



The BURLINGTON Country Club

Keeping Up with the Future While Maintaining Reverence for Tradition

By Pamela Polston
Photography by Stephen Ostrowski

*Golf links to Nature "dear old dame"
Her skies, her sword, her trees. The game
On breast of Mother Earth we play,
And learn to love her more each day.
—from Golf Links, by W.C. Bitting*

Among the many stories, tall and otherwise, in golf lore is one about a momentous day for Andrew Carnegie near the turn of the 19th century. The steel tycoon, who had a private cottage built next to his beloved St. Andrew's course—the American one—was said to be rabidly enthusiastic about the game, but only a so-so player. On the day he sold the Carnegie Steel Corporation to U.S. Steel for \$250 million, he played the course and managed to par its fifth hole for the first time. Later the same day, as he pulled up in front of J. P. Morgan's bank, a friend stopped him. "I've been hearing great things about you," he said, referring to the immensely profitable sale. Carnegie looked at his friend with amazement and replied, "How did you know I had a par on the fifth today?"

Andrew Carnegie's millions couldn't buy him

One of the biggest projects will be to enlarge the pond between hole 4, 13, and 15, a move that will increase the club's water reservoirs and cut costly dependence on city water supplies.

talent with the golf clubs, even if they did help pay for the clubhouse. He was the kind of player who would have benefitted from some of the current changes at the Burlington Country Club, where a new master plan is allowing more leverage on the links—among other things.

BCC has launched a series of course improvements that will install forward tees, resculpt mounds, and alter sight lines to make the game more accessible for all golfers, especially women, older players, and the average, Andrew Carnegie-type duffer. Other projects will address the quality of the grounds and their maintenance: enlarging a pond to increase the water supply, computerizing the sprinkler system, planting more trees and augmenting a naturalness imparted by BCC's original designer, golf course architect Donald Ross.

Ross designed nearly 600 courses—among them Seminole in Palm Beach, Florida and Pinehurst No. 2 in North Carolina—during the 45-year period that saw the birth and tremendous growth of golf in this country. Much has changed in the game since the famed Scotsman made his unique mark on the American landscape: the grounds equipment and the height of the grass, the watering systems, the golf carts, the sophistication of golf clubs and balls, the skill and sheer volume of players. (And, of course, the clothes, but that's another story.) In the 1990s, golf cour-



Melanie Dodds tees off on the new forward tee on Number 17.

ses like the Burlington Country Club must decide how to contend with these changes—as well as more recent environmental considerations—while maintaining the integrity of their classically designed grounds.

“People say you can play this course day after day and never get tired of it,” says former BCC President Robert Dodds. “We don’t want to change that.” But the club now has more than 600 active members with differing needs.

“No major architectural changes have been done since the course was built in 1924,” Dodds explains. “Things were getting done piecemeal; every [president] does something independently. The impetus for a master plan came from the membership, and it was my goal during my tenure to get that in place.”

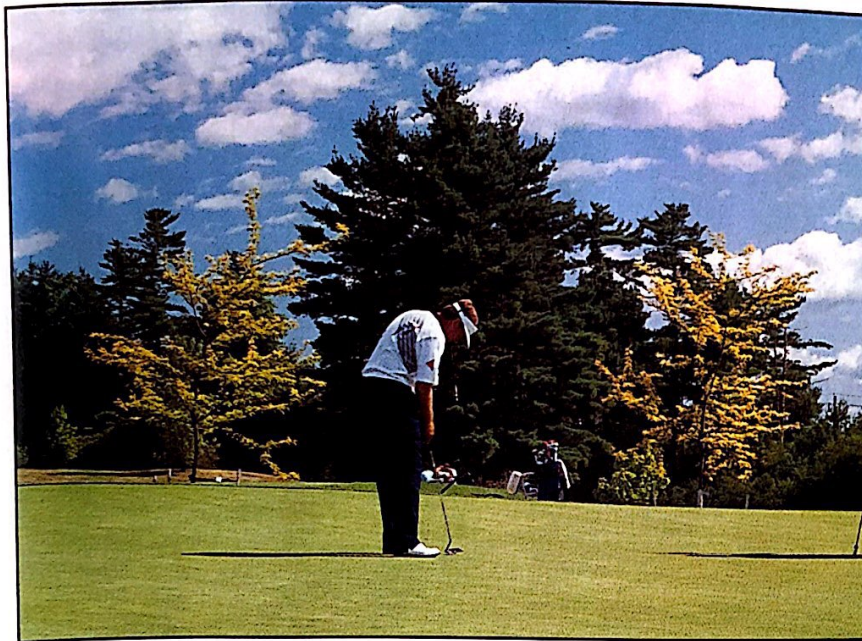
To Dodds and other BCC members, it seemed clear that an outside designer should be hired to develop that master plan, and it was imperative that he be familiar with the Donald Ross approach. “It would be a big sin to have someone who was unfamiliar with the classic design,” Dodds says. “We wanted someone who knew the old methods.”

BCC found its perfect match in Michael Hurdzan, a Columbus, Ohio, golf course architect who not only reveres the classic course designs, but is right up to date as an expert on turfgrasses and environmental regulations. And coin-

cidentally, he got his graduate degrees at the University of Vermont. “I was going to go to Texas for my Ph.D.,” he says, “but once I got to Vermont, I couldn’t leave.” Hurdzan was delighted to be asked to return to the Burlington Country Club, where he recalls “having a few rounds of golf and sledding on the hill in winter” during his graduate years.

The son of a teaching pro, Hurdzan virtually grew up on a golf course. The introduction to his future profession was in 1957—he was just 13—when the course where his father worked was being redesigned. Now sole owner of Hurdzan Golf Course Design, he has created more than 175 new courses and worked on improvements for about 200 more. Hurdzan thinks it was his reputation as an environmentalist—and perhaps his membership in the Donald Ross Society—that attracted the BCC to him. They didn’t know until later about the serendipitous UVM connection.

Before Hurdzan arrived, he asked the club to put together a committee of members, recalls Dodds. The resulting group of 15 diverse players, from highly skilled to novice, from young to old, male and female, gave Hurdzan their input about the course. The major improvements, says Hurdzan, are intended to “make it more playable and pleasurable to more people.” For example, “the golf course needs greater flexibility—bigger tees, more tees.



The Sunburst Yellow locust near 17 breaks up a solid visual line of green, helping the eye get perspective.

Areas where the golf holes are too close together need a greater sense of isolation—this improves the strategy of both better and weaker players.”

One of the changes, Dodds points out, is at hole number three—“a wonderful hole but it needed more cup set space, and a more equitable final landing area.” Another targeted hole, one particularly hard for women, Dodds says, was number 17. Burlington Country Club can be difficult for women because when it was designed, women didn’t play. The women said we need more forward tees.

“There’s an old saying in golf that there are more instructors than players,” Dodds continues. “We had lots of input and disagreements on that one [hole 17]; we allowed Mike to have final say.”

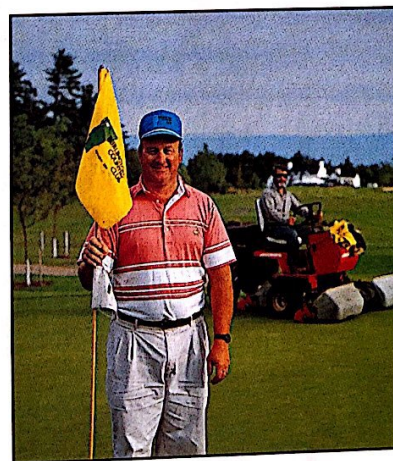
Current president Marcy Fagan, 37, has been a member of BCC since 1977 and a golfer since she was 10, served on the committee and advised Hurdzan. She agrees that the course is not easy for the average woman or older player. “Number 17 is a very difficult par 4,” she says. “The forward tees help get away from the stigma that it’s just a man’s game.”

“Mike also looks at safety features,” adds Dodds. “Are there any places where people could get hit in the head with a golf ball? Yes. Sometimes balls from number one go to number ten and vice versa. No one’s been hurt so far, but it *could* happen. Mike suggested moving the tee to change

the driving direction. If Hurdzan had his way, the first thing he’d fix would be safety.”

It’s not only errant balls that concern Hurdzan. It’s the entire ecosystem of the course itself: how the grounds are cut, fertilized, watered and protected from pests; how the trees and other plant life are maintained; and how the natural habitat of resident wildlife is affected; how the whole place will survive into the future. At the Burlington Country Club, this ecosystem belongs to Fred Martell.

Grounds superintendent for 15 years—his wife, Nancy, and two sons also work at BCC—Martell is as devoted to



Fred Martell, grounds superintendent at BCC for the past 15 years, claims there is a more tolerant attitude about weeds and pests these days, noting that we can live with a little imperfection.

turf as a man can be. But his job isn't just about shaving grass to a hair's width and turning on the sprinklers. Martell oversees an annual grounds budget of \$400,000, the largest part of BCC's total budget and a sum that would have dropped the jaws of the men—even Andrew Carnegie—on America's first course. (After tenure in a pasture, then an apple orchard, St. Andrew's members shelled out \$1,500 for a course that took them all of two days to build. But that was 1897.)

Martell is invited to the Masters Tournament each year to keep the grounds ("a great honor," says Dodds); "Martell gets to try out new equipment and learns a lot." He not only purchases equipment; he operates, maintains and repairs it as well, along with a year-round crew of four. And when Hurdzan suggests moving a mound here, building a pond there, Martell is the one who makes the earth move.

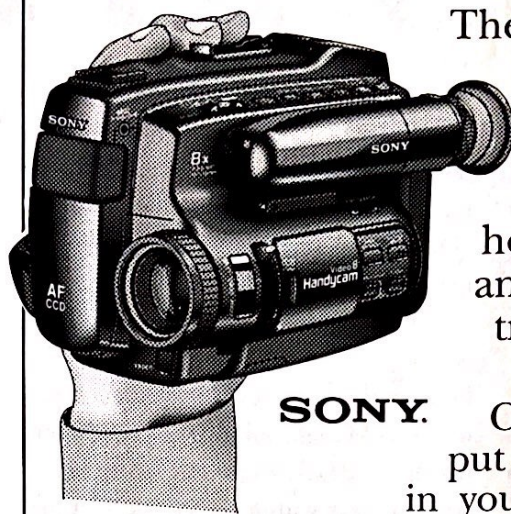
Certainly the biggest project at BCC will be significantly enlarging the pond between hole number 4 and numbers 13 and 15, a move that will increase the club's own water reservoirs and cut its costly dependence on city water supplies.

As for the watering, Martell looks forward to a system that will be controlled by a computer in the office. Already, there are new Toro sprinkler heads that lie flush with the ground until turned on, now controlled manually at boxes in the field. Eventually, these will download into the central computer. Martell notes that Hurdzan was satisfied with the changes made in the watering system over the years.

Although BCC still uses some state-approved pesticides, Martell says the club is going organic as much as possible. "This year," he says, "we came up with biological [natural antagonist] control for cutworms and sod-web worms. These eat around the holes and make the greens look unattractive. As materials and organic fertilizers come out and get approved by the state of Vermont, we try them. Chemical application is the last resort."

Martell claims there is a different, more tolerant attitude about some weeds and pests nowadays, an attitude that says we can live with a little imperfection. "I think

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you're going to see a lot of changes in the next five years," he says. "When I started, we sprayed every seven days, whether we needed it or not. In the '80s, we started to question, to use [chemicals] more specifically. Chemical companies are going to retool; pesticides are going to be a back-shelf type of thing. I know everyone in the golf course business feels that way."

After growing up on a farm in New Hampshire, Martell attended Memphis State, then got a degree in agronomy at the University of Massachusetts. He then returned to New Hampshire and worked at a country club in Nashua before coming to the BCC. He keeps abreast of current information in his field by attending classes, conferences, and national shows, geared toward such topics as pesticides and irrigation. "Vermont demands 16 credits every five years to be recertified," he says. "This business changes every day; the basics I got out of school were great, but everything is different today."

Martell and Hurdzan agree that trees are a critical feature of a golf course, both visually and environmentally. "What the

variety of trees does," says Hurdzan, "is that trees bloom and flower at different times, have different heights and shapes. Some are showier; some, like the spruce, have the same look. You use this variability to frame golf holes, and you try not to use a lot of the same ones so that in case of disease—as with the elms—you won't lose a lot of them."

A case in point is the Sunburst Yellow locust near BCC's hole number 17, which breaks up a solid visual line of green behind it that makes the hole difficult to see. "Different-colored trees help the eye get perspective," Martell explains.

"The biggest thing on golf courses now is tree attrition. We have to plant more because the old ones are starting to die off," says Martell, pointing to a stately but decrepit old oak. Attention is also being paid to areas within the course that are home to a variety of wildlife, from deer to ducks.

The good news, Hurdzan claims, is that golf course builders worldwide are increasingly ecology-conscious. Serving on projects across the United States,

Canada, and Japan, he reports, there is "environmental awareness in all parts." Designing golf courses is an evolving science that Hurdzan says is becoming a technical art. "The tougher it gets, the more we love it," he continues. "We have even looked to organic farming, wildlife preserves . . . we work hard to keep [natural] habitat as much as we can."

That keeping up with the future and maintaining a reverence for tradition should co-exist on a golf course is as natural as playing an 18-hole round. Writer/philosopher/golfer Shivas Irons said about the game: "... If it is a journey, it is also a *round*; it always leads back to the place you started from . . . the more you play, the more you realize you are staying where you are." By playing golf, in other words, "you re-enact that secret of the journey. You may even get to enjoy it." And design attuned to nature, Donald Ross would surely have agreed, is an essential part of the journey. ♦

Pamela Polston is a freelance writer from Burlington, Vermont.