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PROFILED

A return to glory

COLUMBINE COUNTRY CLUB, DENVER, USA

A course renovation at Columbine Country Club has delivered a layout that is worthy of the club's major past. Toby Ingleton reports

The eighteenth (left) and ninth holes at Columbine finish in front of the new clubhouse

A replica of the Wanamaker Trophy now sits proudly on display at Columbine Country Club. The Denver club may have hosted the PGA Championship more than 50 years ago, but it only recently acquired its own version of the glittering prize.

It is a symbol of a new era for Columbine, which began with

the construction of its new \$24 million clubhouse – to replace an original that, according to committee chair Frank Trainer, “looked like a grade school”.

The club was anxious to bring the facilities into the 21st century. “We put together a group to re-energise the membership and return the club to something we are proud of,” says Trainer.



Once the new “world class” clubhouse was complete, and with the club’s status on the rise, attention turned to the course. “We said ‘we’ve gone this far, let’s not stop,’” explains Trainer.

On the promise of returning the layout to a standard worthy of its past glories, Columbine hired Rees Jones and his associate Greg Muirhead to develop a new master plan. Their goal was to provide a course that would test the best in the game – Columbine has over 200 single digit golfers, of which nearly 20 have plus handicaps – while also appealing to everyone else.

“Our initial question to the designers was ‘can you make this a championship facility?’,” says Bryan Heim, the club’s director of golf. “Make it a little harder for those who have a low index – that’s an important part of the club. But at the same time, we want to be a family club, so it must be fun and enjoyable for everybody else playing the game.”

The primary focus was to address issues with the course’s bunkers. “We had widespread dissatisfaction with

the bunkers,” says Trainer. “They typically washed out after every heavy storm. We had mud in the bottom and ragged edges around the tops. If you went into a bunker, oftentimes it was a penalty stroke.”

“They were overly penal,” adds Muirhead. “Very large, and very deep.” And to make matters worse, their location meant shorter hitters and higher handicap players were more likely to find the hazards than the club’s better players.

“We’ve introduced cross bunkers and carry bunkers again to give people options on how they want to play the hole”

Right from the opening hole, and in many other instances throughout the course, bunkers were positioned on each side of the fairway at the same distance from the tee, creating a pinch point. This removed much of the strategy, forcing most players to simply lay up with an iron.

Jones and Muirhead went back to the drawing board and evaluated every one of the club’s 80 bunkers. They returned with a plan that saw locations changed to provide a strategic test and a more balanced challenge. The club appointed contractor Duinck Golf, and work began in September 2019.

“We’ve introduced cross bunkers and carry bunkers again to give people options on how they want to play the hole,” says Muirhead. “And with most of these bunkers if you go in them you

can still have a legitimate recovery shot.

“They’re all in the right spots now. And it’s interesting that the players who end up in them don’t complain. They feel it’s fair – they had plenty of fairway, but just didn’t hit the right shot.”

“We challenge the everyday player as well as the better player,” adds Jones.



*The green on the par-three tenth hole has been recontoured, providing more pinnable areas.
Left, new bunkering on the par-three sixteenth*

“Bunker relocation and elimination has made the course more playable and given us more shot options.”

The overall sand area has been reduced by more than 40,000 square feet. The club has been able to take advantage of new liner technology too, installing the Better Billy Bunker system, and a high-quality white sand that gives a more consistent surface.

“It’s helped immensely with maintenance,” says Hugh Lynch, the golf course superintendent and project manager for the renovation. “When we’re in a monsoon, we can get one inch of rain three times a week. The bunkers could have been out of play for six or seven days, because it would take 200 to 300 hours of manpower to get them back into play.” Now, the club expects to be able to resume play almost immediately.

The renovation also included some removal of trees that were in poor health or added a lot of shade, which has restored width and improved agronomic conditions, plus the

introduction of more short grass areas around greens. “Around the greens, before you were either in a bunker or rough grass,” says Muirhead. “Now they have more short game work, which is seen as a new dimension for their low handicap players, while high handicap players are not just hitting out of bunkers all the time.”

Some holes saw a more substantial transformation.

The short par-four sixth, a dog leg left, had been introduced during a previous renovation in the early 2000s. With tees ranging from 250 to 350 yards, it was reachable for long hitters. But the green and approach were heavily defended. “The size, depth and placement of the bunkers meant that most players would just lay up with a five iron off the tee, taking them all out of play,” says Muirhead. “The rewards were not worth the risk.”

The hole has been returned to its original dog leg right configuration, but now offers players multiple tee shot options to consider. Laying up leaves a

longer approach from a more difficult angle into the new green, whereas a longer, more accurate tee shot will open up a shorter approach from a better angle. Big hitters also have the option of driving directly at the green. The club is also considering a proposed pond, which would add greater jeopardy for those attempting to drive the green.

The new green location leads golfers onto the tees of the club’s original par-three seventh, which is now back in play. It had remained as an alternative hole following the introduction of a new seventh in the previous renovation, which never really captured the imagination of members.

At the par-three tenth, a steep green surface from back to front was impacting playability. “The slopes were probably six or seven per cent and speeds were overly quick when prepped for a tournament,” says Muirhead. “It was forcing the club to focus hole locations on the front half of the green, leading to excessive wear. And putts from the back could easily roll off the green.”

COLUMBINE COUNTRY CLUB

The green has been recontoured, and a back bunker replaced with a chipping area. “It still has some pretty good slope to it, but not nearly what it was before,” says Muirhead.

But perhaps the biggest change was saved for the last, with the club wanting a grandstand finish in front of the new clubhouse.

The par-four eighteenth at Columbine was previously known for a large cottonwood tree directly in the line of play. “When the course was built, someone had an idea of planting this tree right in the middle of the fairway,” says Trainer. “Fast forward 60 years and the tree got to be about 70 feet tall. Cottonwoods don’t live much past 60 years and the tree had to be taken down because it was rotten. Then the hole was defenceless.”

Jones and Muirhead provided options for the club to consider. They first toyed with the idea of a split fairway, making full use of the wide hole corridor, but it felt out of character with the rest of the course. They settled on a design that would bring Dutch Creek, which runs through the course and along the left side of the eighteenth, into play.

The fairway was previously some distance away, with rough grass covering a steep slope down to the creek. “We pushed the fairway towards the creek, and reshaped the slope so it’s maintainable at a tight cut,” says Muirhead. Players can now challenge the creek for the shortest route to the green, or bail out to the right, where a series of three new bunkers await.

The renovated course has been in play for a few months now, and the



Photo: Scott Dressel-Martin

Offset bunkering on the eighth hole gives players more choices to consider. The left portion of the image shows the new eighteenth tee shot

response has been overwhelmingly positive. “Golfers come up to me and say we love everything that Rees and Greg did,” says Trainer. “They come back and say, boy, this course is more fun to play now.”

“The visual experience that people get when they play here is so much

Hills, as one of the top three golf courses in the area. For anyone who’s got game and wants to be challenged, we’re probably the best golf course to join. And for anyone who has a family and wants to get their kids in at a young age, we’re probably the best golf course to join.”

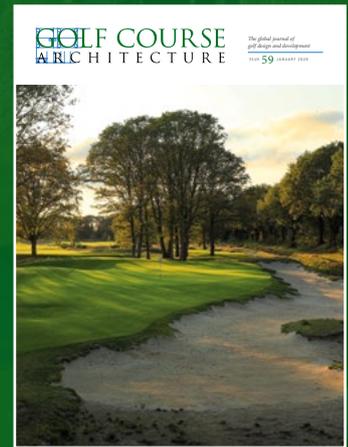
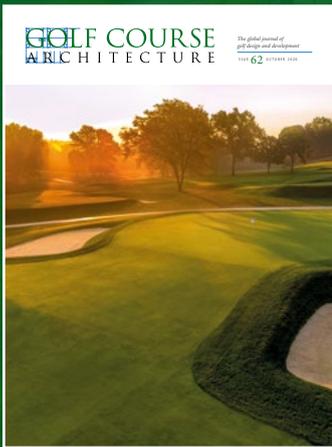
“The visual experience that people get when they play here is so much better... everything just flows better”

better,” says Heim. “It’s because the corridors are a little more open from the tree removal and you can see the bunkers from the tees. Everything just flows better.”

Since completion, the club has attracted more members and is now “within a hair’s breadth of being sold out,” according to Trainer. “I think we’ve easily taken our place, alongside Denver Country Club and Cherry

“Columbine has a phenomenal history,” says Jones. “This was really a wonderful golf facility for both the members and testing the best in the game. We really wanted to bring it back to the future. I think we have put Columbine back in the upper echelon of championship golf, and I hope that some day in the future they’ll have the opportunity to host a major event again.” **GCA**

“A return to glory” appeared in the October 2020 issue of Golf Course Architecture magazine.



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