

At North Jersey Country Club, Less is More

Benjamin Herms

Walter Travis laid out the current iteration of the golf course at North Jersey Country Club on a sprawling, rocky site in Wayne Township, New Jersey northwest of Paterson. The club was formed in 1895 and originally joined the USGA under the name ‘Paterson Golf Club’ before rebranding to ‘North Jersey Country Club’ in 1897. On December 7, 1917, the club relocated from East Paterson to its current site in Wayne Township after the state of New Jersey elected to build two roads through the existing golf course. According to the club’s records, in 1921 the club contracted Clifford Wendehack (famed architect who also designed clubhouses for Winged Foot, Mountain Ridge, Bethpage and more) to build a new clubhouse [right] and Walter Travis to build “a championship course in every detail.” Travis did just that, making use of a fair portion of the hilly and densely forested 300+ acre site. The design included wild greens and significant elevation changes. The former quality was lessened over the decades that followed as improved agronomic practices and a predisposition toward faster greens rendered Travis’ abstract shapes too difficult to maneuver with a putter. By the same token, as clubs around the country attempted to convert their courses into “championship layouts”, corridors were narrowed, trees planted, and bunkers appeared and then multiplied.



In the last half-decade, Brian Schneider and his team from Renaissance Golf Design have worked to restore the unique naturalism of the site and Travis’ lost architectural features.

When Travis built the course, he did so with few bunkers due to a preponderance of stubborn rock close to the surface throughout the property, instead choosing to use hummocks and mounds to affect shots that bunkers would normally penalize. The result of this design strategy is a course that emphasizes a player’s creativity around North Jersey Country Club’s well-undulated greens. In the modern era, most bunkers are no longer hazardous for average-to-good players and can be easily conquered with a lofted wedge in a somewhat binary strategy. Conversely, tight-lying pitches and chips promote a variety of shot options that will be either benefitted or hindered by the present location of the ball, the obstacles between it and the green and/or hole location, the firmness of the turf and the weather conditions during the round. The scale of the undulations within the greens at North Jersey serve to further perplex the player, emphasizing that the selection of a proper landing area for a shot is critical to a preferred outcome. A somewhat uncommon but interesting exercise among golf course architecture enthusiasts is to determine the best or favorite hole in a player’s personal catalog that does not have any bunkers. Such a constraint eliminates many of the greatest holes in America and some courses’ entire routings, which makes it even more impressive that

North Jersey has *nine*. In all, North Jersey Country Club presently has only thirteen bunkers excluding the tenth and eighteenth holes which are still under construction.



The holes that are bunkered at North Jersey Country Club use them to enhance the uneven nature of Travis' green complexes; sixteen of North Jersey's holes don't have fairway bunkers with the exceptions being the tenth and eighteenth holes. Only eighteen will sport fairway bunkers once the pending restoration is complete, and only because they were present in Travis' original plans. The greenside bunkers at North Jersey have flat bottoms and are often

complemented by mounds that push up the neighboring green surfaces. This characteristic is exemplified by the second hole [above], where the left bunker makes the green appear more pronounced. Greenside bunker shots must be played carefully to avoid extreme runouts and unnervingly long putts to achieve sand saves. The bunkers on the second hole are invisible from the tee [right], appearing only as gaps between the tall mounds that frame the green. The two bunkers short-right also serve to hide the tightly-mown runoff separated from the right side of the green by an imposing ridge that can divert balls toward or away from the hole. On other holes, the greenside bunkers melt into the putting surfaces, providing an unfortunate outcome to a shot that doesn't properly follow the complex contours of Travis' greens. To further reduce the number of bunkers across the unforgiving terrain, Travis' layout includes a trio of bunkers between the third and



ninth greens that impact approaches on both holes. These bunkers are surrounded by shortgrass which extends to the practice putting green on the West side of the clubhouse. The ninth green tilts predominantly toward the bunkers, while the third green tilts away from them. Photos of this area [right] and the connected surrounds of the fourteenth and seventeenth greens [below] allow architecture buffs to imagine the diversity of possible shots around North Jersey Country Club. The restored acres of fairway-height turf around North Jersey's greens produce a stark contrast to the thick rough typically surrounding greens in the northeast. Both the color and texture of the added bentgrass add intrigue to each approach shot and allow the contours to melt into the adjacent features like the pond behind the fourteenth green.



Walter Travis' choice to limit bunkering allows the greens at North Jersey Country Club to stand out. Each green has multiple severe contours that ensure a new experience for each player based on the result of their approach, and for that same player a new experience each day with a new hole location. The sixth hole is a 400 yard dog leg right that plays over a native area thick with fescue. The fairway slopes considerably from left to right, encouraging fading golf balls to find the rough on its low side and hooking shots to lose distance. Prior to the course's restoration, the sixth green [right, courtesy of northjerseycc.com] sported five bunkers, four of which were decidedly greenside. The green itself appears reasonable, but a closer look reveals a plateau on the back-left that slopes considerably toward the front-right of the pad. Fortunately, a shot missed long or left will find sand and allow a player to blast a shot onto the green with enough spin to hold the upper portion where the hole is located in the reference photo. Alternatively, a shot missed short-right will be difficult to manage as a ball played from the front-right bunker with any amount of spin will struggle to climb the hill and settle near the hole. The former case rewards more aggressive approach results with an easier recovery shot, while the latter penalizes a more conservative approach. Revisiting the sixth green post-restoration, these outcomes are flipped. All of the bunkers shown above were removed by Renaissance and a runout was established on all sides of the green [left]. This updated configuration still penalizes missed approach shots but also provides ample recovery options from all sides. Expansion of the sixth green has also likely increased the number of pinnable locations, reducing the concentration of foot traffic and subsequently improving green health. Many other greens at North Jersey were expanded during the recent restoration for the reasons previously listed and in an attempt to recapture Travis' signature built-up green edges.



Walter Travis chose to work within the constraints of the property at North Jersey Country Club due to construction difficulties, but the property itself had much to offer the architect. The northern section of the property was especially rugged and varied. The first hole a player encounters in this section of the property is the seventh. The par three seventh plays from an elevated tee over a small pond to a large green at the base of an exposed rocky ridge. This hole was highlighted by Brian Schneider during the restoration effort in part due to the unique and intimidating mounds that front the green. These moguls, which replaced bunker sites, can distract players from the dramatic ridge separating the lower front and higher back of the green. Additional fill was built up on the left of and behind the green, and a fairway-cut apron was added. Without any sand,

this medium length par three still provides a challenge. A front pin [right] must be approached carefully, over the mounds but below the ridge, as a putt from the upper level of the green can't be stopped close to the hole. A pin on the upper level of the green is equally difficult to reach, as another runout behind the putting surface can divert the ball away from its intended target. The rock outcropping behind the green and rear eighth tee box foreshadows the elevation changes players will face when returning to this section of the property on the back nine.



Although not clearly visible in the photo of the seventh green, the eleventh green also uses the same outcropping as a backdrop. The long, uphill par four eleventh hole had both its green and tees moved between Travis' construction and the early twenty-first century. In 2012, the tees were moved back to their original location to bring a pond back into the line of play, and during Renaissance's restoration in the early 2020s the green was moved back and left, obscuring it from view off the tee. The green now sits at the top of a pronounced left-to-right slope [left] that eschews a fading ball, although the location of the green and shortgrass runout should suggest to the player that a draw is the optimal flight for the approach.



Among the protective trees left of the fairway, exposed rock in the distance and native grasses encircling the playing area, the eleventh green at North Jersey Country Club provides ample texture to satisfy any photographer or golfer with a discerning eye. In the case of the eleventh hole, retooling a relatively flat green with bunkers short-left and short-right has elevated one of the least compelling holes on property to one of its most aesthetically pleasing and technically demanding par fours.

The shorter par four twelfth hole shines as well. At

roughly 360 yards, the twelfth first plays up a hill and then down a steep ridge and over a creek to a wide green [below] with plateaus on the back-left and back-right separated by a gully. The green's features are prominently visible from the top of the hill where a proper tee shot finishes.



The thirteenth hole [below], a medium-length par three plays back into the ridge traversed on the previous hole. This hole boasts one of the flattest greens on the course, but is aided by the natural contour of its surrounds and two well placed bunkers short of the green.



In summation, the Walter Travis designed North Jersey Country Club is one of the most unique golden-age golf courses in the northeast. The ingenuity he used to overcome a difficult property is not always necessary with the advent of modern construction machinery, but it has been reclaimed by the membership and maintenance team at North Jersey. The restorative work completed by Renaissance Golf Design has leveled-up the character of the course and recaptured Travis' bold features.



North Jersey Country Club, 18th Green



North Jersey Country Club, 17th Green [right] and 14th Green [left]



Country Club, 13th Green



North Jersey Country Club, 15th Green



North Jersey Country Club, 3rd Green [right], 9th Green [right] and Clubhouse



North Jersey Country Club, 8th Hole



North Jersey Country Club, 4th Hole



North Jersey Country Club, 2nd Hole