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June 2010, Vol. 14 No. 4

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Sands of Time

Michigan Architect Enhances Classic Look of Flossmoor Country Club

By Neal Kotlarek



Change, as John F. Kennedy once famously proclaimed, is the law of life. And, indeed, anyone who has stepped on a scale lately—or examined their 401K statements, for that matter—instantly appreciates the wisdom of the late president's words. But JFK undoubtedly wasn't thinking about design adjustments to legendary golf courses when making his pronouncement.

Perhaps golf's greatest asset is its history. The game's ancient roots and its stoic rules seemingly project a mystique over all elements surrounding it, short of the technological advancements of golf balls and golf clubs. Ask most any country club member about their home course and they will instantly defend the design of each and every hole on the property. Some will even expand further on their assessment and defend every over-undulating green, every awkwardly placed majestic tree and every blind approach shot served up on club grounds.



Hole #2 – Before Photo Courtesy of Flossmoor Country Club



Hole #2 – After Photo: www.mikeklemme.com



It is precisely that fierce defense that makes talented and honorable golf architects grimace prior to taking on the task of renovating a classic old country club course. Such designers each have nightmarish stories to tell involving furious members who feel that improvements, tweaks, and adjustments are personal assaults to the tradition and history of the property. Seemingly, every green contour adjustment and every uprooted tree spurs an emergency meeting of the club's executive committee. Upon accepting the challenge

of renovating and refreshing the members-only Flossmoor Country Club on Chicago's far south side in 2006, Michigan architect Ray Hearn had some hard decisions to make. How would he uphold the context, look and feel of this legendary course built in 1899, and yet make updates necessary to thwart the onset of improved equipment?

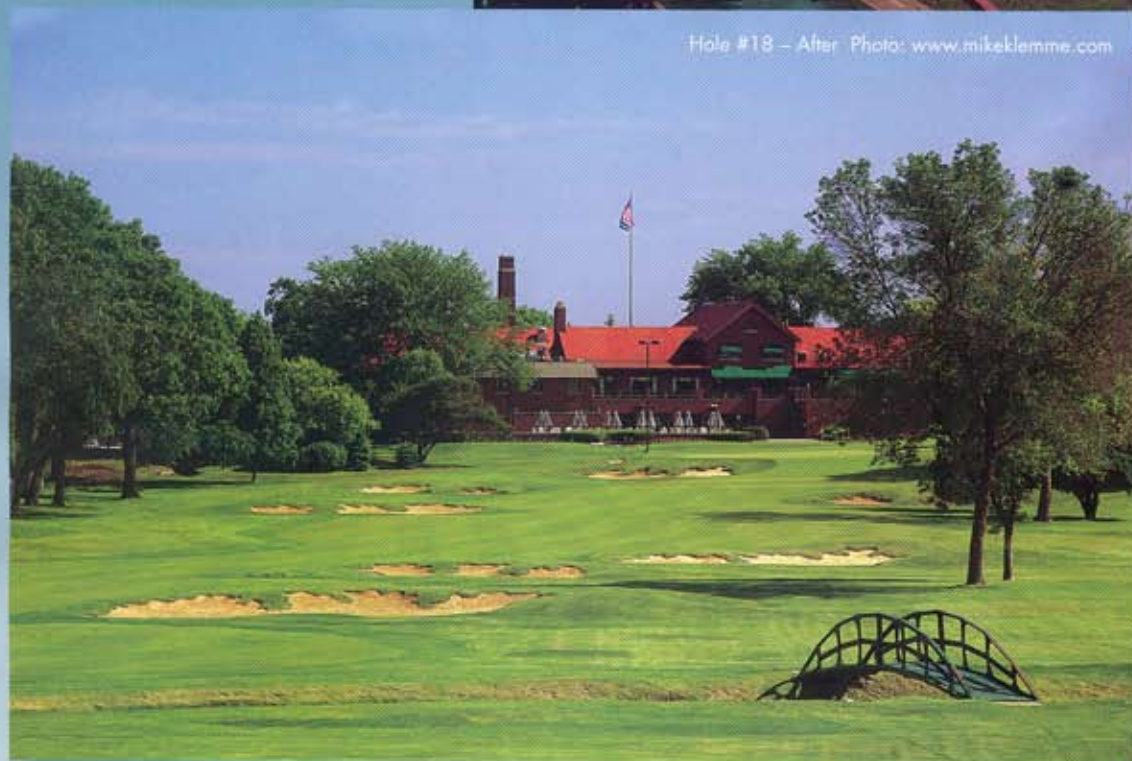
According to the designer, whose projects include new courses and ongoing projects from Michigan to Moscow to Vietnam, the renovation would only work if the course's legacy remained



Hearn on site of Flossmoor Country Club



Hole #18 – Before Photo Courtesy of Flossmoor

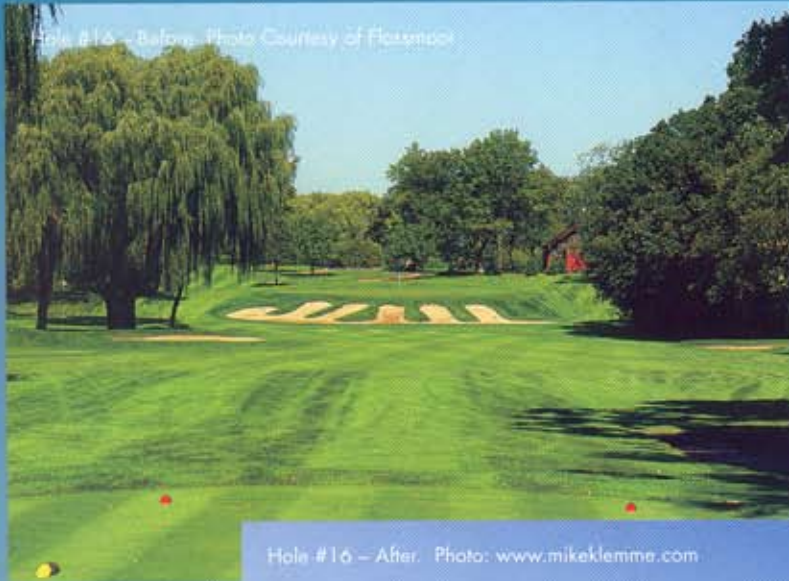


Hole #18 – After Photo: www.mikeklemme.com

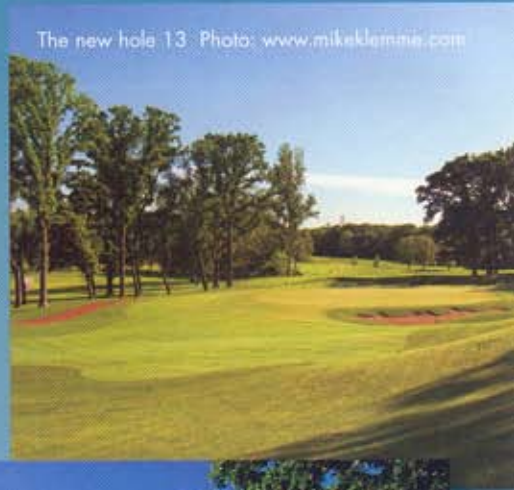
Gone were the geometric ovals of the previous bunkers, replaced by jagged edged shapes that looked like a cross between a Rorschach test and a jigsaw puzzle piece.

intact. "Historical photos and plans are a regular part of my company's early research and due diligence," Hearn said in a late May interview. "We struck gold in that the club had a significant amount of history recorded in their publication celebrating its 100th anniversary. The club had preserved a significant number of plans and aerials so that I could study the progression of this great golf course."

Provided the necessary background of the course and given free reign by the membership to enhance the course's looks and playability



Hole #16 - Before. Photo: Courtesy of Flatbrook



The new hole 13. Photo: www.mikeklemme.com



Hole #16 - After. Photo: www.mikeklemme.com

through restoration, renovation, and re-design where necessary, Hearn got down to business. "One of my main goals," he said, "was to restore the great shot value and strategy this course once had through the implementation of new tees, new bunkers, tree removal, fairway contouring, and minor green and collar adjustments."

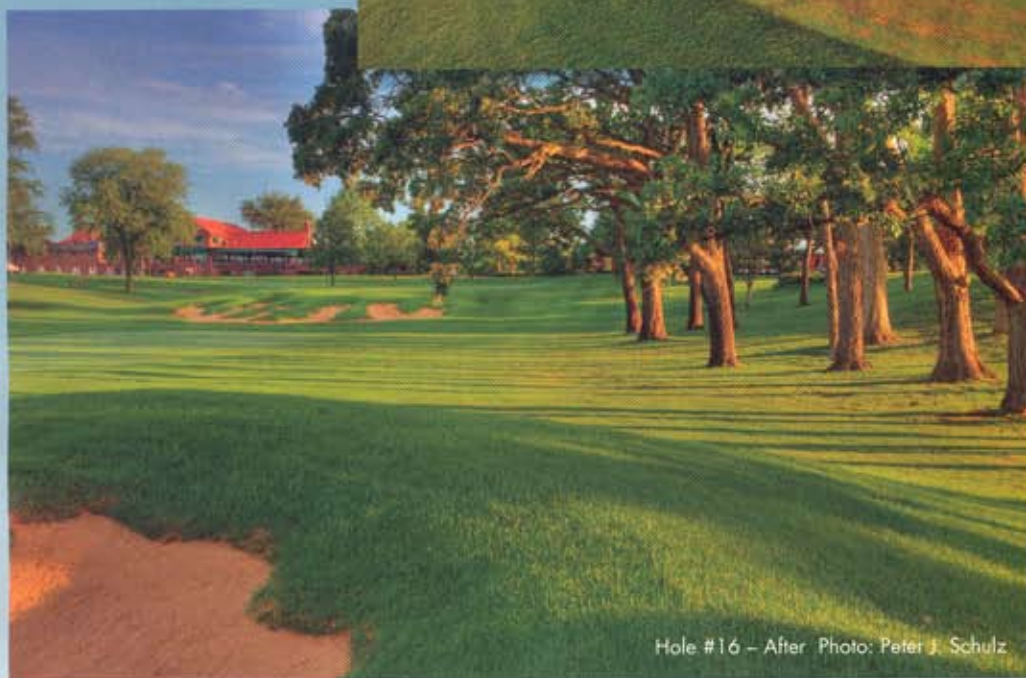
The most dramatic idea in his restoration strategy was a radical alteration to the look, feel, and placement of the club's sand bunkers. Hearn revealed his grand plan to the membership by

drawing the new shapes in the fairways with white paint. Gone were the geometric ovals of the previous bunkers, replaced by jagged-edged shapes that looked like a cross between a Rorschach test and a jigsaw puzzle piece. Some fingers jut out, then recess, then jut out some more. The end results are sand bunkers that look as if they were imported straight from the Irish coast.

Along with revising the look and feel of the course, Hearn and his team uprooted trees that had caused playability, maintenance, and turf quality



The new hole #8. Photo: Peter J. Schulz.



Hole #16 – After. Photo: Peter J. Schulz.

issues. He determined in advance that the course's original routing (most of which was performed by Herbert J. Tweedie) was excellent and that the green complexes were "outstanding." That left him with the delicate task of weaving together the spaces in between. In the end, Hearn did redesign one hole on the course, the par-4 dogleg right Hole 8, and designed and located the par-3 Hole 13.

After three years of work, the final results were unveiled to anxious members in 2009. According to Greg M. Ohlendorf, the club's historian,

it didn't take long to receive feedback. "The members were excited and extremely happy," he reports. "I know everyone had concerns about trees being removed from this great property, but these were necessary changes. The course is now more playable, has better drainage, and is beautiful from Hole 1 to 18. Ray Hearn and his team did a fantastic job!"

Verification of that assessment came quickly after the course was reopened. Host over the decades to over a dozen major tournaments, including the 1920 PGA Championship and the 1923

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U.S. Amateur, Flossmoor is once again on the national tournament landscape, as it has been selected to host the 2014 Western Amateur. In January, *GOLF Magazine* honored the club by designating Hearn's work as "2009 Renovation of the Year." Given a year to reflect upon his achievement, the self-effacing architect said that the accolades he prizes most are from the club members. "The compliments I have received from Flossmoor members and guests from other clubs please me deeply," he says. "They tell me the course once again boasts great strategy and risk/reward options."

A glance at the green of the renovated 6th hole shows precisely why the membership is crowing about their new "old" course. Formerly protected solely by sand bunkers that stood many paces away, the putting surface of this sharp dogleg is now surrounded by the layout's new signature sand bunkers and a grove of trees.

The course's most intriguing sand bunker resides in front of the No. 16 green. While the hole is nicknamed "Braeside" due its hillside location, the most memorable aspect of this par-4 is "Eleanor's Teeth"—a bunker featuring six sandy "teeth" shrewdly positioned in front of the flagstick. Any approach shot hit short on this green will inevitably require a painful extraction on the ensuing shot (or shots!).



While Hearn implemented a different edge to this bunker in the renovation, he says he "paid homage" to the club's history and thus preserved its exact location.

The final hole is a medium-length par-5 whose look and conditioning has been radically improved by the removal of over a dozen pesky willow trees that previously framed the green and also obstructed views of the Flossmoor clubhouse. Even though trees continue to shroud the fairway on this hole, the more intimidating protectors are lateral sand bunkers that scatter across the fairway and in front of the green on the approach shot.

Along with its outstanding golf course, the club maintains a proud tradition as a walking course. According to Ohlendorf, the club's caddie roster is approximately 100 strong, with a number of the caddies attending college on the Chick Evans Caddie Scholarships—a full tuition and housing scholarship managed by the Western Golf Association. In fact, architect Hearn attended college under this esteemed and celebrated program.

Coincidentally, Evans won his first national title at Flossmoor as a 19-year-old. Playing in the 1909 Western Amateur, the future U.S. Open and two-time U.S. Amateur champion made par on the difficult No. 18 to best Riverside Golf Club's Albert Seckel 1-up.



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