

Manchester area is home to some of the  
highest quality golf courses in New England

# A PILGRIMAGE TO VERMONT'S GOLF CAPITAL

BY ARTHUR RISTAU

*Encircling the community like an emerald  
necklace, five superb courses make  
Manchester the golfing mecca of northern*

*New England. From youthful and diversified  
Stratton in the southeast to serene and sedate  
Dorset lying northwest, Manchester is the  
hub of Vermont golf's Saville Row, perhaps*

the most delightful and diversified golfing experiences available in any twenty-five mile radius in this part of the country.

Describing an orbit around the elm-arched village and retail shopping complex are Stratton, Gleneagles, Dorset, and Manchester. Extending south is the crown jewel; the Ekwanok Country Club, arguably among the finest golf courses in New England.

The courses and their satellite activities funnel millions of dollars annually into the region's economy and, with suburbanizing encroachment viewed by many as Manchester's major problem, they furnish landscape definition and scenic enhancement.

Similar clusters of courses are available on Cape Cod, along Boston's north shore, in southern Rhode Island, and in the western Connecticut-

Westchester County region. But none can, collectively, offer the quality and variety of the Manchester area layouts. Each course is elegantly mature and meticulously maintained, but each is also decidedly different.

Nestled between the Green Mountain and Taconic ranges, Manchester-in-the-Mountains — for so it was anointed by some anonymous 19th-century savant — has in the last decade, and thanks largely to golfing, evolved into a major, four-season destination resort.

Television is a constraining medium, and it therefore doesn't do the Stratton Mountain golf complex credit. But as the permanent home for the LPGA McCall's Classic, broadcast on ESPN, the course has become one of the best known in New England. Contestants in this pedigreed event are delighted with the course as a competitive venue, but





Stratton is a multi-faceted, twenty-seven-hole treasure that won't fully unfold until you've played every hole. Good players will find it challenging from the blue stakes, and higher handicappers will have fun from the whites. It can be walked, but if you're having trouble with your feet or knees, a cart is recommended.

Stratton Mountain Country Club will observe its 30th anniversary this year, a season which also will be its first under the ownership of the Vancouver-based Intrawest Corporation. Stratton represents the initial U. S. acquisition by the British Columbia firm which has \$600 million in Canadian assets.

Pro Dave Rihm who is entering his eleventh season at Stratton says the LPGA classic offers terrific exposure for a course which recorded almost 30,000 rounds in 1994, a 10,000 increase in four years. "Two-thirds of our rounds are greens fee players," says Rihm, "so a major event, with TV cov-

erage, gives us a big boost." Greens fees, with cart, are \$70 on weekdays, \$78 on weekends.

Geoffrey Cornish and Brian Silva arranged the three distinct nine-hole locales to the north and west of the sprawling ski complex; the clubhouse is less than a mile from the Stratton Mountain base lodge. Each of the nines is interconnected, each offers a unique variety of shotmaking challenges, and all three are par-36s measuring about 3000 yards from the white markers.

Brian Silva's Forest side is the new-comer having opened in 1986.

While noting that his course is singular, Rihm points out that nearby Mount Snow, also a Cornish canvas

and offering a similar mountainous environment, bears some similarity. Drained by mountain brooks and a copious ski season runoff, Stratton is

lush. Its limestone bunkers contrast dramatically — and photographically — with the soft and fairly small greens. Rihm is especially proud of the fifth hole on the mountain track — a vertiginous 621-yard monster, and Vermont's longest link, where a big number is readily available.

A tributary of the West River meanders through a half dozen fairways and, as might be anticipated, standing water comes into play

on the lake nine. In general, and consistent with hillside environs, the course is kind to straight, though not necessarily long, hitters. "I seldom use my driver," says Rihm, "a three wood

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*Skiing and golf make Stratton a four season resort.*



*courtesy of Stratton Mountain*



or a two iron is all you really need off most of the tees here."

Stratton's reputation as a ski resort and its previous ownership by a Japanese sporting goods conglomerate, has engendered a cosmopolitan clientele. The course has only 250 members

*Superb conditioning of the Gleneagles golf course has helped to earn Equinox a Silver Medal from Golf magazine.*

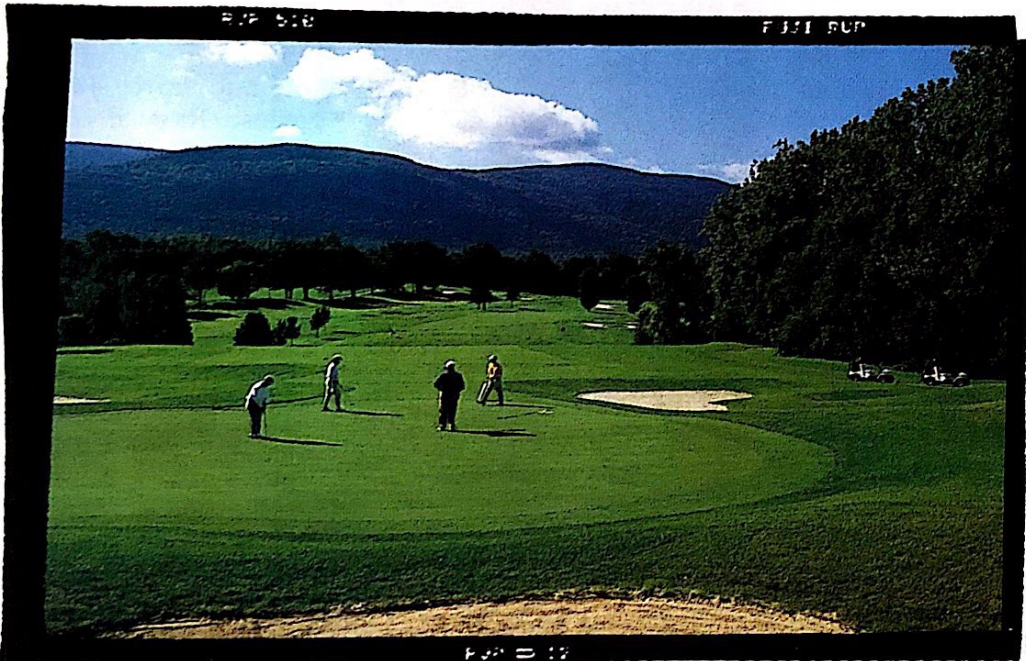
which, coupled with its twenty-seven hole capacity, permits walk-ons throughout its six month season. This is a thoroughly pleasant outing on a premier public facility.

**G**LENEAGLES AT EQUINOX IS, IN ACTUALITY, THE NEWEST COURSE IN THE MANCHESTER GOLFING firmament having undergone the most

significant — and expensive — modernization program of any course in the state's history. Acquired along with the storied Equinox House in 1991 by the multi-national Guinness Corporation, the sixty-seven-year-old course was closed for a year and recontoured by Rees Jones, son of the doyen of contemporary golf architects. It reopened in 1993 following an expenditure of \$3.5 million and was renamed Gleneagles to reflect corporate ties to its sister property in Scotland, the Gleneagles Hotel.

Richard Wood, entering his thirteenth year as professional, is a native Vermonter from Quechee whose father-in-law formerly headed golf operations at that complex. He loves what Jones has done to a course which was originally configured in the mid-1920s by the legendary Walter Travis. Travis won the U. S. Amateur three times in four years and, in 1904, became the first foreign winner of the British Amateur.

Hillocks are Jones's trademark and they abound, speckling the sides of many of the fairways. "We're landlocked here," Wood explains, "so Jones couldn't really redesign the course. But it was rebuilt. Several of



Alden Pelletier



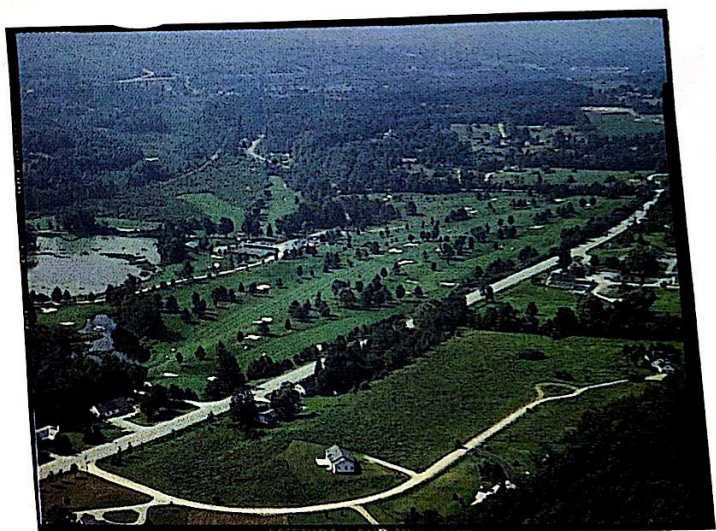
the fairways were raised by as much as three feet and that took care of most of the ground moisture. Rees saw the setting here, and the scenic views of the village and the hills, and he just fell in love with the place. I think it shows."

In addition to the hillocks — three foot mounds which Wood insists actually helps the straying golfer stay in play — Jones eliminated a brook which was a factor on several holes. "On a resort course you don't need trouble down the middle," said Wood. "The locals miss the brook but I think they've gotten used to not having it. The course appeals to just about every kind of golfer because what you see is what you get." What you get for \$3.5 million is a lot of golf course.

The 6000 yard (whites) par-71 track is according to Wood, still a year or two away from the type of perfection Jones attained when executing similar projects at such tonier venues as The Country Club, Baltusrol and the Congressional in Bethesda, Maryland. "The greens," Wood suggests, "are still a little slow. They'll be something else in a couple of years." Something else now are the soft, undulating fairways upon which one's ball perches invitingly, and the splendid views of

Manchester village which are available from several of the elevated tees. Wood is especially proud of his four finishing holes — eight and nine on the front, and seventeen and eighteen winding up. "I think they are four of Vermont's finest," he says.

This is a gentle, walker's course. Greens fees are \$65 during the week and \$70 on weekends, with a more congenial price package available for hotel guests. It is open May through October. Gleneagles' management has registered the course as a Cooperative Sanctuary certified by the Audubon Society of New York State — a commitment to enhancing wildlife habitat within the course's confines. It is also the first Vermont course to have obtained an integrated pest management plan from the state's Agency of Natural Resources.



Arthur Ristau

*Manchester CC enjoys an excellent reputation with experienced golfers.*

**T**HE MANCHESTER COUNTRY CLUB IS PROBABLY THE MOST HEAVILY PATRONIZED COURSE IN southern Vermont, a circumstance consistent with club management's aspiration to make the course a destination resort. "We have almost 450 members," says golf director Bob Stearns who has completed his first year at the club. "About half of them are second-home owners from metropolitan areas in the east, a quarter are retirees who



winter in Florida, and another 100 or so are year-round Manchester area residents." The course is now open only to members and their guests, or to guests of participating motels in the Manchester area. "I'd guess that seventy-five percent of our guests represent repeat business. They like their motel and they like the course," noted Stearns.

Stearns's comments reflect management philosophy. One such manager is Ed Tateosian, owner of the Weathervane Motel in Manchester and a club director. "Golf and skiing (at Stratton and nearby Bromley) work in tandem to make Manchester a destination resort for much of the year," he says. "We try to operate the club with that mutually supportive concept in mind."

Stearns is a native of Center Lovell, Maine, and an Ithaca College graduate who worked at courses in the San Diego vicinity before signing on at Manchester last year. He said the Cornish-designed course was conceived in the late 1960s by local motel owners whose customers couldn't play other clubs in the vicinity. A federal grant was obtained to offset a portion of the developmental costs.

"This is not a club in the traditional sense of that term," Stearns emphasizes. "This is a business. Our membership has evolved through the years from mostly Vermonters to predominantly weekend visitors. In fact, we now have to have a lottery for weekend tee times. We have an aggressive tournament program — more than a dozen a year — and we'll be hosting the Vermont Amateur next year."

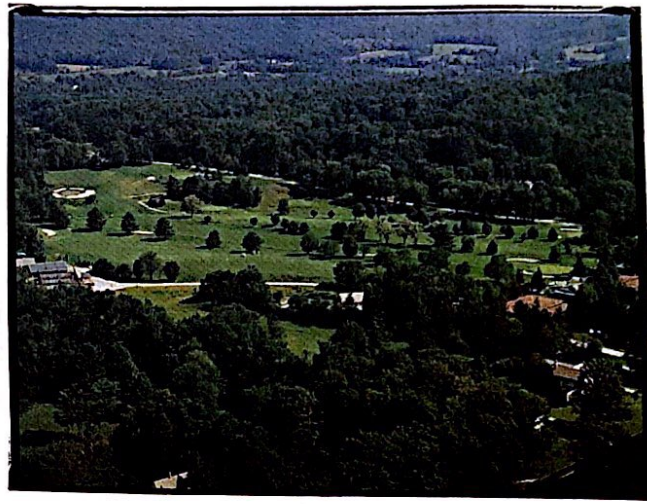
Contestants then will encounter a 6700 yard, par-72 test which features a belligerent back nine and a challenging overall amalgam of strength and shot-making. "Yes indeed, our back nine is as interesting as any I've seen in New England," Stearns offered as he watched a foursome teeing off on the 423 yard, par-5 seventeenth. The hole demands a heroic tee shot, over a whaleback fairway, through a chute of trees and onto a snug landing zone. Three players promptly found the woods, but the fourth deposited a Dalyesque drive, leaving himself a wedge to the green. "That guy is the club champion," Stearns remarked, "but the average player can make a seven here fairly routinely."

One player who doesn't make a lot of double bogeys is Superintendent John Ottaviano. "John's a good golfer," Stearns said, "and I think that's an important quality in a superinten-

dent. Ottaviano also serves on the Pesticide Advisory Committee of the Vermont Golf Association. He shares Stearns's conviction that the back side can be brutal. The thirteenth, for example, is 568 yards the layout's longest and its number one handicap. It demands a pinpointed tee ball and features a narrow, confining approach. Sixteen and twelve offer double greens, a Cornish signature, and both are sited in handsome but treacherous conifer clusters.

Situated in the Battenkill River Valley with the attractive but comparatively prosaic outward nine paralleling Route 7, several of the home side holes border a wetland. "I doubt that a golf course could be built here today," said Stearns, pointing to a marshland adjacent to the ninth fairway. "We probably couldn't get a permit." In addition to annual "work days" traditional at many Vermont member-dominated courses, rock-pulling parties were a yearly ritual at Manchester until a few years ago, but now they're no longer needed. Absent rocks, Manchester still presents a tidy test, offering an engaging melding of contour, water, and woodland. Greens fees, with cart are \$53.

**A**S BEFITTING A COURSE WHICH CAN CLAIM, WITH AMPLE JUSTIFICATION, TO BE THE OLDEST NINE-HOLE CLUB IN THE COUNTRY, the Dorset Field Club (Est. 1886) is just a short stroll from the elegant Vermont village from which the course derives its name. Both are reflective of the charm and



Arthur Ristau

*Dorset's signature green is surrounded by sand.*

postcard-perfect ambiance which delights Vermonters and visitors alike.

Snuggled in the Taconic foothills and the shelter of Mother Myrick Mountain, Dorset's lush layout bespeaks a gentler, less frenetic era...plus fours, wooden shafts, ankle length skirts and neckties. One is inclined to whisper while touring the grounds.

"I have to be careful about this," prefaces Larry Thompson, the club's president emeritus and resident historian, when asked to substantiate Dorset's longevity, "but the minutes of the club offer plenty of documentation." And to Thompson, the evidence is persuasive. "Our records show that we were founded on September 12, 1886. That makes us the oldest continually operating nine-hole golf course in the country. No one," he amends, "has challenged this claim."

Tradition and the nurturing thereof are very much on the mind of course superintendent Dave Berard who speaks very precisely when asked to discuss the immaculately contoured fairways. "We like to maintain a rough that is one and three quarter inches

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tall," he says. "For the average member that usually means two clubs more. That's the way our members like it." And the fairways themselves? "We maintain the fairways at five eighths of an inch tall, and are very water and fertilizer conscious." The fairways make you want to play barefoot.

It was a glorious mid-September morning, but there were just a dozen cars in the parking lot. Most of them, it turns out, were owned by tennis players. "We have seven clay courts," Berard said, "and until recently about half of our members didn't play golf at all. But in the last two years many of the tennis members have been taking up golf."

For the golfers and discounting the perhaps less-than-benign rough, the 5700 yard course is, Berard concedes, "not a lot of trouble." Older golfers, who, one senses, are conspicuous among Dorset's members, can have a propensity to slice. "Even slicers," he notes, "can do fairly well here." But the layout requires some thought. Berard pointed to several water hazards, including a brook which wanders into play on several holes.

Dorset's signature hole is the 406-yard second, which becomes an easier 436-yard par-5 on the inward side. It features a dogleg left into a tight, cloistered green which is fronted by the aforementioned brook.

Adjoining, club-owned land would readily accommodate a nine-hole expansion and Maestro Cornish's design has been yellowing for twenty years. The addition may come to pass one day but, again, it may not. Like everything else hereabouts there is a 19th-century, no-need-to-hurry aura, reflecting perhaps an unstated apprehension that the club would compromise its intimacy — not to mention its exclusivity — if it were amplified. More than seventy Dorset members

also are on the rolls of the equally exclusive Ekwanok Club down the road, and Thompson concedes, obtaining a Dorset GHIN isn't equivalent to signing on with the Book of the Month Club "If you're ready to die," he chuckles, "you probably qualify." But it is a course to die for.

**M**UCH OF THE HISTORY OF GOLF, NOT ONLY IN VERMONT BUT IN THE NATION IS IN THE ARCHIVES and showcases of the enchanting and idyllic Ekwanok Country Club. Sydney Stokes, 83-year-old curator and archivist looks like a bank president, but caresses the tumbler on the club's new vault with the practiced touch of a safecracker. Within, and still in the

father was assassinated. He was elected president of the club in 1904, shortly after taking up golf at the age of 50.

"This course," Stokes recounts proudly, "is one of the first eighteen-hole clubs in the country." He notes that the Chicago Golf Club, of which Lincoln was a charter member, was founded in 1893. "The Newport (Rhode Island) course, which is eighteen holes as well, was founded about the same time."

It is not coincidental that Ekwanok adjoins Gleneagles, a circumstance unique among Vermont golf courses and one that cannot be that commonplace anywhere else. "There was a crude, six-hole course behind the Equinox House where the founders of this club first played," said Stokes. One of those founders and Ekwanok's first president was a third generation Vermonter from Bennington, Edward S. Isham. A law partner of Robert Todd Lincoln's, he also is credited with naming the club for the tribe of Indians who once inhabited the region.

The 250 acres which comprise the club's grounds were assembled almost 100 years ago and the course was opened in 1900. "Very private," is Sydney's terse characterization of the club's admissions policy. As noted, many of the 250 members also belong to the vicinity's other bastion of exclusivity, the Dorset Field Club. Memberships here, and there, pass, like New York Giants' season tickets, from one generation to the next.

The club attained early celebrity when the USGA decreed that the 1914 U. S. Amateur would be played here. That epochal contest, rechronicled in these pages last year, remains perhaps the most noteworthy golf tournament ever played in northern New England. It left an indelible impression on, among others, Grantland Rice, the most acclaimed sportswriter of his day,



sorting-out phase, are the records and artifacts of a golfing culture.

"That telescope over there," Stokes points out, "belonged to Robert Todd Lincoln. "He used it to follow the progress of our tournaments." Lincoln, son of the sixteenth president, lived next door to Ekwanok at his mother's estate, Hildene. He first came to Manchester in 1864, the year before his





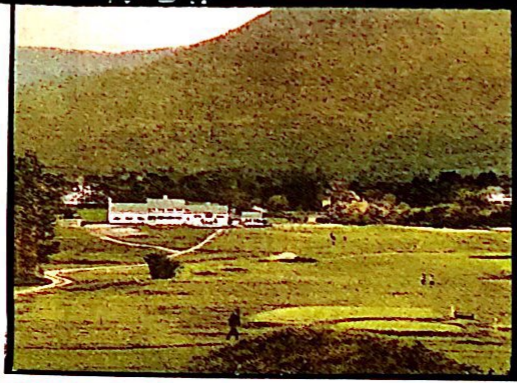
From the collection of Bob Lubban

whose coinages included "The Four Horsemen" of Notre Dame. Of Ekwanok he wrote: "I can still recall the thrill I got when first playing this course, which, even at that time was not only a magnificent test of golf, but that had the finest greens I had ever seen. I have gone back to Manchester at every opportunity since, and the old thrill remains — the beauty of the place itself, plus the fine condition and testing qualities of the course — a championship layout in every respect."

The first U. S. Women's Invitational was played here in 1936 with the great Patty Berg winning and, enroute, shooting a course record 72 which still stands. Berg proclaimed the course, "the best I have ever played."

Emerging from the vault, Stokes, a retired vice president of Merck Drug who first came to Manchester in 1956, leads the visitor on a tour of the gorgeous clubhouse. It includes several glass-enclosed cases displaying primitive golf paraphernalia, some of which is almost as old as the club itself. One prize is the putter used by the immortal Francis Ouimet when he won the U. S. Amateur here in 1914. Stokes is aghast when it is pointed out that Ouimet's name is misspelled. He unlocks the case and removes the identifying card. One senses that someone is liable to hear about this.

The clubhouse's treasurers are too



The pleasures of Ekwanok

numerous to recount. For example there is a wonderful Norman Rockwell original over one of the fireplaces, an oil of a golfer and his caddy which, says Stokes, the Rockwell Museum would treasure. It is insured for \$250,000.

Sydney commandeers a cart. It is quickly apparent that his affection for the club's history is equalled only by his delight in the course itself. In New England, three courses — all in Massachusetts — are customarily mentioned when lists of the nation's 100 best layouts are compiled by one authority or another. They are The Country Club in Brookline, Kittansett in Marion, and the Salem Country Club. Ekwanok is their peer.

Thick, rich Batten Kill River Valley soil covers most of the course and it has been painstakingly nurtured. This is not your basic bump and run challenge. Former Amateur Champion Chick Evans, Jr., whose father was introduced to the course by Robert Lincoln, said

of its surface, "All the fairways are soft carpets. What I like, too, is the fact that the turf of the greens seem to catch hold of a well-played shot. That is what I love to see."

Stokes loves to see his fellow members enjoying themselves, even on the treacherous seventh, the number one handicap on the men's card and a 600-yard bruiser from the championship stakes. It presents a Himalayan hump at the landing area with a second shot that seems to continue forever even as the golfer is beguiled by the stunning views. Typically, the forward tees shave 70 yards, and the yellow markers

another 50. These demarcations are, proportionately, reflective of the diversity available here. There is almost a mile differential, overall, between the blue tees and the yellows. On this day, as perhaps on most, the "avoid slow play" admonition on the scorecard was redundant. There were perhaps a dozen golfers.

Stokes takes particular pride on what must be one of the finest of finishing holes anywhere, a gently upward sloping tour toward the stately clubhouse. He's also proud of the club's caddy program which has been functioning since day one, and offers college scholarships every year. "We have eighteen of our caddies in college now," he says, "and we donate \$2500 to each." The fund averages \$40,000 in contributions each year.

Manchester's courses mirror the region itself. The blend of 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries is reflected in the golfing, as well as the shopping and dining experiences. One moment you're standing before the gracefully pillared Equinox House, the next you're shuffling through the northeast's glitziest shopping center. Strike a titanium-headed driver off an elevated tee at Stratton, or flick a niblick into a small sweet green at Dorset. Great golf is the constant and the courses, old and new, are, like the community, exceptional. ●