

PLUS: Flossmoor G.C. Rejuvenated | Ozzie Guillen on Golf | Oak Meadows Preserved

CHICAGO DISTRICT GOLFER

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State of the Game

Facing new challenges, golf adapts
to the future



FOR EVERYONE WHO
PLAYS THE GAME



CHARLES CHERNEY

Well Preserved

Golfers and environmentalists unite at The Preserve at Oak Meadows **BY BARRY CRONIN**

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Take a look at some of those old black-and-white YouTube videos of Ben Hogan, then imagine the “Hawk” swinging his swing *in person* at erstwhile Elmhurst Country Club, where he won the 1941 Chicago Open nearly eight decades ago.

“The Wee Ice Mon,” of course, is but a distant memory. So are most things in formerly rural DuPage County, including then-private Elmhurst C.C. In 1985, the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County (FPDDC) bought it, renamed it Oak Meadows Golf Course and opened it to the public. As suburbanization intensified, flood waters inundated the fairways, forcing the course to close for weeks at a time year after year – and earn the nickname “Soaked Meadows” along the way.

The “big bang” moment came in 2009, when lightning struck the club’s 45,000-square-foot brown brick Tudor-style clubhouse, burning it down to the ground and forcing the Forest Preserve to figure out what to do next.

Now, 11 years later, the reimagination of The Preserve at Oak Meadows is regarded as the perfect marriage of golf and environmental interests, two groups that often would be seen as strange bedfellows. This will be the course’s third full year of operation since

the \$16.8 million renovation took place between 2015 and 2017.

“We returned Oak Meadows to be part of a public trust,” said Ed Stevenson, who coordinated the project as the director of golf for the FPDDC and currently is executive director of the FPDDC. “We’ve really tried to return this property to the community for golfers and non-golfers alike.”

Ron Whitten, golf course architecture critic for *Golf Digest* magazine, praised the project.

“The creative manner in which [the design] addresses floods and storm water makes [The Preserve at Oak Meadows] the winner of our Green Star environmental award for 2017,” Whitten said.

Stevenson was a key reason for comity between “Golf” and the environmental community, according to Stephen McCracken, director of the DuPage River Salt Creek Workgroup, for the Naperville-based Conservation Foundation.

“We had approached the FPDDC about two years

Prior to the innovative renovation at The Preserve, the Salt Creek tributary long proved to be an issue, as heavy rains often caused its banks to overflow.

Through the Years

- **1923** | Elmhurst Country Club opens in rural DuPage County; private club designed by Charles W. Wagstaff; 18 holes; 45,000 square-foot brown brick Tudor-style clubhouse.
- **1941** | Ben Hogan wins the Chicago Open in a wire-to-wire victory over fellow golf Hall of Famers Sam Snead, Gene Sarazen, Tommy Armour, Ralph Guldahl and Craig Wood.
- **1985** | Forest Preserve District of DuPage County (FPDDC) purchases Elmhurst Country Club for \$6.4 million. Five years later, the District acquired the adjacent Brookwood Country Club, also private, for \$7.7 million, renamed it Maple Meadows and opened it to the public.
- **2009** | Early morning Feb. 27, lightning strikes the historic clubhouse, sparking a fire that destroys the massive building and ultimately forces county leaders to rethink the future of the property.
- **2012** | The Forest Preserve District hires golf course architect Greg Martin to lead master planning to reinvent the Oak Meadows property.
- **2015** | FPDDC approves \$16.8 million to renovate the property. Funding sources include \$2.25 million from the DuPage River Salt Creek Workgroup and \$2.5 million from DuPage County Stormwater for environmental improvements.
- **2015** | Final rounds are played on former layout on July 7 and ground is broken on construction. ECC's original 18 holes and the East 9 of the Maple Meadows course were reduced to 18 holes.
- **2017** | New course reopens in August for limited "preview season" play with a new name: The Preserve at Oak Meadows; wins both the Green Star Award from Golf Digest and the Force of Nature Award from the Chicago Wilderness environmental group.
- **2018** | First full season as The Preserve at Oak Meadows. Receives "Renovation of the Year" from Golf Inc.; tournaments include a USGA qualifier for the U.S. Amateur Championship.
- **Fall 2020** | Anticipated opening of new clubhouse. Construction costs of \$12.6 million include \$7 million in funds from insurance settlement from loss of the original clubhouse. Solar panels will produce enough electricity to power the golf cart fleet, creating the first fully solar powered golf cart fleet in the country.

earlier about [undertaking some environmental work on the property], but at that time there was very little interest," McCracken said. "When Ed took over, he had a different long-term vision."

Rather than lock horns with environmentalists, Stevenson and golf course architect Greg Martin allied with them. The overall goal was to take 288 acres of precious open space – the 18-hole Oak Meadows course and the East 9 of the adjacent Maple

Meadows course that the FPDDC also owned – and create a world-class 18-hole, par 72, 7,100-yard track set amid a revitalized nature preserve, only 15 percent of which would be taken up by tees, greens and fairways.

"One worry was, would the 'Golf' team resist the ecological restoration team's practices?" McCracken said. "This did not occur. Greg and Ed's attitude was, 'Hit us with your best shot.'"



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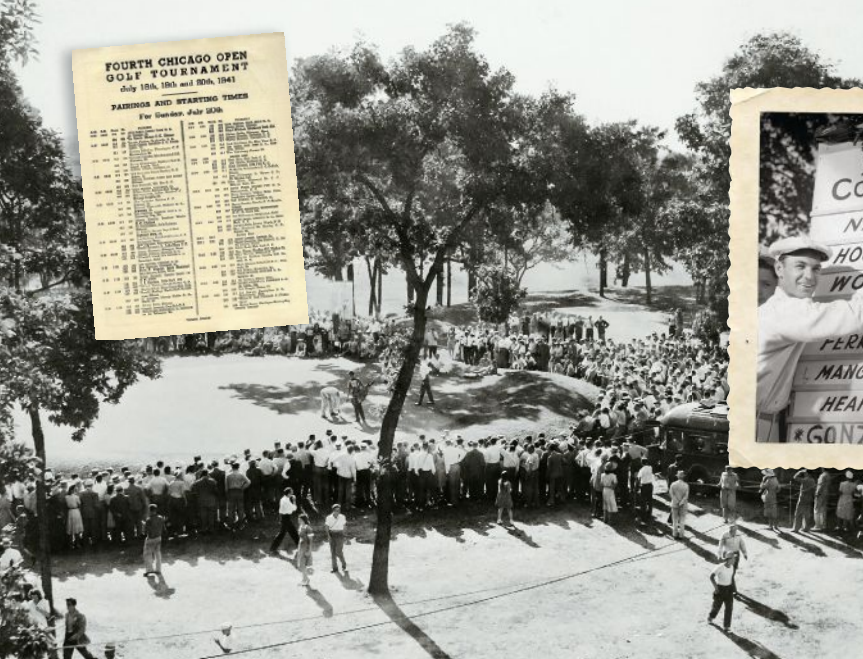
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PAIRINGS AND STARTING TIMES
For Sunday, July 20th

NO.	NAME	STARTING TIME
1	ALBERTSON	11:00
2	ANDERSON	11:00
3	ANDERSON	11:00
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10 LEADING CONTESTANTS

NAME	PAR	AT HOLE
HOGAN	10 UNDER	18
WOOD	8 UNDER	18
	5 UNDER	18
FERRIER	0	18
MANGRUM	1 OVER	18
HEAFNER	1 OVER	18
GONZALEZ	2 OVER	18

plained. “Our answers helped us devise solutions that satisfied both.”

A major element of the project was a troublesome 1.4-mile north-south segment of the Salt Creek tributary of the Des Plaines River that ran straight through the property and served as a stormwater superhighway after a drenching summer rain. Inevitably, the creek would overflow its

banks and inundate low-lying areas of the golf course, where the water often remained for weeks. Local neighborhoods were not spared the flooding. In addition, water quality in the creek had fallen woefully short of federal clean water standards.

The secret was to slow down the creek. Make it meander instead of rush. Hold the water within its banks for a while, so as not to overwhelm low-lying areas. Martin removed a controversial dam and re-routed the creek, turning it like an oxbow. In so doing, he created places for insects, birds and aquatic life to call home. Some 1,500 trees removed from elsewhere on the property were reused to reinforce the shoreline and to create large woody structures within the creek to serve as fish and wildlife

The Preserve at Oak Meadows’ hallowed history as the former Elmhurst Country Club includes Ben Hogan’s victory in the 1941 Chicago Open.

The two sides got along so well that environmental entities wound up contributing \$5 million to the cost of reconstruction (See timeline on page 48).

“We began the exercise by asking, ‘How can this golf course solve more than just golf-related problems? And can we help neighbors, communities and the environment with our solutions?’” Martin ex-



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habitat. Adjacent to the creek, 35 acres of wetlands were installed, where excess water could linger after big storms. In addition to wildlife, the meandering water also has made the creek hospitable to kayakers.

The results were immediate and positive. Despite several multi-inch rainfall events in 2017 and beyond, the course literally kept its head above water, according to Stevenson.

Golfers enjoy the eco-friendly look and spirit of the project, too, according to McCracken, who personally monitors the stream.

“We get constant positive feedback from the golfers about what we are doing,” McCracken said. “When we tell them who we are, we get lots of positive feedback about the way the course looks, plays and feels.”

“By removing the dam, improving the creek banks, changing flow patterns, increasing and improving buffer vegetation, and increasing gravel and cobble areas [at the bottom of the stream], we nearly doubled the score of benthic [creek bottom-friendly] organisms,” McCracken said. “That kind of improvement is unusual in the water quality improvement world.”

While the golf course now is less susceptible to flooding, the rest of the property retains 20 million more gallons of storm water, which helps reduce flooding in neighboring communities.

The Preserve isn't the only course that is helping its local community deal with flooding. Glenview Park Golf Club, Wilmette Golf Club and North Shore Country Club have completed such projects in recent years.

“There are a lot of relationships being developed [between golf course owners and local governments] as it pertains to storm water management, especially during major [golf course] renovation projects,” said Dan Dinelli, golf course superintendent at North Shore Country Club in Glenview. “Open green spaces like golf courses can channel water and store water and help alleviate neighborhood flooding.”

Hogan himself would recognize elements of The Preserve. The hickories and oaks that frame Nos. 1, 6, 7 and 18 on the east side of the property are the same ones that stood during his pre-World War II victory. The integration of Maple Meadows' East 9 allowed Martin to expand his palette and create several new holes, including the drivable par-4 fourth and the sweeping, tree-lined par-5 fifth. Gone is original architect Charles W. Wagstaff's 16th, a short downhill par 3 to an island green, which had to go for environmental reasons.

The new clubhouse – partially paid for with the insurance settlement from the original clubhouse fire – is set to open later this summer. Like the Preserve element of the project, it will be for more than just golfers to grab a bite and settle bets. Students of the environment and ecology will have space for their activities, too.

“It was assumed that any efforts to protect the golf operation from the impacts of flooding would simultaneously reduce the property's usefulness for storm water management,” Stevenson said. “The Master Plan for Oak Meadows was born out of a desire to challenge this assumption and to produce a more fully enduring golf property for both recreation and preserve function.” ●

Barry Cronin is the editor of *Chicago District Golfer*.

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