

Bill Kittleman reflects on his three decades as Merion's head pro

By NEIL GEOGHEGAN
For 21st Century Media

HAVERFORD – Merion's East Course hosted a slew of USGA championships during his lengthy reign as a golf professional at the club from 1963-96 – including the U.S. Open in 1971 and again in 1981. But this week, Bill Kittleman is confident he may finally get a chance to actually see some of the world's best golfers as they tackle Merion for the first time in 32 years.

"I never saw a single shot in 1981 and I don't think I saw one in 1971 either, because I was busy selling merchandise in the pro shop," said Kittleman, who was Merion's head pro for nearly three decades. "To go out and fight the crowds to see (Jack) Nicklaus hit one shot just wasn't going to happen."

Kittleman, 80, remains active in the game even though he retired from Merion 17 years ago. Now a design partner with Gil Hanse's Malvern-based golf course architecture firm, Kittleman is probably best remembered as the guy who came up with Merion's iconic logo, which incorporates the club's unique wicker flagsticks and Scotch broom grass, along with the year (1896) it debuted.

And although he has a degree in architecture from Yale, Kittleman took his logo, had it embossed on a variety of items and forever revolutionized the way major championship venues sell merchandise.

"My main memory of those tournaments is how stressful they were," Kittleman grumbled.

"As the professional at a place like Merion, when you host an Open, the pressure and complications stretch out over four years: two before the tournament, the year of the tournament and even a year after."

Yes, Kittleman is a bit cantankerous, but who better to pro-

vide a little perspective heading into the opening round of an event with a purse expected to be at least \$8 million? For example, just prior to the big break of his career a little over a half century ago, Kittleman was making \$65 a week and working about 90 hours a week at Grosse Ile Golf and Country Club in Michigan.

"I was discouraged and was seriously thinking about getting out of the business," he said. "But I was lucky enough to meet Merion's assistant pro in 1962, he said he was leaving for Sleepy Hollow Country Club and recommended me for his job."

Kittleman got the assistant's job and his first exposure to a national championship came in 1966 when Merion played host to the U.S. Amateur.

"It was so informal that the USGA wanted somebody to keep the public scoreboard out near the 14th tee," Kittleman recalled. "They were willing to pay \$250 for the week. I thought, 'My God, that's a lot of money,' so I volunteered.

"That was not a very smart move. It was about 95 degrees every day, I was all by myself and I was getting phone calls from every third hole with all of the scores. I never stopped writing and there were all kinds of scoring screw-ups."

Three years later, he succeeded Fred Austin as the head pro, and Merion went on to host the U.S. Open two times over the next dozen years. And before he exited, the course added another U.S. Amateur in 1989. But when Merion was left off the informal U.S. Open rotation in the decades following 1981, Kittleman just assumed that its days as a major championship venue were over.

"I was surprised (the USGA) would come back and face all of the logistical problems, a smaller gallery and a course that doesn't have much room to move around," said the long-time Wynnewood resident.

"They took the U.S. Girls' Junior (1998), the Walker Cup

(2009) and the U.S. Amateur (2005), which are non-money making tournaments, so maybe they are rewarding Merion for hosting those events. The USGA will take a strong hit in the wallet coming to this venue. Oh, they will make a lot of money, just not on the scale of a Bethpage or Baltusrol."

Kittleman is pleased that new generations of golf fans and players are going to be exposed to a classic, tradition-rich place like Merion. The lone item on his wish list would be for the USGA to take one of the four rounds and play from a similar distance as the 1981 Open, but he isn't holding his breath.

"I kind of hoped they would have left the course the way it was as far as length for at least one round this week," he said. "The number I remember was 6,505 yards. I don't think it was ever more than 6,600 in 1981.

"The 5th hole was 425 instead of 504 today and it would still be a great golf hole. Depending on conditions, they might hit driver and 8-iron instead of driver 5-iron. But so what? These guys shoot lights out no matter where they go. It would give you a nice comparison of the advances in technology."

Nevertheless, Kittleman believes that Merion will ultimately identify a deserving champion even if the conditions remain sloppy and the course loses some of its teeth.

"Everybody gets so paranoid on the scores and are they going to humiliate or embarrass the club," he complained. "It's ridiculous.

"They may even break a record for scoring (12-under-par by Tiger Woods in 2000) but I don't think that's any reflection on the golf course. A lot of people are afraid they are going to call it a pitch-and-putt, but that's not something I am concerned about.

"I know this place and it's a great golf course. I think (hosting the 2013 U.S. Open) is a good thing. I appreciate the design of the course and the genius of the maintenance. But I don't pay much attention to how far under par they shoot."