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An Interview with Rees Jones

BY **PAUL REEVES**

Medinah Country Club on the outskirts of Chicago, Illinois, is one of the USA's grandest country clubs. Founded in 1924 by a group of Shriners, the club features three 18-hole courses and an iconic clubhouse. The courses were designed by Tom Bendelow, a Scot who made his way to the USA in 1892 and become one of the countries' most prolific course designers, creating an estimated 700 courses.

The No.3 course at Medinah was originally designed for the ladies, but in 1949 the course would host its first US Open. Two more would follow this, in 1975 and 1990, then two USPGAs, in 1999 and 2006. In September 2012 it hosted the Ryder Cup, providing the venue for one of the most exciting Ryder Cup competitions in history. Along this journey of hosting major golf tournaments, the course has undergone many changes. Most recently, Rees Jones – aka the 'Open Doctor' – has worked on the course. Working with the club and his team of designers, Rees has spent 10 years changing the course into the remarkable layout it is today.

Recently I had the opportunity to spend some time with Rees Jones and listen to his thoughts on Medinah, as well as talk about golf course architecture in general. Following is a synopsis of this discussion:

'Open Doctor': Rees Jones

PHOTO: Gary Kellner

The work we have done at Medinah over the last 10 years is about consolidating the course design; some of it is renovation and some of it is new. We installed the flexibility in the course necessary to allow for member, tournament and championship play and to bring Medinah No.3 into the 21st century.

Each project we do on an existing course has had a slightly different objective. Our work at the Country Club at Brookline was a restoration; at Congressional, Torrey Pines, and Atlanta Athletic Club, we rebuilt the golf course. Bethpage was a resurrection. The work we are doing at Baltusrol is a restoration and an updating. We recently completed a renovation of the West Course at Ibaraki Country Club in Osaka, Japan, in preparation for the Panasonic Open. We converted

PHOTO: Evan Schiller

the two-green design to one green per hole; it's the original routing with a completely different strategy for each hole. My firm has the experience to know what should be done. You generally have only one opportunity to do a project the right way.

Below & bottom: Rees Jones' course consolidation brief included returning the green at the par-3 17th back to its former, intimidating position nudging the waters of Lake Kadijah.

Prior to the 2012 Ryder Cup, Medinah wanted greens we hadn't previously worked on to be redesigned, as well as to redesign, relocate and add new bunkers. The acquisition of some land and other work taking place in the vicinity gave me the opportunity to totally rework the 15th hole. Also as part of the course consolidation, I was asked to move the 17th green back to its previous position on the banks of Lake Kadijah.

I first saw Medinah in 1975 but it's my memories of the 1990 US Open, won by Hale Irwin, that are my clearest of Course No.3. But the course I first saw or the one we have now created bears little resemblance to Bendelows' original layout. Roger Packard did some work on it prior to 1975 Open. Even Bendelow had another go at it after 'Lighthorse' Harry Cooper scorched around the course in 63 strokes to win the 1930 Medinah Open. The work I have done to Medinah No.3 has never been about restoration. If you want to see Bendelow at Medinah you need to play the No.2 course; it has not been renovated since it was built.

I have done a lot of work restoring/ renovating and redesigning courses prior to major golf tournaments, with the desire to unify the course into a more solid test of championship golf that would stand the test of time. These were objectives of mine and these were also the club's objectives. At Medinah, prior to the 2006 USPGA Championship I was asked to redesign holes that had previously been changed, to add length, and to reposition and redo all the bunkers. I also needed to take into account the equipment improvements and increased skill levels of the modern touring professional golfer.

PHOTO: Evan Schiller

PHOTO: Rees Jones Design Inc.

PHOTO: Gary Kellner

PHOTO: Gary Kellner

The greens were a key ingredient to the changes made at Medinah. I remember watching the 1999 USPGA and noting the effects of the green contours. Some greens had excessive slopes that needed fixing; others needed enlarging. It was also important to vary the contours to increase the challenge in specific hole locations. The work we did in 2009 added more subtle contours to the greens, contours that had been lost over the years. The transitions between hole locations are modest so that at regular daily speeds the greens are playable for the membership, and then become a greater challenge as green speeds increase to over 13 stimpmeters for championships. For higher speeds we planned the actual hole location during the construction.

The bunkers at Medinah were well past their life expectancy. They had lost their character through over-edging or erosion. We gave the bunkers some character and shifted many of their locations so they were back in play for today's game.

Top & right: The bunkering on the right-hand side of the drive at Medinah No.3's closing hole received major attention; indecision reigns, with players now in two minds as to whether they should take on the sand, lay up, or flirt with hugging the inside of the corner, bringing trees into play.

The bunkers on the right of the 18th were clearly playing their part with the strategy of the hole during the 2012 Ryder Cup. Players were not certain whether to lay up, challenge them, or hug the inside of the corner and bring the trees into play. Many of the players found the sand.

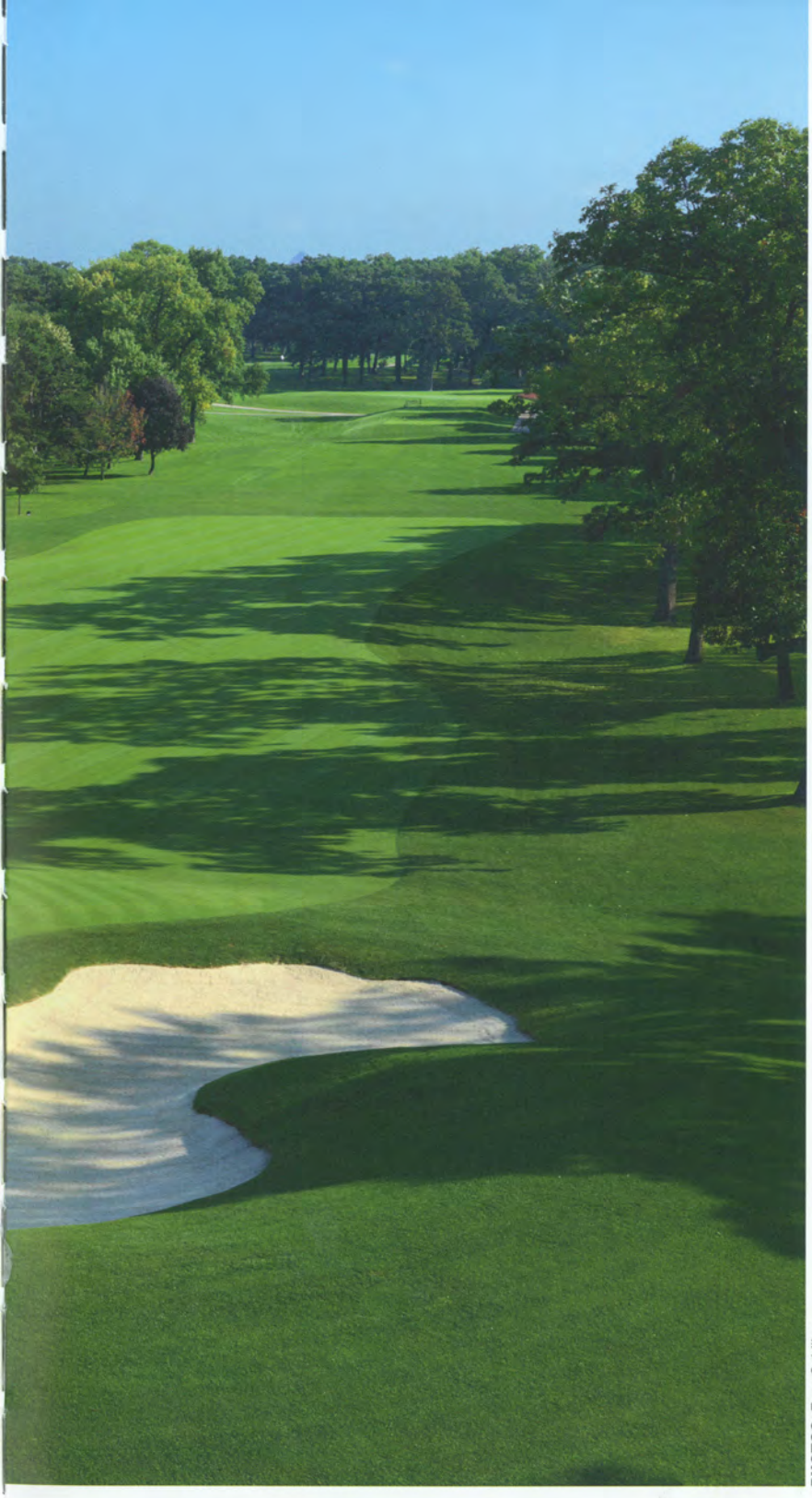
During the 1999 USPGA I found the course quite claustrophobic, with the tree density impacting both the strategy and agronomy of the golf course. During the 10 years of work, more than 1,800 trees were removed. This may sound like a lot, but the course still has quite an impressive frame of trees. While they were once an oppressive penalty, there is now an opportunity to recover from within the trees. The famous 'Garcia Tree' was removed, but not by me; it died. Once in the woods, shot options now abound for the golfer. This in turn introduces a greater risk / reward opportunity for the golfer who challenges the trees by either shaping

PHOTO: Premier Aerials

'The new 15th hole we built was created with matchplay in mind but it also works for strokeplay... the PGA Championship and the US Open like to have a driveable par-4 at their venues.'

their shots over or around them. I think the 11th hole during the Ryder Cup was evidence of the trees becoming important to the strategy of the hole, with players taking a variety of lines off the tee.

My design team has built a number of shorter holes (or drivable par-4s) on tournament courses we have worked on, such as the 14th at Royal Montreal, the 14th at Torrey Pines, and the 6th at Atlanta Athletic Club. Short par-4s must be done the right way. A short four that is too easy is a long par-3. A short four with too much risk doesn't have much appeal and players won't try the heroic shot.



PHOTOS: Evan Schiller

Left: Medinah's committee originally wanted the 15th to be lengthened but Jones saw value in reducing the hole's length; the result is a stunning short par-4 that always challenges.

Top: The 10th hole; Jones breathed new character into the shape and variety of the bunkering at Medinah No.3.

The 15th at Medinah had always been a somewhat non descript middle-length par-4. When the club bought some additional land to the left rear of the green, it was suggested that the green be shifted and the hole made longer. I felt that such a hole would not fit the balance needed at that part of the round and I came up with the hole that exists today. During the Ryder Cup, the 15th really played the way we thought it would. Players who elected to lay up because of the green contour had difficulty making birdie. This made trying to drive the green extremely worthwhile. Players hit the ball on the green, in the approach, in the bunker, in the chipping area and in the water. Every eventuality that we hoped for happened.

Medinah No.3 has the flexibility now to play from 7100 yards to over 7600 yards. It has room for more, but I don't believe additional length would make the course better. The length is there to enable the set-up personnel to change the playing characteristics every day. The course is not intended to be played at its maximum length.

We made many changes to the course. Many are significant and obvious, others much more subtle. One change we made was shaving the slope on the right side of the 12th green. It isn't something that people would notice initially, but it brought the pond on the right into play during the Ryder Cup. Balls did take the slope in the Ryder Cup but Davis Love grew rough next to the water to avoid the one- shot penalty.

I believe some courses are better suited for matchplay, others for strokeplay. Course No.3 at Medinah is adaptable in a way that favours both. The new 15th hole we built was created with matchplay in mind but it also works for strokeplay. I know the PGA Championship and the US Open like to have a driveable par-4 at each of their venues.

I think the Ryder Cup is now the biggest event in golf. However the golf course is under less scrutiny than in a typical major championship, where it is the player verses the course. In the Ryder Cup, it is player verses player and team verses team.

As a Golf Course Architect, I create the stage but I don't direct the play. The set-up is always critical, and in the Ryder Cup the captain is responsible, with the help of others. At the 2012 Ryder Cup it was Davis Love III, Kerry Haigh and superintendent Curtis Tyrrell who were responsible for the height of cut, the length of the holes, and the hole locations. On the last day, they located the hole on the right on the 17th green, thinking it would be the Europeans who would take the risk, not the Americans. It turned out to be the opposite since the Europeans made a dramatic early comeback. Nevertheless it made for great theatre and excitement.

I know I am often referred to as the 'Open Doctor', but originally that was a title given to my Dad. However, I'm happy to have the title and I truly enjoy the work we do to create championship courses that challenge the golf professionals of today.