


# New Leaf

With a new clubhouse and extensive course renovations, Connecticut's Patterson Club positioned itself "for the next 50 years"

BY DAVID GOULD

Photo by Steven Mack

**B**etween the Patterson Club's 1929 debut as a dining club in downtown Bridgeport, Connecticut, and its move to the back country of neighboring Fairfield 18 years later, a bit of American transportation history was made. The Merritt Parkway, with its pleasing bends and unique bridges, unfurled itself a half-mile south of the club's new location. These two landmarks—prestigious club and scenic roadway—make similar statements about upper Fairfield County's relationship with New York City: There's a vital connection to urban affairs and sensibilities, offset by a rural separateness.



Patterson's majestic clubhouse evokes the spirit of the Palmer farmhouse, which sat on the property when the club moved from city to country in 1947.



A famous golfing son of Fairfield County, Gene Sarazen, played the first round ever at the new Patterson Club. He was joined on that June day in 1947 by Bobby Jones and two surely jittery executives of General Electric, which hired Robert Trent Jones to build the country-club version of Patterson and kept ownership of it until the mid-1960s.

Jones was entering the prime of his career when he came to inspect GE's rambling, 163-acre tract. He found a wild yet welcoming expanse of second-growth hardwood forest, perched 200 feet above Long Island Sound—three miles to the south. Aspetuck and Saugatuck River tributaries wrinkle through the sloping landscape, and Jones took note of them, tucking greensites and drive zones along the stream beds.

Below the property's high canopy of oak and maple, its treeline descends into beech, hemlock and spruce down to an understory of holly, hackberry and the like. During the course's recent renovation by Rees Jones, son of the original designer, significant tree removal took place, along with the rebuilding of all tee complexes, a full rebuild of the bunkers (with some added, some removed) plus drainage improvements and the redesign and reconstruction of two greens, No. 6 and No. 18.

Upgrades to Patterson's golf course were folded into a modernization plan built around a handsome and spacious new clubhouse. The membership, bonded by sentiment to the old clubhouse and a separate pro shop/locker room building, were at pains to see them razed. Architects retained by the club studied the existing buildings in vain to find a workable renovation scheme.

"This was definitely a paradigm shift for all of us," says club president Bob Waldvogel of the 53,000-square-foot structure. "You only get one crack at an investment project of this magnitude, and we came to the conclusion that renovating wouldn't address the club's needs over the long haul."

Anxiety about such a major change and the associated costs did arise, prompting a classic test of club leadership and unity.

"Members who had strong misgivings early on have come up to me afterward and said this was the right decision," reports Waldvogel. "We saw the opportunity to set the club on course for the next 50 years, and I think we've done that."

The project wasn't very much beyond 50 days when stress levels spiked, within the club and worldwide. The global financial crisis of 2008 struck suddenly, with demolition work complete and new







The scenic 14th hole showcases how the new bunkers add dimension and challenge. Below: J.J. Henry delights First Tee students at his annual summer invitational.

construction activity in full swing. “You factor a lot of contingencies into your master plan,” says Green Committee chairman Dan Robertson, “but we didn’t factor in a collapse of the stock market.”

Under general manager and chief operating officer Kevin Lalumiere, the staff redoubled its member service efforts. Chris Kenney, director of golf, had been through a clubhouse teardown-and-rebuild during his tenure at Bethesda Country Club outside Washington, D.C. He knew the drill for providing golf service as usual despite makeshift facilities.

“The membership really pulled together and made the best of things,” Kenney recalls. “As a staff we tried to do all the little things that make a disruption like that as bearable as possible.”

The club community also sought to preserve its past as it embraced its future. Members and staff took pains to find or recover any important memorabilia. Photos, documents and old signage produced by that search are now on display in a sitting area near the members’ grill room. That location is a transition point of the new clubhouse.

As work continued, most thoughts turned to the gratification a grand re-opening would bring. That bright day turned out to be May 29, 2010, as members gathered to explore their gabled, white-clapboard clubhouse—designed in a “neo-classical farmhouse” style—and rejuvenated links.

Whereas the old buildings were at a distance from the tees and greens that start and finish each nine, the new clubhouse is closely adjacent. Players are in full view as they hit tee shots over a rise, before they disappear into the back acreage for the 6,824-yard, par-71 test of skill and judgment. As a result of their full-scale renovation, the course’s bunkers catch the eye as well as

catching off-line shots. Some are shaped in butterfly-wing pairings, others are more subtly drawn. They are lined with medium-grain white sand that flashes up in places to assist with targeting and route selection.

Trent Jones built a long and gracefully curving three-shotter as the midpoint of his front nine. No 5, playable in tournaments at 574 yards, calls for a player to bear down but he’ll be tempted to stare at the scenery. Soaring specimen trees rise from a ridge on the right to shadow the final approach area, where mounds and bunkers flow together and a compact pool fronts the putting surface.

Two holes later, the seventh is one of those par fours that is so short on the card—284 max, though it plays uphill—you would be forgiven for bombing a driver and just taking the consequences. Several distinct bunker collections array themselves on the left-side slope in plain sight, surrounded by extensive close-mown areas to chip and pitch from. A money’s-worth bogey here would consist of a tee shot, three different recovery shots and one putt.

It’s acknowledged that the back nine, with its single par five, requires finer shot-making than the front. Its two par threes are

both downhill and each is pulse-quicken- ing. Robertson takes particular satisfaction in the alterations to No. 14, where one of the bunkers behind the green was filled in while others were enhanced. Nine separate tee boxes now spread about the hilltop teeing ground, above a pond that defines the green-site, though it shouldn’t come into play.

No. 18, finished off with a new green that supervising architect Greg Muirhead designed with extra contours, will soon get a revised, probably terraced landing area that better matches the angles and trajectories the new green calls for. That one fairway tweak, along with continued efforts to get some stubborn areas of new turf better established, will complete a comprehensive rejuvenation of the course.

There are 350 Patterson Club families with golf privileges and another 100 or so enrolled in other membership classifications. The tournament history boards that line the new hallways and common spaces include the charmingly named Mr. & Mrs. Championship. That event has been dominated by Joe and Jane Hynes, winners of a half-dozen titles.

Ron Henry Jr. grew up playing at the Patterson Club in the 1960s, winning three junior titles from 1964-’66. His son, J.J., a PGA Tour winner and 2006 Ryder Cup team member, is the most accomplished professional golfer to come out of Fairfield County since, well, Gene Sarazen. An energetic giver to the county’s First Tee program, which is part of The First Tee of Metropolitan New York, J.J. and his Henry House Foundation have teamed with the Patterson Club to sponsor fund-raisers to support The First Tee of Fairfield County.

A centerpiece of those efforts is the J.J. Henry Invitational, hosted by the club every summer. It starts with a clinic by an enthusiastic Henry, who clearly delights in shar-





ing the game with First Tee participants. The kids enjoy lunch, and a field of 24 foursomes joins in for a day of golf followed by dinner and a silent auction.

The goal of the Invitational is to raise \$100,000, which goes to support First Tee activities plus construction of a 5,000-square foot learning center and clubhouse at nearby Fairchild Wheeler Golf Course. The new facility, adjacent to the public course's ninth green, is designed with a computer lab, indoor classroom and lounge area. Patterson members Greg Fell and Rick Richardson have also been active on behalf of this cause, organizing a charity dinner to benefit The First Tee.

There is also more than golf to get the blood stirring for a Patterson member. In addition to its well-landscaped pool complex and tennis facility, Patterson boasts a paddle tennis program that few clubs in the region can match. The courts are sited directly on Cross Highway and in full view as one arrives at the club. What had been a small group of devotees keeping active on chill winter nights is now a busy league and social-play field of some 140 members.



At Patterson's 25th anniversary celebration in 1954, Gene Sarazen (*second from right*) returned to play a round with (*from left*) head professional Neil Martin, club president Joel Hevern, and General Electric vice president C.C. Walker.

In an introduction to his 20th-century novel of suburban corporate life, "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit," author Sloan Wilson paid tribute to the towns and neighborhoods clustered along the Merritt Parkway.

"One of the classic settings in fiction," wrote Wilson, "a little world as reassuring

as Victorian London, is suburban Connecticut in the 1950s." It was in that time and place that the Patterson Club became part of Wilson's "reassuring little world." In the decades since, with the pace of life accelerating and tumultuous events so common, it has proven to be a mainstay of it. ■

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