

Hazeltine, Take Three

THIS SUMMER THE PGA CHAMPIONSHIP WILL PUT A JONES FAMILY DREAM TO YET ANOTHER MAJOR TEST. I THINK WE'RE READY.

By Rees Jones

In the early 1960s, my father, Robert Trent Jones, and Minnesota businessman Totton P. Heffelfinger set out to build a bold golf course that they hoped would become one of the most universally acclaimed championship tests in the world. Heffelfinger, a former president of the USGA, figured that with his connections the course could attract a U.S. Open, and it did, in 1970, only eight years after opening. Unfortunately Hazeltine National wasn't really ready to host a major at the time, and the players gave it poor reviews. Most famously, Dave Hill—who later admitted to having had a few drinks beforehand—told a press conference, “When they built this course, they ruined a perfectly good farm. What does it lack? Eighty acres of corn and a few cows.”

The coverage those remarks received was a disappointment to my dad and the members at Hazeltine, but it didn't deter them from their ambitions. Almost immediately after the Open, the club—architecturally aided by my father and later by me—committed itself to improving the course, a process that has essentially never stopped. The



Left: eighteen and ten in 1970. Above: sixteen today

Hazeltine that the best players in the world will tackle this summer at the PGA Championship is very different from the windswept 1970 venue.

People tend to forget that many of our great courses, including Augusta National, were originally built with limited finances. Bobby Jones and Clifford Roberts struggled mightily during the heart of the Depression to raise enough money to get Augusta off the ground, and photographs of the course from early tournaments reveal that it was far from the opulent masterpiece it is today. Hazeltine was also built inexpensively, probably for about \$1 million (including the land), in just over a year's time. In those days it was not deemed necessary to lavish the kind of money on constructing a course that

is now de rigueur. At Hazeltine, for instance, the fairways were not graded, which resulted in a lot of blind, over-the-rise tee shots. The bunkers were not built as deep as they are today, the irrigation system was primitive and the trees planted along the fairways were mere saplings not yet up to the task of clearly framing the holes.

But the course was long. For the 1970 Open it played at 7,151 yards (the second-longest Open course to that date). In general, the players didn't like it. Jack Nicklaus wrote a preview article for *Sports Illustrated* entitled “Blind Man's Buff at Hazeltine” in which he complained about the many blind shots and blind hazards, the large number of doglegs and the general lack of definition. During the first round, winds blew in off the prairie at more than 40 m.p.h. and barely half the field broke eighty. Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer both played poorly, and the

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course's reputation suffered.

In response to the pretournament criticism, my dad made what I felt was a pretty effective defense. He argued—ahead of his time, really—that raw length would be increasingly important over the years in identifying the best players in the world. He called himself “a defender of par.” His point was proved in the '70 U.S. Open by the winner, Great Britain's Tony Jacklin, an expert at playing in the wind, who posted the only subpar total of the championship, a seven-under-par 281.

In all fairness, however, much of the pros' criticism was valid, which Dad acknowledged. Working with Bob Fischer, one of Hazeltine National's founding members, he supervised substantial changes to the golf course between 1970

and 1981—so many, in fact, that some of the members began to complain that the club logo ought to be changed to a bulldozer. The best change, in my opinion, was converting the par-three sixteenth hole into a distinctive par four with a peninsula green extending into Hazeltine Lake. This is now the most memorable hole on the course; it was made possible when three members, Fischer, Warren Rebholz and Reed Mackenzie (who, incidentally, is the current president of the USGA), discovered that a good bit of the supposedly marshy land near the lake was actually high enough to drain. To keep par at seventy-two, Dad converted the weak par-four seventeenth into a much more challenging par three. He also straightened three blind doglegs.

With these major changes complete, I was asked in 1987 to refine and add more definition to the course in anticipation of Hazeltine's next major,

the 1991 U.S. Open. Working with Mackenzie, we did a lot of regrading of the fairways, added significant new fairway bunkers on numbers one, two and eleven, and better framed the corners of several dogleg holes. On the par-five seventh, for instance, we moved the tee to the left to better orient the hole along a line of trees and

relocated about forty bunkers. (All told, since 1987, we have reworked or created virtually every bunker on the course.) The most significantly altered hole is the par-five fifteenth, which we actually shortened by about ten yards, to 586 yards. We moved the championship tee 100 feet to the right into a grove of trees so

that it sets up less awkwardly, and we transformed the fairway bunker complexes, making some of the old ones more penal and adding new ones. Elsewhere we added fifty yards to the par-five third hole, bringing it to 636 yards, and rebuilt the bunkers on several other holes closer to the greens, to give the PGA more devilish places to hide the pins.

At 7,360 yards, Hazeltine will play 211 yards longer than in

1991. Given the prodigious distance that today's best players hit the ball, some might be concerned that it's still not long enough, but I think it is. The hot summer air in Minnesota is heavy with moisture, and the bent-grass and poa-annua fairways do not usually provide a lot of roll. Despite the transformations, Hazeltine is still a power hitter's course.

In the bigger view, however, I think it's fair to say that Hazeltine has finally fulfilled the dream that my father and Tot Heffelfinger had for it forty years ago. They wanted a course the golf world could count on to fairly identify the best players in the game, and as evidenced by the organizations that have selected the course for important upcoming championships—the 2002 and 2009 PGAs, the 2006 U.S. Amateur, the 2016 Ryder Cup—that's what Hazeltine is. It makes a son proud. •



The fifteenth, then (mid-sixties, left) and now: shorter but more hazardous

added some hillocks along the left side of the fairway. On sixteen we converted an indistinct watery swale to the left of the fairway that was scarcely visible from the tee into a definitive six-foot-wide water hazard. And on eighteen we more sharply framed the green by adding new bunkers and reshaping some old ones; we also moved back the championship tee fifty yards, thereby creating a more dramatic finale.

The pros at the 1991 Open, won by Payne Stewart, were almost universal in their praise of the course—perhaps they were just relieved that it had improved so much since 1970—and that essentially gave us permission to finish the job for this summer's PGA Championship with another major renovation effort beginning in 1997. We continued the process of better defining the holes, removed the last of the blindness that had bothered the pros thirty years ago and added or