

## AMERICA'S BEST NEW COURSES 2017

In 2017, over a thousand Golf Digest panelists across the U.S. and Canada played and evaluated new and newly remodeled candidate courses, scoring each in seven evaluation categories: Shot Values, Design Variety, Resistance to Scoring, Memorability, Aesthetics, Conditioning and Ambience. To determine Best New awards, the average scores in five of the seven category were averaged: Shot Values, Design Variety, Resistance to Scoring, Memorability and Aesthetic. The average for Shot Values was doubled, then added to the average of the other four categories to determine a final score for each course. Because all were new or newly remodeled courses, and still growing in, Conditioning scores were not included. Likewise, because of their immaturity, Ambience was not considered in the formula to determine the winning courses.

The field of new courses was down a bit from 2016, so we consolidated all candidates into one Best New category, without regard to public or private status. However, the number of remodeled courses was up considerably from the previous year, so much that we had the opportunity to separate the competition into three categories: Major Remodeled Courses, Renovated Courses and Restored Courses. A Major Remodeling involved work that fundamentally changed the previous architecture of the course, either in style and philosophy or with the addition of new holes. A Renovation retained the existing architecture but adjusted it for such things as present-day technology and water reduction. A Restoration involved returning the course design to its original architecture while retrofitting it for 21<sup>st</sup> Century needs.

Some major remodeling jobs were so drastic as to be considered by the architect and club as brand-new courses. (In most such cases, the course is often renamed to reflect its new beginning.) In the cases of such “blow-up jobs,” we considered it a new course for purposes of Best New Course competition.

At the conclusion of our 2017 survey, we received a considerable number of concerns and complaints that our Best Remodel honors didn't really deliver on the implied premise of the Best Remodel survey. As one architect noted, Golf Digest was not honoring the Best Remodeled Course of the Year, it was honoring the Best Course That Happened to be Remodeled. We took this criticism to heart. While most participants in our Best Remodel portion of the 2017 survey were expecting to compete for a Most Improved Award, we were unable to deliver on that. To do so would require that the same panelists who played and evaluated a remodeled course would have also previously played and judged that very course before its remodeling. That's just not feasible.

So we decided to abandon the Best Remodel portion of our Best New Courses survey in 2018. Nominations for newly remodeled courses in 2018 will automatically be considered for our next Best in State ranking, the next logical step in the quest for a spot on America's 100 Greatest.

Finally, while the results were announced in January, 2018, it took six more months to produce this newsletter. The delay was unconscionable, the reasons unimportant. I apologize for the delay.

## Best Remodeled Courses of 2017 – Renovation Category

This category covers remodeling that retained the original architecture but adjusted it for such things as present-day technology and water reduction



The old Pete Dye par-4 12<sup>th</sup> at TPC Sawgrass had an enormous mound hiding view of the green from the tee and much of the fairway. The new drivable 12<sup>th</sup> is clearly visible. (Ron Whitten)

**1<sup>st</sup> Place: TPC Sawgrass (Players Stadium Course) – Score: 47.1824 (out of a possible 60).**  
Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. Resort Course. Steve Wenzloff, redesigner.  
7,245 yards par 72.

### **Whitten's Notes:**

Unsatisfied with the hybrid Mini-Verde Bermuda turf used on the greens, the PGA Tour, which owns TPC Sawgrass, decided to replace it with TifEagle Bermuda, and figured if they're going to close the course anyway, they might as well make improvements. Steve Wenzloff, in-house designer for the PGA Tour, consulted with original architect Pete Dye on suggested changes, but Dye was not involved in the rebuild. Biggest improvements were a new lake between the sixth and seventh holes (replacing little-used spectator mounds), and converting the par-4 12<sup>th</sup> into a tempting drivable par 4. More details can be found at <https://www.golfdigest.com/story/the-players-preview-changes-to-tpc-sawgrass>. The hole frustrated some tour players during the Players Championship in March of 2017. That event is being moved back to its original March dates from May to make room for the new permanent dates for the PGA Championship. TPC Sawgrass often felt immature in previous Players Championships held in March, mainly because the old Bermuda turf was still coming out of dormancy. Conventional wisdom is that its newer state-of-the-art Bermudagrasses won't take as long to mature in spring. Plus, they don't plan to

overseed over the winter months. Which begs the question: will resort players be asked to play off of mats when the fairway grass is dormant?

**Panelist Comments:**

“A great and unique design that is very difficult but has options for lesser players...Great test of golf, nice redo with most of it underground. Added length, added bunkers helps some holes...Bunkers in the correct places...Some very strategic lines have to be taken off the tees...The more aggressive the line, the shorter the approach, but the more punishment - via water or strip bunkers with an awkward lie or high lip - for wayward shots...Went through all the changes in detail; they are all for the better and add some additional risk/reward...Best greens I have putted on in Florida...The redesigned 12<sup>th</sup> hole is driveable and presents a great risk-and-reward opportunity...Besides the 12<sup>th</sup> hole being completely redone, it looks like a lot of the changes are bunkering updates. Holes 1, 2, 6, 7, 10, 14, 15 all had bunker updates. Previously separated, different bunkers have now been combined into one large section of bunker on each of those holes. This seems to allow for more playable shots from them from a resort-play standpoint. One would assume this also cuts down on some maintenance. What were once 13 hazards are now just seven on those holes...Much talk was made about the 12<sup>th</sup> hole becoming a driveable par 4. If you have the prevailing Northwest wind, it would be pushing the ball towards the water on the left for your drive or approach. The green feeds hard left to the water making the layup shot difficult...Wow, great golf course. Has so much to offer. Can't beat those last three holes...Finishing three holes are worth the wait...17 is extremely memorable, but not really nearly as good a hole as many others on the course... The more I play TPC Sawgrass, the more I appreciate the quality of its Shot Values...The new green at the par-3 13<sup>th</sup> requires great finesse. A large ridge separates the upper tier from the lower tier, which is guarded by water left. The upper tier is also split, and the front half works from the middle of the green to the front, while the back half works from the middle of the green to the back. A shot that finds the green, but on the wrong tier, requires great finesse to two-putt...Great to play a course you see on TV every year. Challenging but a great test of accuracy and true test of golf...Tight enough where you need to think off the tee...Very stimulating visually. Water, trees, bunkers, pine straw - it has it all. Probably a little difficult for higher handicappers, but I think they would still enjoy it...They have softened the green contours so that they can run them fast for the tournament, but they now play great for the everyday crowd...Loved the course...Hard not to be influenced by seeing it on TV so often, but love many of the holes...Public resort course gets way too many rounds...Hard as it wants to be for every level...As a Floridian, I know this is a different course during tournament time as opposed to when the Marriott tourists play here. I hope the Golf Digest panelists are able to see past this duality...Great variety of holes and conditioning was excellent, with the only problem being the pace of play...One of the most demanding and toughest courses I have played...An awesome venue...First time I've played it. From the first hole, it was so captivating that I forgot all about the island green 17th until I saw it from the 16th hole...Aside from appreciating that this is Pete Dye's showcase of strategic and penal golf, and its collection of really good short holes (like number 12), I was for the most part underwhelmed. Obviously a made-for-television course...I was able to play the course three days in a row in different winds. You have to hit all kinds of shots...What a treat!..Great Ambiance from start to finish. A place that golfers of all levels should experience.”



The par-3 12<sup>th</sup> at Makena is 217 yards, downhill over a nasty gulch. (Courtesy Dennis Wise)

### **Best Remodels of 2017 – Renovation Category**

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> Place - Makena Golf & Beach Club – Score: 45.8687**

Makena-Wailua, Maui, Hawaii. Private Course. Dennis Wise, redesigner.

7,038 yards par 72.

#### **Whitten's Notes:**

At one time, Makena was a destination resort with two beautiful Robert Trent Jones Jr. designs. But when the economy soured a decade ago, its South Course was closed, and in 2014 the remaining North Course was sold to Discovery Land Co., which brought in Dennis Wise, formerly a Tom Fazio associate who had worked on many Discovery Land projects, to retrofit the course. It's still a beauty, but now with Discovery's trademark "comfort stations" offering food and drink throughout the round. Course reopened in fall of 2015 but we failed to have enough panelists evaluate it in 2016, so we consented to hold it over to 2017.

#### **Panelist Comments:**

"Discovery Land has hit the mark, setting the bar among other courses on the island...This new Dennis Wise redesign of the original Robert Trent Jones Jr. layout is outstanding... Really nice Fazio-esque remodel on what I thought was a good layout to begin with...Dennis Wise made good use of the existing corridors while adding touches here and there, such as lakes, lava outcroppings, etc...Except for changing the dogleg par-4 third into a short, drivable par 4, routing is unchanged...Green complexes were mostly interesting and unique...Conditioning was terrific...Total turf replacement with new Paspalum grass is now providing exceptional playing conditions from tee to green...Beautiful views throughout the course...Difficult to find better views on any course in the country... A couple of shots were a bit too player friendly (any shot hit

inside a 30-foot region would wind up 10 feet away at most) but all-in-all, a really good golf course...Combined with its beautiful, secluded location on Maui, I think it's one of the finest courses in Hawaii."



A pine still threatens approach shots on Shoal Creek's par-4 10<sup>th</sup>. (Ron Whitten)

### **Best Remodels of 2017 – Renovation Category**

#### **3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Shoal Creek - Score: 45.4514**

Shoal Creek, Alabama. Private Course. Jack Nicklaus and Jim Lipe, redesigners.

7,264 yards par 72.

#### **Whitten's Notes:**

One of the early, great Nicklaus-designed courses, Shoal Creek has twice hosted the PGA Championship and is host to the 2018 U.S. Women's Open. I first visited the course in 1983, for a story on how the then-six-year-old course was installing a then-state-of-the-art misting system for its then-radical-for-the-Deep-South bent-grass greens. Jim Simmons was the course superintendent back in 1983, and he's still involved with Shoal Creek today, as its superintendent emeritus and project manager. He invited me in 2015 to check out Shoal Creek's reconstruction. At nearly 40 years old, it needed some updating, so Nicklaus and his former senior design Jim Lipe (now operating his own firm in Louisiana) literally ripped up every hole and re-thought strategies and options. The result is not a restoration but an updating. Gone are huge fairway bunkers, like the monster on the par-4 14<sup>th</sup>, replaced by smaller clusters of traps. Greens have been recontoured (using new Auburn Victory strain of bent grass) with one putting surface, the 11<sup>th</sup>, made longer with two levels, so it can play as a par 5 for members and as a par 4 for championships.

Another, the redesigned 12<sup>th</sup> green, now actually flows from front to back, which was unheard of in the late 1970s when Shoal Creek was first built. The designers also added chipping swales of tightly mown TifGrand (which Nicklaus calls “runoffs”) adjacent to many greens. That’s another feature that wasn’t even considered by any architect anywhere in 1977. Trees have grown considerably, yet Nicklaus preserved all the strategic ones, particularly the pine in the center of the fairway on the par-5 sixth and another pine on the front left corner of the rebuilt 10<sup>th</sup> green. Shoal Creek presently ranks No. 106 on Golf Digest’s list of America’s Second 100 Greatest. So why was it considered for Best New Renovation? Because it would be foolish not to recognize that even great courses can be improved.

**Panelists Comments:**

“This timeless Nicklaus design is the essence of Southern golf...Core routing with narrow, mildly-turning hole corridors carved out of the forest. Nice rolling terrain with some elevation changes on the back nine...I've always considered Shoal Creek to be one of the most beautiful, peaceful places to play golf in the country. The lack of homes and golf carts make it seem like you are in a special place. Now with its recent renovation, the course has its teeth back as well...Wonderful recent facelift with new bunkering, tree removal for sight lines, updating of the green complexes...Greens were made smaller and bunkering enhanced...The redesigned green complexes were really outstanding. Every green has a wide variety of sections for outstanding hole locations...The new TifGrand approaches are already firmer and more consistent, enabling ground shots to be played into greens at Shoal for the first time. The new deeper bunkers are a big improvement both visually and performance-wise...Added much-needed length and targets are smaller with much better Shot Values. Overall, the property is as good as it gets...Significantly enhanced Shot Values and Resistance to Scoring...Heavily wooded; water in play on half the holes; mostly long and medium length holes, oriented in all directions, but 3s and 4s in particular often fight the prevailing wind...Very difficult course from the back tees, long, tight, but fair...Interesting use of a singular pine that affects the lay-up shot on six as well as left of 10 green. Unique but not unfair from a design and playability standpoint...New green shapes to create more pin positions. Traps repositioned and in excellent shape... Bunkering now is more penal with sharper faces both around the green and in fairway bunkers; However, at the same time it’s a lot less maintenance since the size of the bunkers were dramatically shrunk on several holes... New turf will need less water and be more heat resistant...New Auburn Victory bent greens are very true and receptive...Nice work done in preparation for the 2018 Women's U.S. Open...Suitable for another U.S. Amateur or PGA Championship...The new changes make it a worthy adversary. Mix in the beautiful mountainous setting, and Shoal Creek is now one of the best to play...The only aspect of the renovation I don't like is the new par-3 13th. I hate that the new green site no longer uses the hillside shelf, and I think the green is too severe for the length of the hole...Playable for all types from the proper tees, with manageable forced carries and mostly open entries into the greens. Very walkable course with great championship tournament history and strong traditional feel...Outstanding golf atmosphere...Best in the state of Alabama.”



Views of Shoal Creek during remodeling in 2015-2016. Left: Nicklaus grads a sketchpad to explain his concept for the orientation and bunkering of a green. Below: (L-R), Jim Lipe, Jack Nicklaus, club president Micheal Thompson and the author.





The uphill par-4 16<sup>th</sup> at the Highland Course at Atlanta A.C. soon after it was regrassed in 2016. (Ron Whitten)

### **Best Remodels of 2017 – Renovation Category**

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Place: Atlanta Athletic Club (Highlands Course) – Score: 44.7976**

Johns Creek, Georgia. Rees Jones and Bryce Swanson, design associate, redesigners.

7,613 yards par 72.

#### **Whitten's Notes:**

Back in 2011, I was so gung-ho about the new turfgrasses selected by then-Director of Agronomy Ken Mangum for the Highlands Course at Atlanta Athletic Club that I declared in Golf Digest that AAC would become the leading edge in a massive movement of major championships to Southern venues. See <https://www.golfdigest.com/story/pga-championship-venues-whitten>. So I was a little surprised when, five years later, Lucas Harvey, AAC's new Director of Agronomy (replacing the retired Mangum), proposed changing turfgrasses again. The club agreed, so out went the Champion ultradwarf Bermuda greens in favor of TifEagle. (The greens were rebuilt in the process, with new drainage and mix.) Tees and fairways had been Diamond Zoysia, but because Diamond proved to be affected on Atlanta's coldest winter days, they're now Zorro Zoysia (planted after the top four inches of tees and fairways were replaced with fresh sand). Tifton 10 Bermuda had been used in the rough. It's now Tifway 419 Bermuda, a great old standby. Most importantly, the approaches and surrounds of greens were replanted in TifGrand Bermuda, which allows them to be mowed very tight for additional bounce. Along the way, Harvey also upgraded his irrigation system. Because each turf has different water demands, a precise individual-head system was

installed, each head controlled by Harvey with a smart phone app, applying moisture only where needed and thus saving water and money. No longer will an errant shot at AAC land behind an irrigation box. There are none anymore. Consulting architect Rees Jones took advantage of all this reconstruction to remove some bunkers that affected only high handicappers, reclaim some pin positions on greens and add some forward tees. I took a look at the finished Highlands Course just before the 2016 Tour Championship at nearby East Lake. The Highlands looked and played even better than it had in 2011. As a Southern venue for majors, as far as I'm concerned, it's still the leader in the clubhouse.

**Panelists' Comments:**

“Changes really just a very minor haircut, which is a good thing... Very interesting old style course in Atlanta. The redesign work has brought the course back to a championship level course that can be made very difficult... Every bit of the turfgrass was replaced during the summer of 2016 and the result is nothing short of astounding. Along with the turfgrass replacement, some slight redesign work was done. Several bunkers were reduced or eliminated, creating more shot options on certain holes... Changed out Zoysia approaches, collars and green surrounds to a TifGrand Bermuda that allows a shot to release more... Tree removal, lowering a couple of greens and bunker removal/relocation were the big changes... The topography gives you a number of downhill holes and uphill holes to provide nice balance... Zoysia fairways were really good. Nice short grass along banks to ponds; no rough to stop balls... Greens were firm with great speed even though they were wet... New chipping areas and removal of bunkers around greens were nice improvements and provide more shot options... I do enjoy the choices off the tee; driver is not the first choice on many holes... Long-iron approach shots are required on many of the par 4s and on three of the par 3s... I dislike the bunkers on the far side of so many dogleg holes. I did like the additional runoff areas added on several greens... Some of the back tees here are insane. I can't imagine anyone but tour pros ever seriously playing from there... Somewhat underwhelmed on the front nine. The more I play it, the back nine shows its teeth... Not that many truly memorable holes other than the last four... Wonderful experience... Hole after hole, you can truly see why this course has played host to multiple major championships. The design allows for well-struck shots to be rewarded while punishing a mis-hit or bad decision. With holes challenging every aspect of golf, AAC is true test of a complete golf game... Club tries its best to create a special environment and it is special, but not elite... Highlands is a wonderful golf course, but unfortunately, it retains a 70's sort of feel. Lots of artificial hardscape, garden-club decorative shrubbery everywhere. A really nice leisure suit, but still a leisure suit in some respects, unfortunately... From its history to the conditioning of the course, AAC is a fantastic place to play.”

**Best Remodels of 2017 – Renovation Category**

**5<sup>th</sup> Place: Meadow Brook Club – Score: 43.4020**

Jericho, New York. Brian Silva, redesigner.

7,405 yards par 72.

**Whitten's Notes:**

How things change. Thirty years ago, golf writer Brad Klein was feuding with golf architect Brian Silva over Silva's remodeling of Wampanoag Country Club in Connecticut, Klein's home course. Rather than restoring its Donald Ross architecture, Klein said, Silva damaged the design by installing Pete Dye-type features, features Silva always insisted were requested by the green committee uninterested in preserving Ross. As a member of the Donald Ross Society, Klein spent

years discouraging Ross clubs from retaining Silva for any restoration or reconstruction work. But in 2015, Klein offered his head-hunting services to Meadow Brook Club and recommended the club hire Silva for the job. I asked Klein about that flip-flop. “Hey, people grow up,” he said, and I’m not sure whether he was referring to himself or Silva. I should point out that Meadow Brook is not a Donald Ross design, but rather a 1955 Dick Wilson design later altered by his old associate Joe Lee, who added three new holes in 1967 when highway expansion slashed across part of the property. Silva’s renovation included the softening of several sharp doglegs (a trademark of both Wilson and Lee), the rebuilding of a couple of severely contoured greens, switching the 12<sup>th</sup> from a par 5 into a par 4 and the 18<sup>th</sup> from a par 4 into a par 5, and relocating and deepening bunkers. Meadow Brook was once a stalwart member of Golf Digest’s America’s 100 Greatest, but fell off in 1991. Today we have it ranked 29<sup>th</sup> among the Top 30 in New York. The Wilson-style of architecture (like that of his contemporary, Robert Trent Jones) with its narrow corridors, elaborate bunkering and insistence on a precise aerial game, have clearly fallen out of fashion with a large number of Golf Digest panelists. It will be interesting to see how this updated Dick Wilson design will fare in 100 Greatest competition, particularly with the additional of a big number of younger golfers to the Golf Digest panel.

**Panelists’ Comments:**

“Outstanding renovation in which the few mediocre aspects of Meadow Brook were all upgraded... New back tees and softening doglegs are good improvements...Nice renovation. They stretched the course out while lessening the severity of many of the doglegs...Meadow Brook is an expansive property, and recent renovation work, most notably tree-clearing, has brought back long views to take advantage of its scale while also adding charm, as the native grasses interplay with acres of gently rolling fairways...Almost a thousand trees were removed on the redesign, which opened up the course and gave the ability to lengthen it. The back nine meanders through a forest near I-495...The back nine could use a bit more tree clearing, but does provide a contrast in style to the front...A very natural setting where the scenic values make for a fun and enjoyable walk in the park...Nice use of fescue without it coming into play...Still have giant greens, tons of pin positions. They redid 18<sup>th</sup> green so to make it playable; now a par 5...The greens are large with many potential pin placements, but do not have many crazy contours...Major changes to greens on four holes (5, 9, 10 and 18); each now has additional pin placements and more moderate pitch compared to the prior design. The fifth is now a reachable risk/reward par 4 with an expanded green and more pin placements, receptive to an accurate long drive. The change of the 18<sup>th</sup> to an uphill, reachable par 5 is a wonderful finish to a solid course...The course is long on the card, but finesse is required. The fifth and 17th require precision around the greens to stop a ball on steeply elevated, narrow surfaces...Favors right-to-left ball striking...In spite of having several dogleg lefts and only one dogleg right, the overall Design Variety is excellent. All the par 3s go in different directions and they vary in length from 160 to 260 yards... Still too many interior trees around back nine and on hole seven. But what a great start. It’s no longer just a tough slog, but fun to play and enjoy...They welcome analysts for good reason. They have a lot to show...It’s a very nice place, long from red tees but nothing so special. Many of the holes are similar...Would be quite surprised to see someone leave this golf course and say anything out there is unfair...Solid and enjoyable. Always fun and challenging. Not spectacular but wonderful.”



Dogleg-left par-4 15<sup>th</sup> around marsh at Old Marsh Golf Club. (Courtesy Old Marsh G.C.)

### **Best Remodels of 2017 – Renovation Category**

#### **6<sup>th</sup> Place: Old Marsh Golf Club – Score: 42.6677**

Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. Private Course. Pete Dye and design associate Chris Lutzke, redesigners.

7,215 yards par 72.

#### **Whitten's Notes:**

I suspect in the future we'll be debating which was the last course that Pete Dye actively worked on. Old Marsh could well be that case, and there's evidence to document that. There's a 2016 YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OB9zbS54KDC> that shows Pete himself involved in shooting grades on a green being rebuilt, which is pretty hands-on. Indeed, if you've never been involved in a course construction or reconstruction, the series of YouTube videos covering the complete rebuilding of Old Marsh can be an eye opener. Not a blade of grass went untouched. The place was rebuilt from drain tile up. They even ripped out the old bulkheads along lakes and gutted the clubhouse. Old Marsh has always been one of Dye's favorite accomplishments. I recall touring the course with him in 1993 specifically to witness his "positive drainage system" (drain tile connected to pumps) during a rainstorm. "Put your hand over this drain," he instructed me. "It feels like a vacuum cleaner." Pete was proud that, without pressure from environmentalists, he'd designed holes with concave fairways to funnel excess water toward drains and away from pristine marsh. He also lined each hole with a wide moat, simply to keep golfers from trying to tromp through dry wetland vegetation in search of a golf ball. Golfers would just beat that vegetation to death, he said. (One of the YouTube videos shows workers removing accumulated vegetation in one of those moats.) I'm told Old Marsh was rebuilt in part because surrounding water levels were rising, so the profile of each hole was raised 18 inches. That's evident from the moonscape piles of sand seen in some of those videos, and the huge stockpile of sand that looks like a mesa next to one green. If you don't have time to watch all 30 episodes, there is one about 15 minutes long that encapsulates the renovation of each hole in its many stages: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ\\_pDxSFwhs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ_pDxSFwhs)

#### **Panelists' Comments:**

"Old Marsh is a unique Pete Dye design that plays through the marshfields west of Palm Beach...Built in 1987, Pete Dye did an outstanding job. Forget his signature railroad ties; he put illusions throughout the course, hiding greens with mounds, tucking them here and there. One really has to think around this track...Nice changes made to the course. Some holes were shifted

towards or away from adjacent water, creating other angles and more varieties of risk. Some reshaping or removal of bunkers add to the variety of challenges around the greens, requiring more finesse shots. Overall, a pretty successful renovation...Due to the county raising the water levels a couple of years ago, they came in and put several inches of sand over the entire course to raise the property. This was a necessity from a drainage standpoint...The course was raised 8 to 16 inches, lengthened 200 yards, some greens made longer or were moved. TifEagle greens, tees and fairways Latitude 36 Bermuda. All in all, a very good redo...Latitude 36 was described to me as a 'Southern bent grass.' They believe it's the grass of the future in warm climates to lead to firm and fast conditions... I really like the low profile greens that mostly melt into the fairways...Dye routed the course around existing marshland, using that water to aid his design, resulting in many holes which ask you to be strategic off the tee to avoid the obvious trouble (water). He furthers the challenge by placing sand traps in many prime landing areas, asking you to stare at both hazards as you choose your line...No real weakness in any category, just a notch below greatness in nearly every category...There is an enormous risk/reward at Old Marsh. The back tees are challenging with many carries over water and wetlands...Like most Dye designs, the tee shots look visually intimidating but once you get in the fairways you realize there was much more room. No holes really set out straight; you feel like there is a slight right or left bend in them in order to have the best angle into the green...Not too often you find a course with water on every hole...There is way more risk than reward. That is my one constructive comment about this entire course, not based on a single hole...Water on every hole can become quite demoralizing for the high handicapper...Shots to the greens are the challenge. Around the greens is easy...Holes were a touch lacking in risks/reward, which should never be confused with difficulty...There is a certain amount of repetition of the forced carries on many holes, along with similar looks to these hazards...Good Pete Dye track but not great. Similar looks and yardages on a bunch of holes resulted in my low Design Variety score...Some great holes, some non-descript 'Florida' holes. One big alligator on seven... The mounded fifth is gimmickry at its worst. There's no strategy...A day at Old Marsh feels like a privilege. Its understated nature, nature paths and active caddie program...Old Marsh is a fun course but not a course I would want to play every play...Bring plenty of golf balls."

### **Best Remodels of 2017 – Renovation Category**

#### **7<sup>th</sup> Place: The Country Club of North Carolina (Dogwood Course) – Score: 42.2608**

Pinehurst, North Carolina. Private Course. Kris Spence, redesigner.

7,301 yards par 72.

#### **Whitten's Notes:**

Kris Spence has developed a deserved reputation as an expert in the restoration of Donald Ross courses, retrieving neglected Ross designs at Sedgefield Country Club, Cape Fear Country Club, Forsyth Country Club, Greensboro Country Club (Irving Park) and even Memphis Country Club (another 2017 Best Remodel candidate). But his roots actually go back to the architecture of Ellis Maples (who, of course, got his start under Donald Ross.) Before he became a golf architect, Spence was the superintendent at Forest Oaks Country Club in Greensboro, an early, prominent Maples design now available for public play. Early in his career, Spence modified Maples designs at Gastonia in North Carolina and Chatmoss in Virginia, showing respectful deference to their original designs. So it's logical that Spence would be asked to re-establish the Maples style of design at The Country Club of North Carolina's Dogwood Course. (I should note here that Willard



Ellis Maples built his island green at CC of North Carolina's Dogwood Course 18 years before Pete Dye did his at TPC Sawgrass. (Courtesy CC of North Carolina)

Byrd went to his grave insisting that he, not Maples, designed the Dogwood Course. The compelling evidence was that Byrd handled its routing as part of the larger residential masterplan, but Maples designed the tees, greens and strategies. Golf Digest has always given Maples and Byrd co-credit for the design.) Spence's work at CC of NC was a textbook example of how to enhance an already great design. Dogwood was ranked among Golf Digest's 100 Greatest from 1966 until 1998, and on America's Second 100 Greatest from 2013-2017. Given the numbers it received by panelists in this single-year survey, I expect Country Club of North Carolina will be contending for a spot on the 100 Greatest again in the near future.

**Panelists' Comments:**

"A very solid renovation done by Kris Spence...A successful and needed update to this beautiful and challenging course...Sandcapped fairways, rebuilt bunkers, added new greens on holes four and 15, changed 10<sup>th</sup> green and new Champion ultradwarf Bermuda putting surfaces...Nice layout with many classic features from the 1960s design standpoint. Inside/outside bunkering on several holes. Nothing hidden, everything right in front of you...Having played CCNC's Dogwood prior to the renovation and now after, I think they did an excellent job. The returfing of the fairways to Zeon Zoysia and conversion of greens to Bermuda from bent were great changes...Spence created and enlarged closely mowed areas around the greens...Great putting surfaces in terms of speed and smoothness...Terrific bunkering...Bunkers seemed to be perfectly placed on each hole...Tree removal and slight routing changes made an already good golf course even better. The sight lines were improved in many places...Eleven through 15 is a great stretch of holes...Holes seven, 14, 15 & 17 are very good designs and challenges...No weak holes. Very pretty in places...Hole 18 is

a very poor design and a weak finishing hole...With number 18, risk/reward is on the drive, not the approach...The uphill finisher is a very awkward hole, and I'm not sure if the 11<sup>th</sup> is an effective way to use the creek as a hazard...Strong Shot Values are on display on many holes, most exceptionally on the 18th, where a long drive left over the lake will leave a short approach shot to a high, pitched green...This course needs more definition and texture to be a World Class course...Excellent Aesthetics with native grasses and pine straw, as well as its use of water and sand hazards...The Dogwood Course boasts pristine conditions which, combined with towering pines lining each hole, gave me the most 'Augusta-like' experience in my years as a panelist...Big fan of this course. Have always been a big CCNC fan. To me this course does not have any visible weaknesses. It is a course that I would truly love to be able to play every day...A fundamentally sound and worthy test of golf...With the changes made to this course, I think it is worthy of a move back into the Top 200...Strong candidate for Best in State or even Top 100.”



The 385-yard eighth at Glen Oaks Country Club in Des Moines. (Courtesy Dennis Wise)

### **Best Remodels of 2017 – Renovation Category**

#### **8<sup>th</sup> Place: Glen Oaks Country Club – Score: 41.7501**

West Des Moines, Iowa. Private Course. Dennis Wise, redesigner.

6,961 yards par 71.

#### **Whitten's Notes:**

Dennis Wise was operating Tom Fazio's Kansas City branch office in the 1990s when he handled supervision of the design and construction of Glen Oaks Country Club in Des Moines. It was a simple drive up I-35 from Kansas City for him, and the course itself was just minutes off the interstate. He moved to Scottsdale back in 2000, and formed his own design firm in 2013, but he was still the logical choice to renovate Glen Oaks. After all, he grew up in Des Moines, even worked on the maintenance crew at Des Moines G&CC as a teenager. Wise's work at Glen Oaks was reflective of a refined philosophy. His goal, as explained in a document circulated among membership, "was to strategically reposition bunkers, contours and hazards to achieve versatility in shot angles and shot selections within each golf hole. This resulted in the existing 73 bunkers

being transformed into 44 relevant bunkers (23 fairway, 21 greenside), framed with jagged, serrated bunker edges, mimicking the landscape savannah within Glen Oaks. ‘There is still depth and intrigue to the bunkers,’ Wise declared. ‘It’s now defined by the natural slope of the ground as opposed to artificially-created slopes.’” Wise also added bent-grass chipping swales along some greens, relocated the fourth green 70 yards shorter, thus making it a drivable par 4, cleaned out overgrowth of trees on several holes and added numerous forward tees to encourage members to Tee it Forward. Incredibly, Wise kept the course in play during all the reconstruction. Anywhere from 14 to 17 holes were always available for play during the January, 2016-May, 2017 period of remodeling.

**Panelists’ Comments:**

“A remodel by Dennis Wise of the original Tom Fazio-designed course...Typical Fazio layout with large green complexes and undulations...The remodel included removal of many trees around the entire course, new sand in all bunkers, the shortening of one hole to make it a drivable par 4 and addition of one new tee box...Glen Oaks is the same course with the exception of the drivable par-4 fourth hole. Tree removal and replacement of sand in the bunkers does improve Aesthetics and maintenance functionality...There were many trees taken out to provide better vistas and more air movement, leading to improved turf conditions and generally more playability. The redesigned bunkers are very attractive with a rugged look of fescue grassed on many edges and firm, white sand to provide an impressive contrast. The number of bunkers were reduced from 75 to 55 but are placed more strategically...Overall, very positive changes to the golf course...No. 4 went from a 350-yard par 4 with limited risk/ reward to a 270-yard drivable par 4 with high risk/reward. The new fourth green structure is not consistent with the rest of the course. It is more undulating...The redesigned No. 4, now a drivable par 4, is a very good risk/reward hole in addition to being visually appealing...New drivable par 4 really helped Design Variety and added some to Resistance to Scoring...Shotmaking still reigns supreme at Glen Oaks. Fazio protects his greens with deep bunkers, water hazards, false fronts and deep rough...A very enjoyable golf course to play day in and day out...The reason it may not be as difficult as other Fazio courses I have played is its generous fairways. Obviously, approach shots become much easier when hitting from the fairway...Glen Oaks seemed to be in surprisingly rough condition in terms of balls marks on the greens, unrepaired (or unfilled) divots on tees and fairways and bare spots in the rough around the greens. Frankly, for a club of this stature, I was really surprised by that.”

**Best Remodels of 2017 – Renovation Category**

**9<sup>th</sup> Place: Milburn Country Club – Score: 41.4984**

Overland Park, Kansas. Private Course. Todd Clark, redesigner.

7,015 yards par 72.

**Whitten’s Notes:**

Milburn Country Club, presently ranked No. 8 in Golf Digest’s list of Best in Kansas, is a 1917 Bill Langford design that had undergone renovations in bits and pieces for nearly its entire 100-year history, by architects including Orrin Smith, Floyd Farley, Tom Clark, Baxter Spann and Don Sechrest. What Kansas City golf architect Todd Clark aimed to do in his renovation was to give Milburn a consistent style of architecture. As he explained in his master plan presentation, he would rebuild all greens to USGA specs, eliminate the simple shapes of bunkers by repositioning



Architect Todd Clark's renovation plan for Milburn Country Club in Kansas City.

and reshaping them to provide visual interest, put in new drainage and sand that bunkers wouldn't hold rainwater for days at a time, improve shot values by adjusting fairway contours, enhance creeks and lakes and install closely mown "collection areas" along certain greens so options for recovery shots would vary from pitches to putts. Lastly, he wanted to drastically improve drainage. "Although this is an improvement that few people see, it is very important to long term maintenance," he wrote. I played the remodeled course with Clark, *Sports Illustrated* writer John Garrity and Golf Digest panelist Craig Jorgenson in the spring of 2017 and really liked what Clark had done with the place. He selectively removed trees but didn't denude the course. He used bunkers strategically and sparingly. (Indeed, a number of bunkers shown on his master plan were never built.) He cleaned out an overgrown dry creek to make the dogleg-right 12<sup>th</sup> into perhaps the finest hole on the course, with the tee shot threatened by the ominous ravine. Milburn is not one of those flashy courses that panelists gush over on first glimpse. It's the sort of solid design that gets more appreciation the more one plays it. Unfortunately, Golf Digest's rankings are based on first-time, single-round assessments. Which is why we urge all panelists to take a second look, without clubs, to study the design a bit more before filing an evaluation.

**Panelists' Comments:**

"Significant green and bunker restoration...A good variety of doglegs and a few interesting green complexes...Very challenging, narrow fairways with overhanging trees make shot placement critical...Redid all the tees, all new bunkers, new fairways, new irrigation...Tee boxes reshaped/moved, bunkers all redone with Arkansas white sand, trees removed to make course more fair and playable...From a Shot Values perspective, Milburn requires both length and accuracy,

with the ability to work the golf ball in both directions...Plenty of risk and reward to keep your interest...Elevation changes and large oak trees across the property make this a greater strategic challenge than some of Milburn's better-known neighbors...The remodeling gave players of all ability, especially juniors, seniors and women, a much more playable course with many more options...Many of the greens are semi-crowned (almost Ross-like), and have corners and slopes down away from the putting surface...Bunkers are all now visible and much more playable...The cart paths are perhaps a bit too prevalent and visible....A nice feel to an old country club...A hidden gem in Kansas City and a sneaky good Old School experience...Currently No. 8 in the state and deserves to be there.”



The 15<sup>th</sup> at Loxahatchee in Jupiter, Florida. (Tid Griffith, Elite Golf Photos)

### **Best Remodels of 2017 – Renovation Category**

**10<sup>th</sup> Place: The Loxahatchee Club – Score: 41.4700**

Jupiter, Florida. Private Course.

Jack Nicklaus and Chris Cochran, design associate, redesigners.

7,240 yards par 72.

#### **Whitten’s Notes:**

Even though this was Nicklaus working on a Nicklaus design (Golf Digest’s Best New Private Course of 1985), this could never be considered a restoration. To do that, Jack would have had to re-establish all the knobby “mammary mounds” down the sides of most fairways (as well as some in the middle of some holes), features that Bob Cupp had convinced him were fashionable to use, first at Grand Cypress, then at Loxahatchee. Jack had removed all of them during a 2004 remodeling of Loxahatchee, replacing them with gentle dunescapes of wiregrass and pine straw. Still, when I toured the course with Jack during that reconstruction, he seemed a bit wistful about the loss of at least some of those notorious “conehead knobs.” “It’s too plain down this right side,” he said to his crew on the par 4 seventh, and soon they came up with a landscaping plan that

included sabal palms, saw palmettoes and slash pines. This second remodeling of Loxahatchee involved mostly new greens with chipping areas and new state-of-the-game turfgrasses, although Jack and associate Chris Cochran did address bunkering, downsizing them much the way as Jack did at Shoal Creek in Alabama, making them more player-friendly. For instance, two sprawling fairway bunkers on the first became six small ones less likely to snag average golf shots. Likewise, two big bunkers behind the par-3 second green are now gone, replaced by two on the right of the green to keep slices from rolling into a pond. That's the Nicklaus approach these days, a kinder, gentler approach.

**Panelists' Comments:**

“Great course redesign. Jack took pride in redoing this, one of his original designs. Lush and beautiful...Greens are TifEagle, fairways and tees are Latitude 36...The new type of Bermuda on the fairways played fantastically...Latitude, the latest grass du jour in Florida, is very impressive...Course was lengthened, greens were made larger with more contour...All greens were rebuilt, restored, lowered in many instances and contours added, all of which improved the green complexes. Some greens were moved as well...It's more golfer-friendly. If a green is missed, quite generous collection areas affords a makeable up-and-down...Flattened several of the humps that caused blind shots. Separating the double green was an improvement...All bunkers redone with Better Billy Bunker drainage...The sand in the bunkers was fantastic. Had a different grainy texture to it, but the ball really came off the face in it well. Did not feel like your standard Florida sand...Loxahatchee strikes a nearly excellent balance in presenting plenty of risk and rewards but punishing a lack of accuracy, length or finesse...A particularly good use of water hazards adds to the Aesthetics category, as Nicklaus and team have nearly every water hazard run right up to the fringe of a green giving a true championship golf club feel, as opposed to a player-friendly optical illusion, where the hazards really are not that much in play...There are no gimmicks at all at. Just championship golf awaiting on each and every hole...There are no weaknesses at Loxahatchee...Ten holes with water on the right, two holes with water on the left. Could make a tough day for a high handicapper fighting a slice...Not a weak hole. Both nines equally enjoyable. Excellent routing, nice variety. A wonderful golf course...A modern Florida course in fantastic condition...Walking with very knowledgeable caddies is an added treat...A must play in Florida.”

**The remaining field of candidates for Best Remodels of 2017,  
Renovation Category, listed alphabetically:**

**Best Remodels of 2017 – Renovation Candidate**

**Carolina Country Club – Score: 40.0970**

Raleigh, North Carolina. Private Course. Rees Jones and senior design associate Greg Muirhead, redesigners.

6,304 yards par 71.

**Whitten's Notes:**

This is one of Raleigh's first country clubs (indeed, for the first few years of its existence, it was called Raleigh Country Club), its original nine laid out by a club committee and dating from 1911. Its back nine, wrapping around the perimeter, was staked out by the club's pro George Eddy and opened in 1916. Some observers insist they see Donald Ross in the design, but there's no evidence he ever worked at this course. (His credits do include Carolina Golf Club in Charlotte, which might