

Merion an Ominous Open Site

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ARDMORE, Pa., June 13 — Some of the biggest names in golf have cemented their name with par-shattering victories on courses lengthened and toughened for the United States Open.

But that has not happened at the storied Merion East course here in suburban Philadelphia. No one has broken par in the three Opens played here. And when Jack Nicklaus and Lee Trevino tee off in the 1981 Open at Merion Thursday, they will find no changes since their playoff here 10 years ago.

There has been no need for changes to make Merion tougher. Though it is the shortest course used for an Open since World War II, it may also be the most demanding. The record is even-par 280, set by Nicklaus and Trevino in 1971 before Trevino won the playoff the following day.

Bill Kittleman, club professional here for 12 years, expects Merion East to prevail over golf's best players again next week.

"It may be short but it's treacherous," he said. "There's hardly a level lie on the course. There's always something looking at you — a creek, a trap, a dogleg. There's no shot at Merion without hazards that do what hazards are supposed to do — make you stand there and scratch your head. There's more pure golf architecture here than at any course I've ever seen."

Kittleman, a Yale graduate, studied architecture and appreciates design. At 6,528 yards on 127 acres, real estate half the spaciousness of most Open courses, 69-year-old Merion looks at first glance to the long hitter like a pitch-and-putt course. The illusion evaporates with the first round.

"Merion is a masterpiece," Kittleman said. "It is something to cling to because none like it are being built anymore. You can't just stand up and fire. Placement is everything. There are no shortcuts. Try that and you'd be out of the grounds or in the deep rough or in quarry."

A yawning former quarry, tangled with trees, vines and furze, dominates the three finishing holes.

"Half of the quarry is unplayable," Kittleman said. "You'd probably lose your ball and be glad you did."

With no premium on length, the long hitter must fall back on precision, playing for position on every shot and testing his skill with every club in the bag. In 1971 Nicklaus used a driver off the tee on only three holes.

Nicklaus is the only golfer ever to subdue Merion, but he didn't manage it in an Open. As a 20-year-old, he led the United States to victory in the World Amateur Team Championship with a 269 in 1960, during a rainy week when otherwise lightning-fast greens were holding. Unless the course is wet, shooting par here is a triumph. Ben Hogan won the 1950 Open at Merion with 287 and Olin Dutra came in first in 1934 with 293.

Because it is such a challenge, Merion has been chosen for 14 tournaments by the United States Golf Association, more than any other course.

"Acre for acre," says Nicklaus, "it may be the best test of golf in the world." Kittleman breaks the course down into three groupings. The first six holes play long. They average 420 yards and include Merion's only two par-5's.

"You just try to stay even on the first six," he said. "The 5's are definitely not birdie holes. They're classics."

One is 600 yards long. The other is uphill. Both slope to out-of-bounds or a creek or deep rough.

The next seven holes average only 300 yards and have four of Merion's six par-4's of less than 400 yards. This is where the golfer must beat the course if he's going to do it. But the holes are deceptive and require much the same finesse as the others.

The last five holes take back more than they give, requiring length and pinpoint accuracy. They have proved to be as tough a finish as any Open course.

Kittleman said Merion has 129 bunkers, twice as many as the average course. And it climbs tight to the greens, some sporting discouragingly bushy growths of Scotch broom and dune grass.

Fairways slope to one side or the other, sometimes both. Even so, fairways must be held, and in the right spots, because there usually is only one opening to the undulating, well-protected greens. The 11th green, for example, is ringed on three sides by Cobb's Creek and guarded on much of the other by a bunker.

Other greens are equally hard to hit and hold. Once on, they are fast and tricky.

"Every four-foot putt is a real character builder," says Nicklaus, the defending champion who will be gunning for a record fifth Open title.

Only 18,500 spectators can see the fireworks. There is no room for more on Merion's diminutive parcel of real estate. All tickets have been gone for two weeks, the first four-day sellout in the 86-year history of the Open.