

Golf, reparations and Native American heritage

BY MARK WAGNER

To a golf historian, the club and ball game can be connected to everything from Mary Queen of Scots to Babe Ruth and the landing of the moon (there is a Daisy golf ball up there somewhere!). So, it's only a little surprising golf can lead to a discussion of reparations for the genocide of Native Americans, and the restoration and celebration of Native American heritage.

Lake of Isles in North Stonington, Connecticut, sits on 1,000 acres of stony scarp and wetland. "A dramatic piece of land," according to Rees Jones, the decorated architect who, beginning in 2002, designed and built 36 holes of golf that dance through what once was and is now again Mashantucket Pequot tribal territory.

"Anything that would help the tribes, I am happy to do," said Jones, noting that his family supports efforts to make life better for America's indigenous people. They are not alone in the desire to right the profound wrongs that have been done.

Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation was officially recognised in October 1983 when President Ronald Reagan signed the Mashantucket Pequot Indian Claims Settlement Act, an act of Congress that provided the tribe federal recognition as well as funds to repurchase over 800 acres of stolen tribal land. Today the reservation



Photo: Mark Wagner

Rees Jones designed 36 holes of golf at the Lake of Isles in Connecticut, which is owned and operated by Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation

encompasses 1,637 acres and is the longest continually occupied reservation in American history.

According to Lori Potter, communications director for the tribe: "We are a people of precedent. We are the first genocidal massacre survivors in what would become the continental US. The tribe occupies the first Indian reservation, the first tribal casino and the first tribal gaming commission."

Historically known as 'the Fox People', the Pequots prospered for thousands of years on their traditional lands – roughly 250 square miles – on what is currently known as Connecticut and Rhode Island.

By 1991, the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Council had expanded its bingo hall into a casino known as Foxwoods,

now the largest casino in the world.

The gaming and entertainment venues were successful enough that the tribe built and operates an award-winning museum and research centre. And in 2002, the tribe secured 1,000 acres from the state and hired Jones.

Jones's portfolio includes three of the 55 Native American-owned courses in the country. In addition to Lake of Isles, he has worked on Dacotah Ridge for Lakota Sioux.

He says: "I learned mostly from my father [Robert Trent Jones]. We had little money, so, when mom and dad would take us on vacation, it was usually to one of my father's job sites."

About Lake of Isles, Jones says: "It was a difficult site – a newbie would have been stifled. The daily work

GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE

required consulting with the tribal council and archaeologists to ensure that sacred sites were protected.” He also notes holes are carved around wetlands, carved around the lake, and he designed for a vast amount of conservation land.

“We studied the topo more than the land. We cleared what was pretty dense forest, then we had rock problems. We would put in a hole, but then had to reset a lot of them due to various concerns.” One of those concerns was the tribe’s heritage.

In addition to archaeological surveys and respect for sacred sites, seashell and turtle symbols were both worked into the design. “We worked with the tribe considering their background and history and what was essential to them,” says Jones. “We understood what was important to them and included that in our approach.” The turtle and seashell symbols are worked into bunkers on both the North and South courses – recognition of the turtle, the spirit animal of the tribe, and the seashell for the aquatic economy by which the tribe thrived before European contact.

While the issue of reparation for slavery continues to roil our national dialogue, a number of studies show casinos, entertainment venues and golf have reversed social and economic decline for tribes nationwide. Lori Potter says: “Being able to provide jobs, housing, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, cultural and educational opportunities, and a secure community are among our highest priorities as a tribe.”

For Jones, that golf can play a role is



Photo: Mark Wagner

Bunkers on both the North and South courses at Lake of Isles feature turtle symbols, the spirit animal of the Mashantucket-Pequot Tribe

second nature. “Giving them the land to control their own destinies?” he asks rhetorically. “Why did America decide to take care of these people whose land they took away? It’s a self-determining ability to be able to build... venues. It’s beneficial to the tribes to have these opportunities to build courses.”

Even for non-golfers, golf courses can give people a place to go, says Jones. “Look at Torrey Pines and Bethpage,” he says. “People go there whether they are playing golf or not. Look at Wellman [in South Carolina, where Jones is currently restoring a public course], Dacotah Ridge... for the tribes, the courses become social centres as well as golf centres.”

The resources generated have allowed a wronged people to press for justice. “Tribal sovereignty is our highest priority,” says Potter. “We work to ensure the federal government upholds its obligations to tribes. It’s critically important to maintain strong government-to-government relationships and educate state and federal representatives on who we are and how well we contribute to

Connecticut as well as to Indian Country, whenever needed.”

If the arc of history bends toward justice, if we need evidence of forward motion in our dystopian present, the resurgence of the Mashantucket-Pequot Tribe is a shining example. That the game of golf has aided in the process is not a surprise to historians of a sport which, by its nature, requires truth-telling, humility, and a love of the land. **GCA**

In the United States, November is National Native American Heritage Month. [The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center](http://www.nationalnativeamericanheritagemonth.gov) has numerous events planned through the month. Events being sponsored by the Library of Congress and other governmental bodies and NGOs can be found at: www.nationalnativeamericanheritagemonth.gov

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