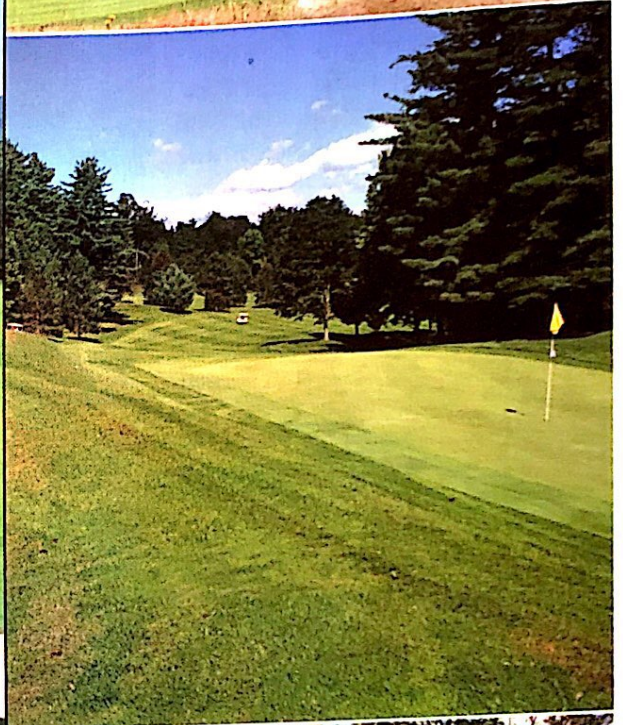
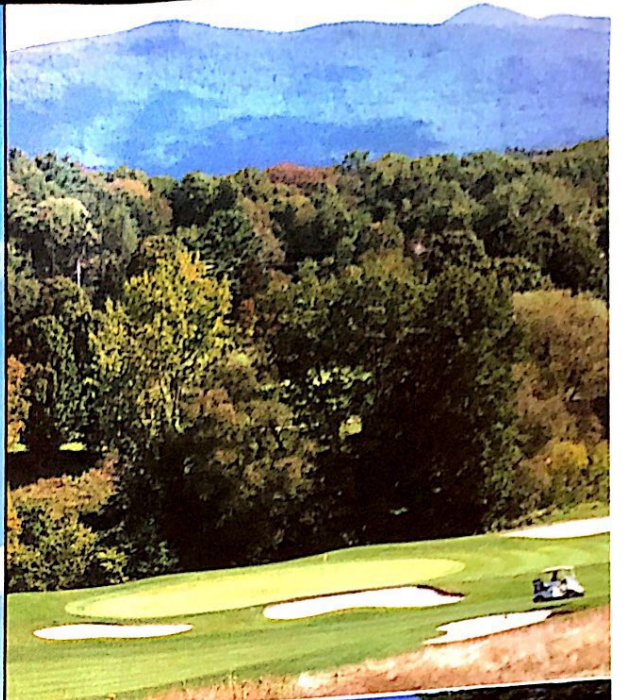


R RUTLAND REIGNS

Words and Photos by Bob Labbance

After a century, Rutland Country Club is still the grande dame of Green Mountain golf.

Golf began in Rutland, Vermont, during the summer of 1896 on an informal three-hole course outside of town. The layout was moved to the Proctor family land on a bluff west of town and expanded to nine holes the following summer, but it wasn't until 1901, when the members re-organized as the Rutland Country Club, that the group moved to its present location. Despite the fact that many of the members transferred their allegiance to the new organization, the incorporation of the Country Club marks the start of a fraternity that this season celebrates its centennial.



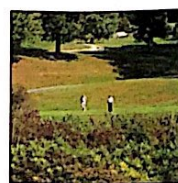
In the four years between course designs, golf course architecture had changed considerably in the United States, and no longer were clubs satisfied by the efforts of members. To plan the new layout the club turned to George Low, a 26-year-old Scot from Carnoustie, who had landed in America in 1899, and by 1901 was a summer resident of Vermont.

Low began his American career as the pro at Dyker Meadow in New York, one of the finest courses in the country at the time, and just two weeks after his arrival in this county tied for second at the 1899 U.S. Open. At Dyker, Low met James Taylor, founder of Ekwanok, who convinced him to accept a job as Ekwanok's first professional.

Low had been involved with golf course design in Scotland, but planning the Rutland Country Club was his inaugural assignment in the United States. He made the short trip from Manchester for the first time on July 7, 1901, and the *Rutland Herald* reported that "as soon as the farm crops are harvested Mr. Low will take a plan of the grounds and will work out the course to be covered by the new links." The country club site had enormous potential,

and Low would stick to the more level parts of the property, avoiding the upland hillside and apple orchard. He used the East Creek to provide challenge on several of the links—a hazard that still confounds players today.

Rutland golfers were pleased with their new links, and during the first full season of play improvements were constant to the grounds and clubhouse. The club also continued to operate part of the property as a farm—selling milk, cream and apples, as well as pasturing members' horses. In 1902, Rutland joined with five other clubs to form the Vermont Golf Association. Ninety-nine years later the organization still has its headquarters at the Rutland Country Club.



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In 1904, Rutland hosted the third annual Vermont Amateur Championship—the start of a long association with the event that continues today. It was unusual in the early days when the final was not contested by a player from the Rutland Country Club. Nine different Rutland members have won a total of 17 state amateur titles—a Vermont record. In 1905, the McCullough Cup was established to reward the best team effort, totaling

scores from the four best players from each club in the state. Rutland has won that honor more than 30 times, yet another record. Needless to say, Rutland is a club known for its players, and today there is still a large contingent of single-digit handicappers among the 550 members.

By 1925, the membership was ready to expand the course and become Vermont's fourth 18-hole course, and they voted to do so on December 4, 1926. A finance committee engaged the services of Wayne Stiles, one of the foremost golf course architects of his day.

Stiles was born and raised in Boston. At age 18 he began working as an office boy for landscape architect Franklin Brett; 13 years later he opened his own design firm and added golf design to his talents in town planning and landscape design. Eventually partnered with John Van Kleeck, Stiles produced more than 25 designs in New England, as well as work south to Florida and west to Nebraska. His strength lay in beautifully landscaped and deceptively intricate greenside areas. A second shot poorly played would not find a favorable result in his better work, but the player would enjoy the

surroundings in which he was expected to perform.

Stiles submitted an estimate of \$30,879 to remodel the front side and build the backside, but the final cost overrun of nearly \$13,000 shocked H.G. Smith, chair of the construction committee. "I feel that we have a good golf course, but I do not feel that any of us are entitled to a great deal of credit for having

produced an economical result," wrote Smith.

"However, the Club members seem well pleased with it and if the load does not prove too much of a burden, it will be all right in the last analysis," Smith concluded.

Time tells us that the money was well spent, as little repair has been needed in the ensuing decades. Today, Rutland remains an excellent natural golf course in a delightful setting. Stiles used the uphill portions of the property, and created a progression of unique holes weaving across the broad slope. As you battle the twisting, sidehill dogleg sixteenth, a long string

of pretty views opens up. From the White Rocks cliffs in Wallingford to the twin tops of Killington and Pico, the seventeenth tee is a proper spot for reflection.

This attractive environment has produced some top-



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flight talent. Member Tom Pierce won his first Vermont Amateur at the age of 16 in 1935, an event he went on to win a total of seven times, still a record today. Another product of the Rutland Country Club went even farther. Jim Murray of Carnoustie became the professional in Rutland in 1927, just as the 18-hole course was becoming a reality. He lived in a house just off the second tee, but only one of his four children was interested in golf. His daughter Mae worked at her game under the watchful eye of her father, and then went out to compete on the state circuit. She won the Women's Amateur six times, including four straight, from 1946 to 1949; was runner-up at the 1950 U.S. Women's Amateur, and was later selected to the 1952 Curtis Cup team.

Over the years the course has been visited by many prominent personalities, including Walter Hagen, Gene Sarazen, Patty Berg, Ted Williams and Calvin Coolidge. Native son Coolidge was vice president of the United States when he spent an afternoon at the club on August 21, 1921, the guest of former Vermont governor Percival W. Clement. It is doubtful that Coolidge—a man known in golfing circles for finding the game “rather expensive for the average pocketbook”—played golf during his visit.

Four-time British Open winner Bobby Locke was a frequent visitor to Rutland in the 1950s, after marrying local resident Mary Fenton. Sports psychologist Bob Rotella returns to his home town at least once a year to compete in ‘The Pierce,’ Rutland's premier golf tournament. Rotella grew up caddy-ing at the club. Barry Van Gerbig, a Rutland member in the





summer and former president of Seminole Golf Club in North Palm Beach, Florida in the winter, used his local knowledge to capture the 1993 Vermont Amateur at Rutland. Amid heat and humidity uncharacteristic of Vermont, Van Gerbig built a nine shot lead going in to the final round, then squandered nearly half of it when he took a quad on the par-four sixteenth. He recovered to hold off five-time champion Shawn Baker, who closed with a tournament low 65. Van Gerbig became the most senior player to ever win Vermont's highest amateur honor.

Under the able stewardship of pro Greg Nelson and superintendent Karl Larson, the Club continues to flourish in the 21st century. The golf course has always been open to the public, though the large and avid membership makes calling for starting times mandatory. In its clubhouse, RCC has always proudly displayed items from its history—including the original course map penned by Stiles—mostly thanks to the late Howard Shortsleeve, who cared deeply about the Club from his days as a caddie to his premature passing several years ago. While those who knew Howard know he would relish the opportunity to be on-hand for the year's celebration, his presence will be felt as members revel in the pleasure of more than 100 seasons of great golf and heartfelt camaraderie.

Page 61, top: The spine of the Green Mountains provides a dazzling vista from the back nine upland holes.

Middle: Few architects today would dare to design a dogleg as crafty as Stiles' par-4 eleventh.

Bottom: Tasteful landscaping enhances the clubhouse and grounds at Rutland.

Here: At 230 yards, Rutland's fifth hole is one of Vermont's toughest par-3s.