, who tied for fourth at the most recent PGA in the Met Area, the 2016 event won by Jimmy Walker at Baltusrol, is readying himself for the challenge at Bethpage's Black Course. At the 2016 Barclays, he failed to shoot par or better in all four rounds and finished 7-over par.

"The fairways are relatively tight, and they've got some turn to them," says Koepka. "So you've really got to pick and choose what you're going to hit off the tee. You don't always need driver. It's all about placement. And then coming into these greens, there's just a constant slope on them. You feel like everything is at like a 1½-degree slope, so you're trying to fig-

ure out the best way to get [an] uphill putt and not be in a bad spot. And then the rough is going to be pretty deep, I would assume. You know if you hit it in the rough, you're going to be struggling to make par."

The rough is the only aspect Wilson, the director of agronomy, is mildly concerned about come May, assuming no winter damage. "By that time of year our short grass – the greens, tees, fairways – is in fantastic condition," he said. "Last year, the corresponding week of the tournament, the greens were in terrific shape. Last spring was cold into April and the rough had a hard time getting going. Some of the rough was still dormant in May and we saw some straw-colored turf out there. But by the time the tournament rolls around hopefully the course will be in perfect shape."

Local pros know it will provide a perfect test.

"There are only two or three holes out there you can really attack from a par-4 standpoint," says Glen Arbor Director of Golf Rob Labritz, who has appeared in five PGA Championships and won three New York Opens at Bethpage Black. "Then you have to take advantage on the par-5 holes. The rest, strap on your seatbelt because you'll be in for a tough ride. And that place is always filled with energy. A ton of people from Long Island and New York City are going to come to see how it tests the best players in the world. It's going to be a fun scene." ■



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