



THE Host CITY

THE REAL Philadelphia STORY

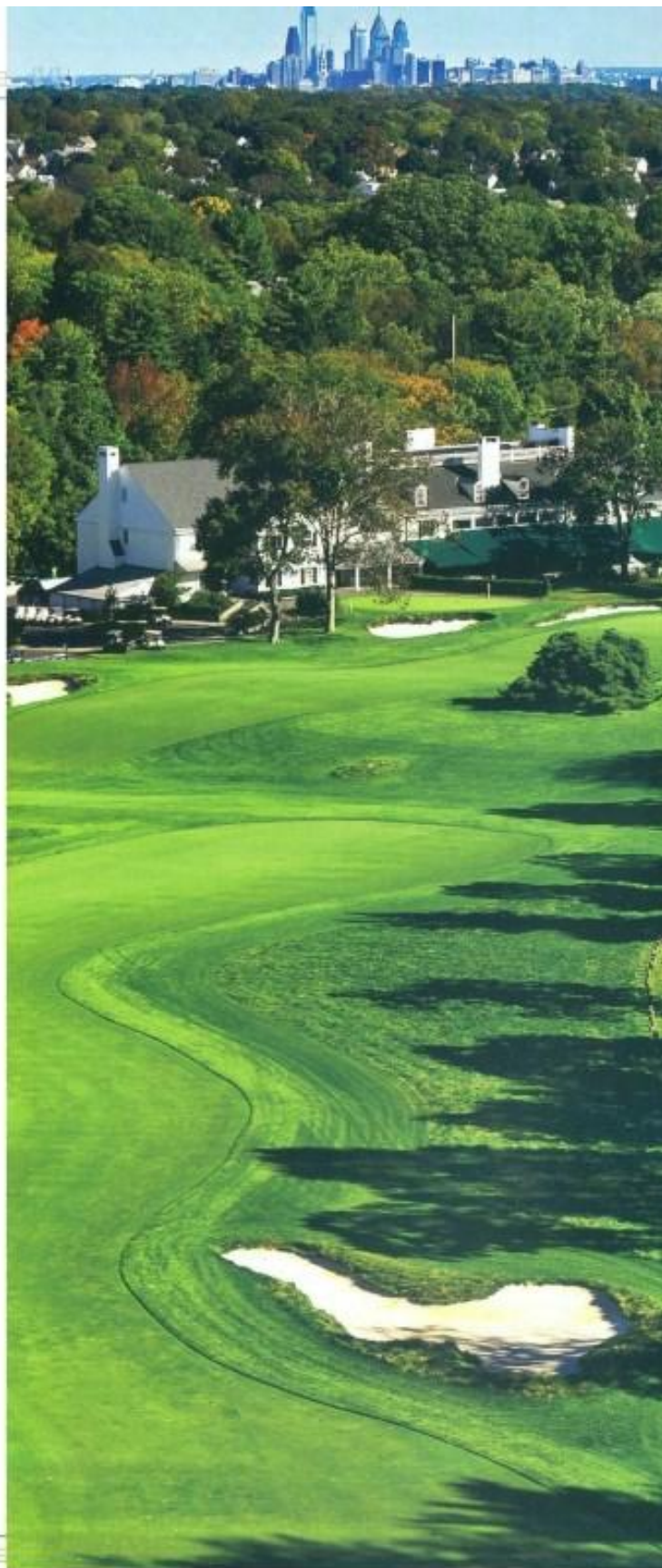
One Philly scribe argues that
the City of Brotherly Love is also
America's best golf town

By MICHAEL BAMBERGER

THE WEALTH OF GOLF IN PHILADELPHIA, public and private, is a legacy of the city's 20th century riches. We bottled beer, rolled cigars, bound books, sewed hats. We sold insurance. Maritime insurance, worker's compensation insurance, insurance on insurance. We refined oil, processed chemicals, manufactured steel. We had hospitals and universities with thousands of good-paying jobs. Golf became part of our culture early and there was enough mega-wealth to support all manner of private courses and enough middle-class and working-class wealth to support all manner of public ones.

JEROME BASTIEN

Merion's clubhouse sits in a leafy suburb 10 miles
from Center City, which rises in the distance.



Just looking at the life and times of one person, Hugh Wilson, insurance man and amateur architect, shows the extraordinary range of our golf. Between his work at Merion (private) and Cobb's Creek (public), he's the whole package. Golf in Philadelphia is the whole package, too.

THERE IS NOT ENOUGH SPACE HERE TO DESCRIBE the accomplishments of some of our native sons and daughters who have held assorted USGA medals and trophies in their hands. I could write pages about George (Buddy) Marucci, who captained the victorious USA team at the 2009 Walker Cup Match at Merion. Or, for that matter, Jay Sigel, who played on nine Walker Cup teams before turning pro at the ripe old age of 50. Or the late Dorothy Germain Porter, who won the 1949 U.S. Women's Amateur at Merion, four USGA Senior Women's Amateurs between 1977 and 1983, and a truckload of hardware in between.

Shall I continue? We Philadelphians proudly claim Max Marston, who won the '28 U.S. Amateur, defeating Jones and Ouimet on his way to the final. We stake a claim to Meghan

matter with me not as opinion but as certifiable fact. In a 1989 conversation he told me that there were three and only three truly great American golf cities, and they were, in reverse order of importance, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia.

I know that will be painful for the heirs of Charles Blair Macdonald to read. C.B. was the genius force behind the Chicago Golf Club and the National Golf Links of America on Long Island. He was, of course, the George Washington of the USGA. He does not have a course in Philadelphia. His absence in our town is a hole in his distinguished body of work, but in our embarrassment of riches we tend to overlook it. After all, we have everyone else: amateur architects like Hugh Wilson and George Crump, the Pine Valley mastermind. (Macdonald, it should be noted, offered some suggestions there.) A.W. Tillinghast, George Thomas, Donald Ross, the firm of Toomey and Flynn, among other Golden Age icons, all had shops in Philadelphia.

I can describe for you a couple dozen Jazz Era courses in Philadelphia that will leave you salivating like Pavlov's dogs, as long as you are partial to old-timey traditional walking courses with bewitching greens, fast fairways and good bones. We have a

We have **WELL-REGARDED** new courses, designed by Tom Fazio, **TOM DOAK** and Gil Hanse, among others.



Bolger Stasi, who has won the U.S. Women's Mid-Amateur Championship four times in recent years.

You want pros? We got pros, Philly-style. Long before Johnny McDermott and George Fazio and Al Besselink became part of the lore of professional golf in general and U.S. Open golf in particular, they were scratch-playing caddies at various Golf Association of Philadelphia courses. If they gave you two a side they were just toying with you.

Between our golfers, our championships and our courses, Philadelphia must be considered — does this sound horribly immodest? — the epicenter of American golf. This is not the Flying Fish talking. (A nod to one of our excellent local brews.) The dean of American golf writers, Herbert Warren Wind, a longtime New Yorker by way of Boston who knew the great links of Chicagoland (and a winner of the USGA's Bob Jones Award), discussed this delicate



Meghan Stasi has won the U.S. Women's Mid-Amateur Championship four times and is part of a great tradition of female golfers from the City of Brotherly Love.

bunch of well-regarded new courses, too, designed by Tom Fazio, Arnold Palmer, Robert Trent Jones Jr., Tom Doak, Gil Hanse and the firm of Coore and Crenshaw, among other New Agers. I do not know anyone who is an authority on these courses. Most of my fellow Philadelphia golf bums take this view: There's not enough time to play the golden oldies.

We talk about our golf courses in Philadelphia in human terms. A Philadelphia insurance man named Fred Anton, who caddied in the 1950 U.S. Open, once said to

me casually, "Greens are to a golf course what eyes are to a portrait." People of a certain age will refer to Merion with feminine pronouns: "She looks lovely, but her rough is all fangs." As for our local propensity to be circumspect, it routinely dies in the face of a nasty hole location: "What was he thinking?" Someday we will have a female greenkeeper in town and we will add one



letter to the preceding sentence. Philadelphia golf is at once stodgy and progressive.

GREENKEEPER, NO “S,” although some of our young people will use course superintendent, and we don’t correct them. But Philadelphia golf values tradition, and greenkeeper is still in circulation in all manner of Philadelphia grill rooms. So are caddies and after-work leagues, in which most people walk. We have a thriving caddie scholarship program named for J. Wood Platt, a famous Philadelphia amateur from the Hogan era who won the 1955 USGA Senior Amateur. Woodie once began a round at Pine Valley by going three (birdie), two (eagle), one (ace), four (birdie). He had just played four of the most demanding holes in the world in six under par. The fifth at PV is a wicked par 3, right beside the clubhouse. The man never even pegged his ball. Woodie skipped the final 14 and went instead to the bar. He told his gang, “Why go on?”

Snapper soup is popular at certain Philadelphia clubs, and only a non-native would think snapper refers to a fish. (She’s a turtle.) The \$2 Nassau is still a common game, and the phrase “the usual amount” saves a lot of lengthy first-tee discussions. Our



Cobb’s Creek (top) is a favored public facility, while Austin (above) was a local teaching treasure.

local sociologist, the late E. Digby Baltzell, the man who coined the term WASP, often noted in his writing that Philadelphia’s Quaker roots created a culture that despises wastefulness. (William Penn, whose statue sits atop City Hall, was a Quaker.) Still, Atlantic City is only a 70-minute train ride away. In fact, Tillinghast and his golf crowd used to travel by train to Atlantic City for winter golf. According to Tillinghast’s own lore, it was at the Atlantic City Country Club that he heard the term “birdie” first used for playing a hole in one under par. As for gambling, there are money games to be found, most notably at Squires, a men’s club where shirts are optional, where various owners of our professional sports teams have enjoyed memberships and where credit is generously extended.

Philadelphia, by the way, has always enjoyed a reputation for having women golfers who can go low and knock it far. The credit for that is often attributed to a legendary pro at Merion, Fred Austin, who began his instruction to women with words to this effect: Knock the stuffing out of it. His feeling was that female golfers starting in the game could always learn finesse later. The first thing was to get it down the fairway.

Those last three words bring to mind, of course, Bob Jones,

AL TILLINGHAST/PHOTO ILLUSTRATION ©2008'S CREDIT: AP

who completed his 1930 Grand Slam by winning the U.S. Amateur at Merion. He secured his triumph on the 29th hole of the 36-hole final, the downhill par-4 11th, where Ardmore Avenue sits in your backswing and the green is protected by Baffling Brook. Beside the 11th tee is a large boulder with a plaque commemorating the great sporting moment of one Robert Tyre Jones Jr. If you look at the plaque you will see that there's a metal plate on top of Jones's middle name. When the plaque first came back from the factory, the name was rendered Robert Trent Jones Jr. Could the club have afforded to simply start over? Of course it could have. But sensible Quaker values prevailed. And now it's a conversation piece.

Before Joe Dey, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia, became the executive director of the USGA in 1934, he was a cub reporter on the *Philadelphia Bulletin*. In 1930, when Jones was trying to complete the Grand Slam, Dey's editor gave him an idea that was way ahead of its time. He was instructed to record each shot Jones played in the final — the club and the distance and the outcome. This was some years before Golf Channel and Twitter — something like 70. Dey's

hand man at CBS, the director Chuck Will, was another Bala legend. Long before Jack Whitaker started wearing those British racing caps, he was eating hoagies in Northeast Philadelphia. Jerry Tarde, the longtime editor-in-chief of *Golf Digest*, is also from the Northeast. His experiences playing Juniata, a city municipal course, show up in his writing. The usual at Juniata was not \$2 a side.

Philadelphia golf will not be pigeon-holed. Across the street from Juniata is a private course called Torresdale-Frankford, where the caddiemaster for years was a masterful chess player and, by reputation anyhow, richer than most of the members. They say Ned Feldenkreis could have bought a Cadillac with the stack he carried every day.

No one better understands the breadth of golf in the City of Brotherly Love than my friend Jim Finegan, a retired Philadelphia advertising man who wrote a seven-pound book about the history of golf in our city and its suburbs that admirably scratches the surface of this important subject. Jim is a former club champion at Philadelphia Country Club, where Sam Snead didn't win the 1939 U.S. Open. (Byron Nelson did.) Jim has re-

Jones's caddie, A TEENAGER named Howard Rexford, recounted his experience for the REST OF HIS LIFE.

account ran in the next day's paper, and Dey talked about the experience for the rest of his life.

LIKEWISE, JONES'S CADDIE, a teenager named Howard Rexford, recounted his experience with the great man for the rest of his life. Rexford went on to become an accomplished Philadelphia amateur, winning a handful of club championships, including several at Bala Golf Club, where he played regularly with a local radio and TV producer, Frank Chirkinian, whose work for CBS at Augusta National secured him a place in the World Golf Hall of Fame. That's how things are in Philadelphia golf. Everything is connected to everything else. If you visited Rexford's home, he showed you the cut-glass fruit bowl Jones gave him for his wedding.

Chirkinian was Philadelphia through and through. His right-



Chirkinian (left) was a Philly kid who produced the Masters for 50 years, where he came to know Palmer, who designed the Blue Bell Country Club course.

corded many, many scrambling pars on the 45 holes at the Philadelphia Cricket Club, site of two early U.S. Opens. He has been the winner of the Father-Son members' event at Pine Valley, where the 1986 Walker Cup was played. Jim knows every water hazard on Cobb's Creek, a public course within the city limits designed by Wilson, where the U.S. Amateur Public Links was played in 1928. As for his knowledge of another Wilson course, the East at Merion, it's staggering. In 2000, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Ben Hogan's aching victory, Jim spoke to the Merion membership from deep within his unbridled passion, about some of the many USGA championships that have been played in Philadelphia and its suburbs.

His point: No city has a stronger link to the USGA than Philadelphia. Trust me, on this subject, you do not want to argue with Jim Finegan. ■