



# NEW ECHO LAKE RECAPTURES CHAMPIONSHIP IDENTITY

*By Brendan Prunty*

**O**n a recent, cool June morning, the championship tee box on the 12th hole at Echo Lake Country Club sat quiet. Some 40 paces from a stately grey house, with a soccer net in the backyard, this was an area that had for decades, been full of towering trees. Now, standing on the back, it's easy to see the entirety of the longest hole on the course unfold before you. A vista of winding fairway, doglegging to the left with bunkers splicing in all the way up to the green, 582 yards away. This is what had always been here — but over time had become flat, bland, and undefined.

It is this spot on the new tee, where Rees Jones walked away from a small group in the fall of 2008, jettisoning his party to walk into the woods, leaving them to wonder what the famed golf course architect was up to.

It is here where the first puzzle pieces began to be put into place in what would become a plan to breathe life into Echo Lake.

“We had been debating putting a championship tee back there, but didn't really know how to approach it,” Echo Lake superintendent Chris Carson said. “So as we walked around with Rees, he walks off into the forest behind the 11th green and it was about four or five minutes before we started to wonder what he was doing. So, we walked back to see what was up, and he says, ‘This is where your new championship tee needs to go.’ It was an electric moment, because it was obvious that's where it should go. It was discovering something we didn't know we had. It was a watershed moment for this club.”

For nearly 120 years, Echo Lake Country Club has been nestled on a bluff overlooking Westfield's Echo Lake Park. The Donald Ross-designed course has since its inception, been considered one

of the hidden gems of the metropolitan golf community with its rolling hills, tough layout, and genial atmosphere. Its championship pedigree includes everything from Met Open (won in 1934 by World Golf Hall of Famer, Paul Runyan) to the New Jersey PGA Championship (won in 1969 by Babe Lichardus) to the NJSGA Amateur and Open championships to two USGA championships — the 1994 U.S. Junior Amateur and 1999 U.S. Girls' Junior (won by LPGA star, Inbee Park).

Ten years ago though, that championship identity felt lost and in need of recapturing. Its former head professional Mike Preston, had numerous conversations with Carson about making tweaks to the golf course. Over the years, there had been many tinkering jobs: holes had become altered, changed, trees had been added, and in the case of the fifth hole, a renovation job had been done where the finished product didn't meet the membership's expectation.

“Being on the greens committee for 20-plus years, I had seen so many ideas and people coming in,” recalled Preston, who retired as Echo Lake's head pro after 32 years in 2014. “But with the new committee and new chairman, they were hot on re-doing the fifth green. And Dave Brown pulled me aside after the first meeting and asked what I thought we should do with the fifth. I told him, ‘No one here is really an expert on doing anything with this golf course — myself included. We needed to get a true expert.’”

The club knew it had some trouble spots to fix in order to regain its status as a championship-caliber club, so Brown — serving as the chairman of the greens committee — got to work researching architects for the job. The club settled on Montclair-based Rees Jones, Inc., in part because of the proximity to the project, but

also because Jones had some unique approaches to some of Echo Lake's issues.

With Brown — the Westfield native who spent 10 years in the NFL as a quarterback for the New York Giants and Arizona Cardinals — leading the initial charge from the membership side, along with Jim Gallagher, Preston and Carson felt as if the time was right for changes to the course.

"There had been several architects who had been involved at Echo Lake," Jones said. "Obviously Donald Ross, but also Robert White and Willard Wilkinson, and then you have other aesthetic changes over times — trees, bunkers — those types of things. We were just really looking to consolidate the different styles. We wanted to look to the future, but embrace the past to some degree."

Soon after Jones was brought aboard, the club was eager to get work started and wanted to begin with the much-maligned fifth hole, where a redesign project of the green years earlier had gone awry. But instead of taking that route, Jones pushed the club go the opposite direction.

"He told us, 'Let's not tackle our worst problems first,'" Carson, who has been at Echo Lake since 1984, said. "Like that instance on No. 12, he wanted us to take a look at issues we didn't even know we had."

Slowly but surely the momentum of the project started to begin. There was work done on No.'s 12, 13, 14, and 16. In 2011, the club renovated the ninth hole, turning one of the most frustrating tee shots on the course into one of the best. In 2015, a new green was built for the par-3 17th hole, allowing for more flag placements. As the project progressed, the membership quickly began to see the benefits.

"It had a feel of a lot of different pieces stuck together," said Steve Weisser, who was a co-designer on the project and handled the day-to-day aspects. "But as it started to come together, you could really see the flow coming back into the place."

The biggest part of the project was still yet to come.

Along with the fifth green, the opening four holes at Echo Lake had long been an issue. Each had its own need for change — a blind tee shot (No. 1), an outdated short, uphill par-4 (No. 2), an awkward and easy par-4 (No. 3), and a too-short par-5 (No. 4) — necessitating the biggest undertaking of the entire project. For years, Preston and others had debated what to do with those holes, and it wasn't until that first walk-through of the property in 2008, where Jones strolled up to the area between the second green and third tee and solved it all in one look-over.

"We had always thought we should turn No. 2 into a par-3," Brown remembered. "But Rees was standing at the top of the hill, and was looking over No. 2 and No. 3, and says, 'Well, what if we made this a par-5?' And he walked us up to the vantage point of where the new second green could be — and is now — and it blew us away. It never even crossed our minds to turn that into a par-5, and turn No. 3 into a par-3. It unlocked for us, what we could do with No.'s 1 and 2, as well."

The biggest remaining puzzle piece for the club's master plan had fallen into place.

By taking the 247-yard second hole and turning it into a 500-yard par-5 (and consequently turning No. 3 into a 140-yard par-3 from a 363-yard par-4), Echo Lake finally recaptured the championship layout feel it had been searching for. The blowing up of the hill on No. 2, also took away the blind tee shot on the opening



hole — which had slowed down rounds (and outings) for years. And by adding a par-5, the club could do something it had needed to about the fourth hole.

"When I arrived, I dove right into this project," said Echo Lake's current head professional, Pat Fillian, who took over after Preston retired in 2014. "My first thought was we needed to make No. 4 a par-4, and make us play at Par 71, instead of 72."

Jones loved the idea, as did Brown — and Gallagher, who had succeeded him as greens committee chairman — which was the final ingredient to the process. On Sept. 13 of last year, the bulldozers arrived, moving earth for six straight weeks until the land was perfect.

"I got a video sent to me that morning at like 9 o'clock in the morning of all the shrubs which used to ring the first tee coming down," Gallagher, now the club's president, said. "And in the span of less than an hour, you could see what the finished product would look like — even though everything was dirt and bulldozers. It was so amazing."

The new Echo Lake opened to rave reviews in time for the annual Member-Guest tournament on Memorial Day weekend. The championship pedigree has been restored, with the NJSGA Amateur Championship returning for the first time in 51 years, in 2018. The bulk of the club's master plan has been completed, but everyone — from Jones and Weisser to Carson, Fillian, Gallagher and others — views it as a living blueprint, which will always need constant upkeep. Still, there is a palpable revived sense of pride in the steps of members.

Gallagher, who will often squeeze in an early work round, was walking off the course recently when he was stopped by an old-time member.

"He had had his doubts as to just how well the overall process would work and what would result," Gallagher recalled. "And as I was walking out, he just grabbed me and said that he just got back from Florida and hadn't seen or heard how it turned out. He tells me, 'This so far eclipsed the expectations I had, I can't even articulate it.' But when he told me, he's already played it four times and each one of them was more memorable than the last, it really hit me."

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