

# Old Oaks preserves its past while providing a richly modern member experience.

BY DAVE DONELSON

Photograph by Evan Schiller

**W**ith a golf course created by two legendary Golden Age architects and a spectacular mansion for a clubhouse, Old Oaks Country Club could easily sit on its considerable laurels and bask in the glories of days gone by. But the 94-year-old Purchase, N.Y., club is focused on the future instead. “We’re trying to provide what young families want,” says president Josh Polan. “We’ve tried to broaden the mix of our membership, too.” Like so many private clubs, Old Oaks lost some members in the aftermath of the 2008 national economic meltdown. It fought back aggressively, though, and today has a robust membership of 400 families. Roughly 50 of them have been members for two or even three generations while an equal number are new within the last ten years.

# DEEP ROOTS



The eighteenth hole at Old Oaks climbs the hill to finish near the grand clubhouse. The pro shop is at right, by the first tee.



The grand entrance of Hill Crest estate, as the property was known in 1924, just a year before it was purchased by the Progress Club. Below: *The American Architect* reported on alterations to William Read's house in Purchase that resulted in the East Porch of today's clubhouse.

"When things got tough, the board recognized the situation and went after some new members," according to head golf professional Nick Maselli. "They also placed a big bet on golf. The club spent \$3.5 million on the golf course, the range, and the short game area, and it's paid off. People are coming and they're excited about it."

Old Oaks has purposefully stepped up its amenities and significantly modernized its attitude. "We've tried to reduce the formality of the club," Polan says. "There was a time when, on Saturday nights, men wore jackets and ties. My guess is now there are maybe three nights a year when jackets are requested and ties aren't required at all."

"We've taken in a lot of members and the churn has been remarkably small. That tells me we're accomplishing what we set out to do. A number of these people joined when our initiation fee was peanuts. They could have left after a year or two without losing much, but they haven't."

In 1925, members of the Progress Club, a group of Jewish businessmen in Manhattan, organized what eventually became known as Old Oaks Country Club to expand the club's activities beyond swimming, billiards, and card-playing in its home at Central Park West and 87th Street. The group that bought the only property the country club has occupied first called it the Progress Country Club, then renamed it Purchase Country Club, Pine Ridge Country Club, and finally Old Oaks Country Club when it merged with Tuckahoe's Oak Ridge Country Club during the Great Depression.

Legend has it that the "Old Oaks" name

was derived not from the trees on the course but from the logos on the Oak Ridge CC dinnerware that was put into use as a money-saving measure after the merger. Today, the most prominent display of oak trees at the club is the allée that leads from the impressive stone pillars at the entrance. The red oaks were planted in 1988 to replace double rows of Norway maples that originally lined the road.

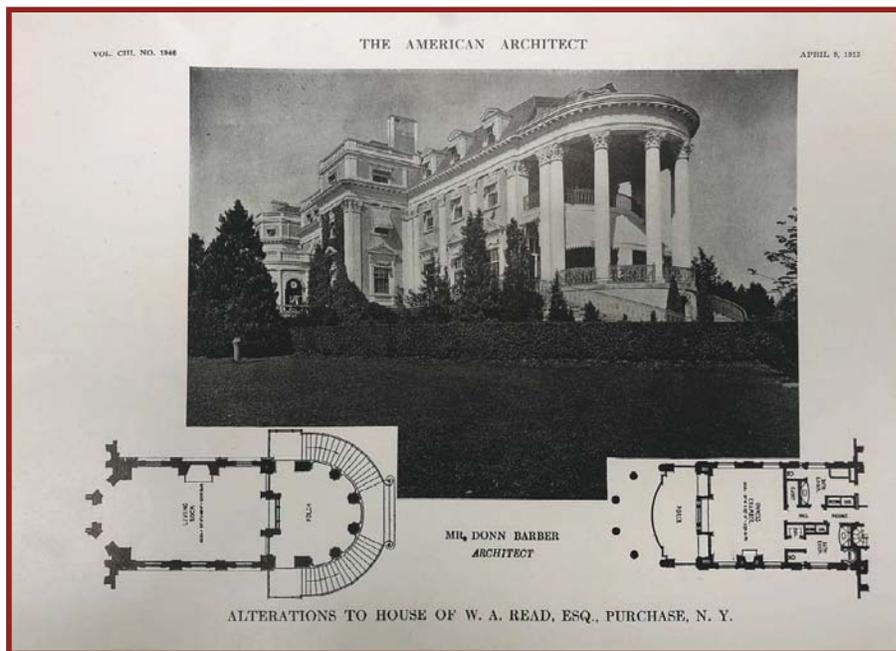
The Progress Club acquired the 205-acre estate of William Read (principal partner of the investment bank Dillon, Read & Co.) from his widow for \$600,000 and immediately put A. W. Tillinghast to work designing two golf courses. The 9-hole West Course opened in 1926, and members began play on the 18-hole East Course the next year.

The courses were actually constructed by Charles Alison of Alison and Holt using Tillinghast's designs; Tilly had resigned when the cost of construction passed the \$100,000 threshold that would reduce his fee. Alison was already building Century Country Club, which abutted Old Oaks before the bulk of the West Course was obliterated by the construction of I-684 in 1963.

Like most Golden Age golf courses, Old Oaks has undergone many changes, although the routing and the muscular character of the track remain the same. It's formidable enough to co-host sectional qualifying for the U.S. Open in tandem with Century CC, as it has repeatedly in the last 30 years (including this year and the next two as well). Old Oaks will also host the Met PGA Championship in 2021 and the Met Amateur in 2025, the club's centennial year.

Third-generation member, club historian, and former president Ken Schlechter says, "It was a real turning point when Lowell Schulman became president. He made a lot of improvements in the course and hired a professional greens superintendent. The quality was really stepped up." Schulman's long association with the club is memorialized by a plaque near the lake on the sixth hole proclaiming it "Loch Lowell."

In 2001, Ken Dye toughened the course by lengthening it, deepening the bunkers, and constructing a new 18th green. In 2016, Rees Jones began phase one of a master plan that called for undoing some of those modern touches and restoring its classical character, including replacement of that 18th green. "It had five tiers!" exclaims Maselli.





Above: The expansive pool was used in the filming of *Goodbye, Columbus* starring Ali McGraw (inset) and based on the Philip Roth novella. Below: The formal gardens in 1926.

“The new one is much more traditional in a Tillinghast sort of way. It’s back-to-front with subtle breaks. The green is now kidney-shaped and has a bunker right front that matches the rest of the golf course.”

The Rees Jones renovations were designed not to make the course more difficult—with a 71.9/140 Course and Slope Rating from the 6,421-yard blue tees, it’s already tough enough for most mortal golfers—but to provide more flexibility. New tee boxes were created on half the holes. “It was a combination of black, a couple of blues, and many red and green tees,” Maselli explains. “We wanted to spread the golf course out more so every skill level had a course to play.”

A big part of the master plan was a major upgrade to the club’s practice facilities. A double-ended range is complemented by a short game complex with two target greens, three bunkers, and countless lie/turf variations. All the bunkers can be played in both directions so you can work on short as well as long sand recoveries. And Maselli notes a well-appreciated detail: “We put good balls there so if you’re chipping, you’re not hitting a hard range ball.”

Another enhancement intended to attract more family use of the golf course is a state-of-the-art indoor practice facility. “It has three hitting bays, a putting green, and a lounge,” Maselli says. “All the bays are equipped with advanced technology. The teaching bay has FlightScope and V-1 cameras. The other two have Foresight with desktop Dell gaming computers with big monitors so members can use them without taking a lesson.”

The investment has paid off, as the bays

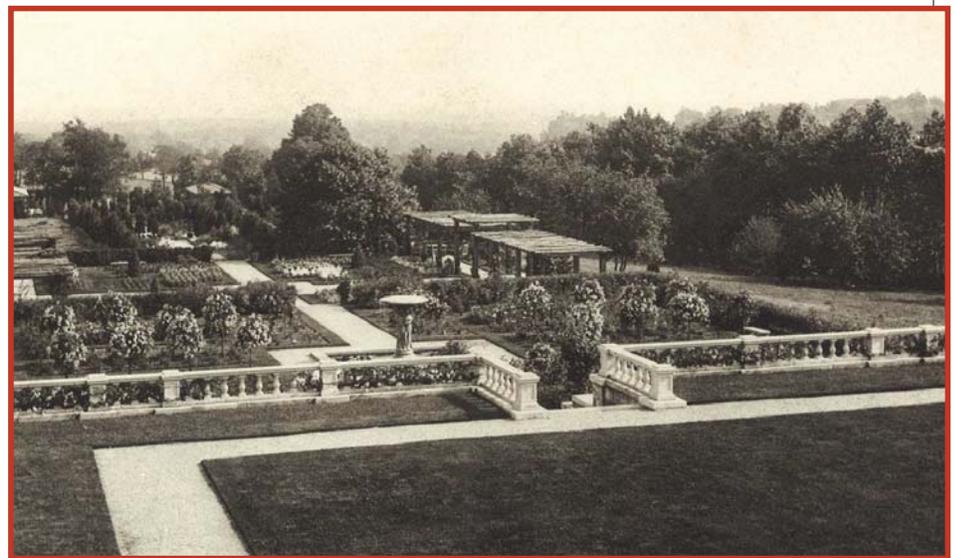
were in steady use throughout the normally slow winter months. “It’s been a big attraction with all the new members that are local families,” Maselli says. “Saturday is their family day together and coming to the indoor golf facility becomes just like going to basketball practice or whatever. Without the technology, kids wouldn’t be interested.”

Maselli, who has been head pro since 2017, started at the club eighteen years ago as an assistant to Bobby Heins, whose playing credentials include back-to-back Met Open triumphs as well as nearly every other title in the area, not to mention competing in 15 major championships. The original Progress Country Club head pro was “Wild Bill” Melhorn, who lasted just a year before he moved to Fenway GC and was replaced by Bobby Cruickshank, perhaps best remembered for losing to 21-year-old Bobby Jones in a playoff at the 1921 U.S. Open at Inwood. Willie MacFarland, who

beat Jones in the 1925 U.S. Open, became head pro in 1936 when the club merged with Oak Ridge and became today’s Old Oaks.

The golf facilities are excellent, but it’s the clubhouse at Old Oaks that takes the experience to a dramatic and literal peak. The English-style manor house was constructed in 1890 as a “summer cottage” by Trenor Luther Park, a Manhattan merchant and commodore of the New York Yacht Club. To enhance his summer home, Park hired Beatrix Jones Farrand, who designed the White House’s Rose Garden, to landscape the grounds.

Park sold the estate, known as “Hill Crest,” to William Read in 1906, and Read added more property to the grounds as well as rooms to the already-sumptuous mansion to make space for his nine children. “We’ve had renovations, but basically the character has stayed the same,” Schlechter says. “I love the Grand Hall. The craftsmanship is wonderful.” Iwona Sterk, the general



manager since 2017, explains that the club takes great care to restore furnishings to match the original fabrics and finishes because the members appreciate the artistry. Today, the 80,000-square-foot clubhouse has some fifty rooms including three indoor dining facilities, outdoor cocktail and dining terraces, locker rooms, an exercise room, and apartments for members.

Just as the golf course and practice facility have been transformed to attract a wider array of family members, other club amenities have been modernized with the same goal in mind. "Our membership is very diverse," Sterk says. "We have legacies in their nineties and families with young children. It can be a challenge pleasing everyone, but we make sure there are activities for all on our calendar."

Among those family-friendly innovations is the Old Oaks Treehouse, a space where kids can hang out while their parents enjoy other parts of the club. "The room not only has games and other activities, but we hire two teachers for the season," Sterk explains. "We also have a playground and basketball court, and the teachers take the kids to tennis, golf, and swimming lessons."

The Olympic-size pool and adjacent kiddie pool, both classically landscaped, are

centerpieces of club life at Old Oaks as well as the site of some semi-historic occurrences. "Having Ali McGraw swim topless in our swimming pool during the filming of *Goodbye, Columbus* was quite a significant event," says Schlechter.

Old Oaks offers a wide variety of dining options, from the classically impressive Oak Room to the chicly modern Acorn Grill, not to mention the unique halfway house, where Efrain Barajas [one of "The Invaluables" profiled in *The Met Golfer*, November-December 2018] has presided since 1987. The lakeside facility not only serves golfers from its site at the confluence of seven greens and tees, but is a favorite for member families who enjoy casual dinners there on Wednesday and Saturday evenings that are typically sold out throughout the season.

Another unique food feature at Old Oaks is Acorn Organics Farm, which occupies five acres where the original estate gardens were located. The brainchild of former Old Oaks president Richard Fleder and member Andrew Benerofe, the farm not only provides spectacularly fresh produce for the ever-changing menus at Old Oaks, but the club donates about 60,000 pounds of food annually to local pantries and other organizations through the Old Oaks Foun-

ation. Members can also pay into a crop-share program for their own tables.

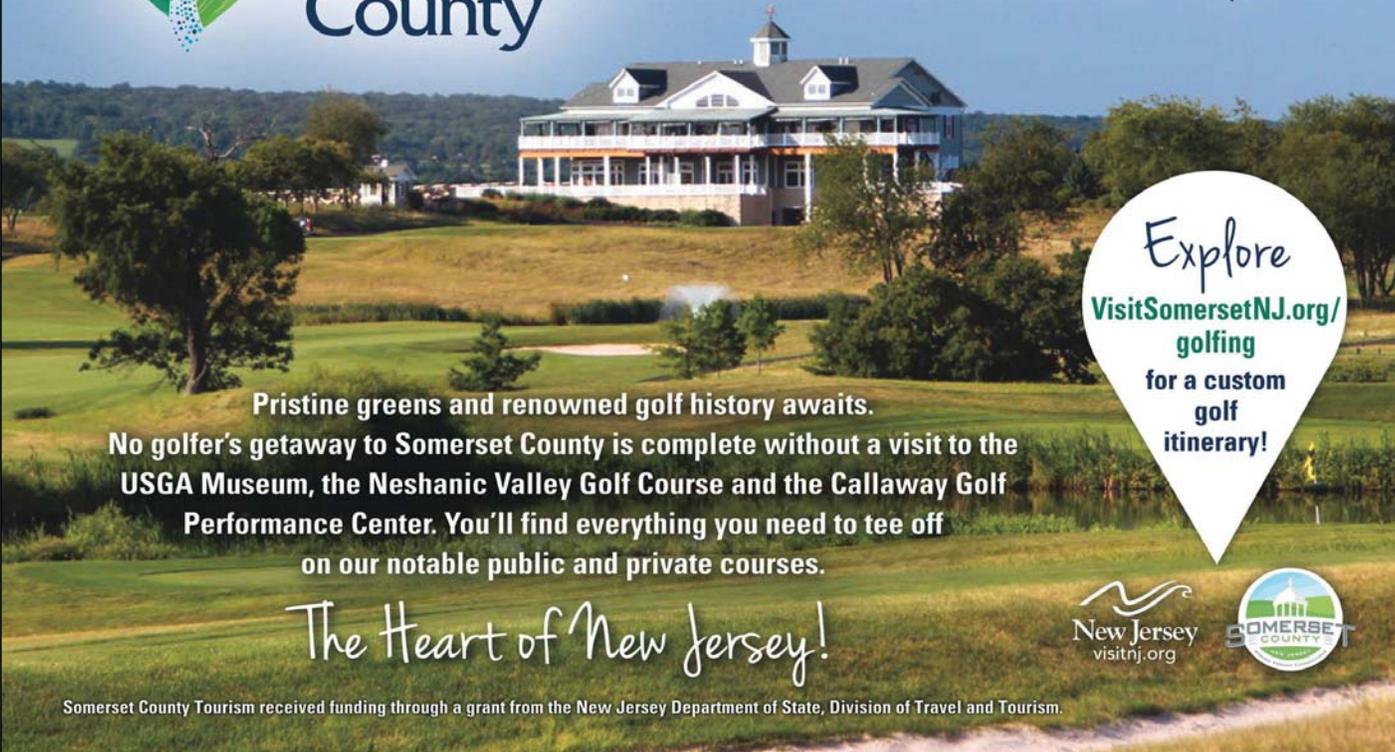
Old Oaks Country Club celebrates its past while it lays the groundwork for its future in a coterie of loyal members. "New members are surprised at how easy it is to integrate themselves into the membership," Polan points out. "Some clubs are tough. If you don't know a lot of people it can be very hard. We do a solid job of making sure new members get comfortable, not only with the facilities, but with the other members as quickly as possible. If they don't, they're not going to be happy. Golf is a social activity and we do a pretty good job of getting people to know each other and feel comfortable."

Sterk adds, "This is all done to build the next generation of members."

That next generation of members is perfectly exemplified by the Herzig siblings, Gabby and Robbie, who won the club's golf championships last year. Gabby, who was a 19-year-old sophomore at Pomona College, won the women's title in her first try, while 15-year-old Robbie beat a five-time club champion in a playoff to capture the men's title. It was his first attempt as well. As Polan says, "That's what we mean when we talk about young members and the ability to grow young players." ■



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