

The remaking of Hazeltine National

When Hazeltine National Golf Club was looking for an architect to make the final refinements to the course before this year's U.S. Open, the decision was made to keep it in the family. Robert Trent Jones had designed Hazeltine in 1962 and supervised a redesign in 1978. So the club turned to Trent's son, Rees, in 1987 for the finishing touches.

It was a natural move for reasons other than family ties. Rees already was working on a redesign of The Country Club in Brookline, Massachusetts, for the 1988 Open, and his star was on the rise. Also, the younger Jones gives strong emphasis to what he calls "definition" in his design, meaning he creates holes where the player can clearly see what he needs to do. That was precisely what Hazeltine lacked.

"Shot to shot, it was not a bad golf course," says Rees, who remembers the criticism the course received when it first hosted the Open in 1970 (he was

then working for his father's design firm). "But the players often felt they didn't have a target to aim at."

Rees raised several tees so the player can better see the fairway. He also added mounds and bunkers to frame the landing areas, not as obstacles but to give the player a better idea of where to aim. Maturity has also helped to add definition: The course was only eight years old in 1970; trees that were saplings then have grown to full size.

"The idea is to give the player a chance to visualize the shot," says Rees. "That helps him to execute it." Except for the par-five seventh hole, where the tee was moved to reduce the angle of the dogleg, Rees didn't make any significant routing changes. Those had been done by his father in 1978, the first step in the development of the new Hazeltine.

The consensus was that the original design had too many doglegs, so in 1978 doglegs on the first, ninth and 18th holes were

eliminated. The eighth hole, a par-three, also was redone. But the most significant changes were to the 16th and 17th, where weak holes were turned into strong ones. The problem with the old par-three 16th was a tree overhanging the green that made it a virtual dogleg, while the 344-yard par-four 17th was considered a "trick" hole that required the pros to lay well back off the tee in 1970. Now the 16th is the signature hole, a strong par four on the shores of Lake Hazeltine, and the 17th is a solid par three.

Rees Jones (left) and father Trent molded the new and old Hazeltines.

In his own work a decade later, Rees concentrated on further strengthening Hazeltine's finishing stretch. "The world really focuses on the finishing holes in a U.S. Open. Those holes could turn the tide the last day, so what we do in preparing them is very significant." On 16, Rees found a wet drainage swale running down the left side of the fairway. "I was concerned that a player in contention might hit into it and face a decision whether to play out," he says. "I turned it into a stream because I wanted it to be an absolute penalty. And I built mounds around the stream so you can see it from the tee."

Rees also made the 18th more formidable by moving the tee back about 50 yards to stretch the hole to 452 yards and adding bunkers and swales to the right of the green. "It will be a challenge to make a birdie if the pin is on the right, as I expect it will be on the last day."

Rees knows Hazeltine will come under even more than the usual U.S. Open scrutiny because of the 1970 controversy. But, he predicts, "There will be fewer complaints this time."

"Actually, a lot of the controversy arose in 1970 because (Jack) Nicklaus and (Arnold) Palmer didn't play well and because the weather was so bad the first day. The wind blew so hard that the course was very severe. That put the onus on Hazeltine. Even if they'd left the course the same, I don't think it would be criticized as much today."

They didn't leave it the same, though, and Rees believes the players will find the new version "fairer." The passage of time—and developments in golf architecture—also might change attitudes toward the course. "Compared to the radical designs of the '70s and '80s, the players will see Hazeltine as a traditional course. I think they'll like it."

—DAVID BARRETT

