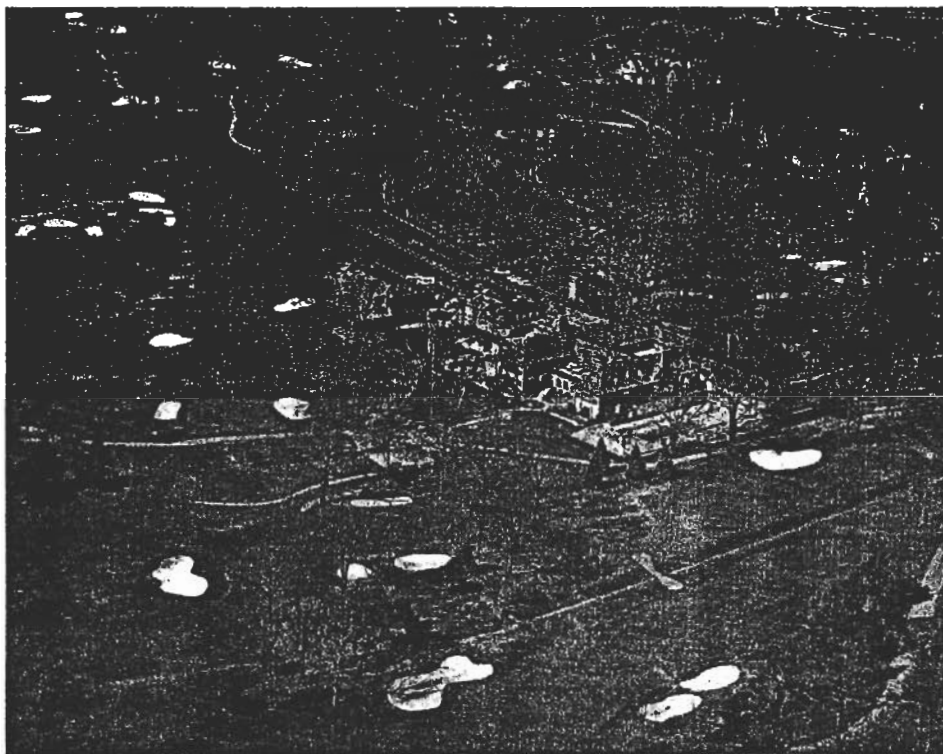


Detroit Golf Club Remains Extremely Popular



Detroit Golf Club continues to host Michigan's premier spring amateur tournament, the Horton Smith Memorial/ Michigan Medal Play Championship

By Jack Berry

Detroit Golf Club has a pedigree that matches up with any in the country — the first two Donald Ross-designed golf courses in Michigan; Donald's brother, Alex, the 1907 United States Open champion, as professional for 31 years and succeeded by two-time Masters Tournament champion Horton Smith who was succeeded by hometowner and 1953 PGA champion Walter Burkemo; an Albert Kahn clubhouse; a financial angel in Horace Rackham who was a great civic benefactor; and a succession of legends in all of the important positions including Clem Wolfstrom who is in his 41st year as Golf Course Superintendent.

Like the Motor City itself, Detroit Golf Club has experienced up and down cycles in the automobile industry, weathered Dutch elm disease that killed a thousand trees, the move of Chrysler Corp. headquarters from nearby Highland Park to suburban Auburn Hills and, most difficult of all, the 1967 race or in Detroit.

"I think any lesser club would have folded then," Wolfstrom said. "People were leaving

like flies. The houses around the course were for sale. A committee was formed to find new property outside Detroit for the club and it looked at the land where Wabeek (housing development and golf club) are.

"Ed Addis was chairman of the committee and he came back and said Detroit Golf Club was going to stay right where it was.

"At the time I was going to build a house and I went to Gordon Andrew, the Greens Committee chairman, and asked if I still had a job. He said 'There always will be a Detroit Golf Club.'

"There has always been great leadership here and that's what has held it together," Wolfstrom said.

It has held together so well that the membership is full, 500 stockholding members including former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, former Detroit Piston "Microwave" Vinnie Johnson, former Detroit Red Wings goalie Greg Stefan and 805 members including all categories. And it's an active membership with 45,000 rounds last year, strong despite uncertain economic conditions, poor spring and fall weather and the aftermath of

Sept. 11.

"It's a golf club," said Head Professional Jon Gates, "that's what people join for. I like all the activity. We have over 100 youngsters in our junior program and we had 140 women in a Texas scramble."

Gates, who went to DGC from Orchard Lake Country Club, said there's been a change in the role of male members — they all aren't on the tee Saturday mornings. Instead, many of those in the 35 to 40s age group are involved in family activities like soccer and baseball.

While Wolfstrom is the old hand on the grass side, DGC has a new look in the office and the pro shop. Lee Woodruff returned to Michigan from the Tournament Players Club at Jasna Polana in Princeton, NJ, to take over as chief operating officer and general manager, and Gates, current vice president of the Michigan PGA Section, left Orchard Lake to succeed Senior Tour hopeful John Traub as the golf professional.

Woodruff, the 1990 Michigan PGA Match Play champion, was director of golf at Garland Resort before going to New Jersey as general manager of the new TPC, a stop

on the Senior PGA Tour. A word about Jasna Polana - it's the estate of J. Seward Johnson of Johnson & Johnson Pharmaceutical Co. and his widow, Basia Johnson, hired Gary Player to design a golf course on the 200 acre property and named it Jasna Polana which means Bright Meadow in Polish. Got that?

Now, back to DGC which is in its 102nd year. It began modestly on 45 acres of farmland at Woodward and Six Mile Rd. Membership was limited to 100, each member got one share of stock for \$10 and the initiation fee and annual dues were \$10. The first layout was six holes. Three more were added in 1900, and in 1902 membership increased to 200 and the initiation fee and dues were doubled — \$20.

The original nine holes weren't sufficient for that many members and 135 acres were purchased at Six Mile and Hamilton and an 18-hole, 6,212-yard course was laid out. That required more money and life memberships were sold for \$250 and annual dues hiked way up to \$35.

According to the archives dug up by DGC member Marian Benton, DGC really got rolling in 1913 when more land was purchased for \$350,000, Ross was hired and 149 building lots were platted around the perimeter. Rackham, who was Henry Ford's lawyer, paid \$100,000 for the optioned properties and gave them to the club at cost. Rackham also provided an interest-free loan to get the project moving.

Ironically, Rackham wasn't even a golfer but his largesse extended to the public at large. He felt people who couldn't afford to belong to a club still should enjoy the game so he hired Ross to design a course farther out Woodward — Rackham Municipal Golf Course, an outstanding course that has hosted two United States Amateur Public Links championships.

While Detroit Golf Club is classified as a parkland course now with thousands of trees, old photographs show few trees and when Ross began he mainly had 219 acres of open farmland.

"I think he outdid himself with two magnificent courses," Wolfrom said.

The par 72 North Course (originally par 71, the fifth hole was lengthened to a par 5 and the green moved as a safety measure a half century ago) gets the most publicity but, surprisingly, Wolfrom, Woodruff and Gates vote for the par 68 South.

"I love the South," Gates said. "We get two-thirds more play on the North but the South is more the original Donald Ross. It has so much character and you have to be more of a true shotmaker."

"I agree," Woodruff said. "I played here three-four times in the 1990s and they'd always say 'We'll play the North,'" Woodruff

said. "It wasn't until this summer that I played the South and it's true Donald Ross."

Wolfrom said there was a move years ago to increase par on the South to 72 to even play on both courses.

"I fought it and eventually the idea died. The South is a unique course. It's well-drained down, we thinned some trees and we've got good soil," Wolfrom said.

The South Course record is 11-under-par 57 set by a young assistant pro to Horton Smith whose name somehow escaped the archives. Wolfrom thinks his name was Bob Writh.

Smith set the North Course record, a brilliant 29-33—62, 10 under par, and Burkemo had a chance to tie or beat it but he bogied his final hole and settled for a 63.

"Wally started on the 10th so his final hole was the ninth and we were roto-tilling the bunkers that day," Wolfrom said. "One guy operated the roto-tiller and three followed to rake it when he finished. The roto-tiller got ahead and did the fairway bunker on the ninth hole and the rakers hadn't caught up. Wally buried his drive in the bunker and all he could do was hack it out. He made bogey and shot 63. But he never said a word about that bunker. He had a heart bigger than he was.

"I only had two years with Horton (he died in 1963). I was hired in March of 1962 and Horton wrote me a three page handwritten letter, welcoming me to Detroit Golf Club. Here I was, a lowly grass-cutter, and he was two-time Masters champion and known throughout golf. It was a real pleasure to work with that man.

"When we had a big tournament in town the tour pros would come to the club and Horton would give them lessons on the little putting green. He was a wristy putter — they all were then, because the greens were a lot slower.

"Even at the end, when he wasn't well, he'd stand at the foot of the stairs going up to the men's grill at lunch time, introduce himself and shake hands with the guests of every member."

As for the slow greens, Wolfrom said in 1962 "on the best day they'd be 6-1/2 to 7 if they'd had a stimpmeter then. That would be considered slick. I probably was the first one locally to go to 3/16th of an inch and I'd double cut them when we had events."

In recent years DGC has upgraded the irrigation system, did a major renovation of the classic Albert Kahn clubhouse and redid the men's lockerroom, dining room and ball room and on the future list is upgrading the women's lockerroom and the swimming pool.

A Heritage Committee is collecting memorabilia such as Horton Smith golf clubs and awards and doing more research on the club's history, and board member Randy Gillary has worked up a DGC Caddie Scholarship


Foundation. DGC already is the second biggest financial supporter of the Western Golf Association's Evans Scholars program which awards scholarships to Michigan and Michigan State.

DGC's caddie program always has been among the strongest in the state — 270 young people showed up in the spring to register for 70 available positions. In all, DGC has 150 caddies. For many years Hugh Syron was caddiemaster and was a legendary curmudgeon, still remembered by visitors to the club who caddied there.

DGC continues to host Michigan's premier spring amateur tournament, the Horton Smith Memorial/Michigan Medal Play Championship, a unique two-in-one event. Thirty-six holes are played on Thursday, one on each course, and that comprises the Horton Smith. The tournament continues with the third round Friday on the North and concludes Saturday on the South.

And, moving ahead in the early days of the 21st Century, the club is "wired" — it has a Website which informs members of tournaments and club functions and it has the e-mail address of 700 members and is able to reach nearly everyone with Internet speed. One hundred and two years old and moving on strong. MG

For membership information, call Alexandra Sienkiewicz, 313/345-4400, ext. 105



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