

# Rebuilding Mode

*Changes to classic  
and modern courses  
take on a variety of  
scopes and models*

by Stephen Goodwin



*Alterations to green complexes at Princess Anne was a part of Tim Liddy's work at the Hampton Roads club.*

PRINCESS ANNE COUNTRY CLUB

**M**akeover. Redo. Update. Overhaul. Remodel. Renovation. Restoration. Strict restoration. Sympathetic restoration.

The sheer number of terms used to describe the process of converting older golf courses into modern tracks is a revealing indicator of the thorny, tricky issues involved. Golf course architect Lester George, who has more than a dozen renovations in his portfolio, has coined his own word: "restovation," he calls it, a combination of restoration and renovation.

Arthur Hills, another prolific architect, once called his firm's ren-

ovation of Belle Haven Country Club a "palimpsest" – a medieval term for a manuscript page that has been written over so that older writing is still visible beneath the new.

No matter what it's called, renovation has been at the top of the agenda in Virginia golf for the last two decades. To keep up with changes in the game, top clubs from one end of the commonwealth to the other have bitten the bullet; they've risked the perils and pains of renovation. Not only is the renovation process costly in terms of money, but it also means closing the golf course for a long stretch of time – not to mention the wrenching, soul-searching process that

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**Lester George's (pictured far right) research and resulting "restovation" to The Greenbrier's Old White Course helped the course retain some of its original shot values.**



GEORGE GOLF DESIGN

goes on behind the scenes as a club seeks to redefine itself.

Says Drew Rogers, a senior associate at Arthur Hills / Steve Forrest and Associates in Toledo, Ohio, "We try to work with the club, to understand what they want. We take our directions from the members, but we try to help them ask the right questions. Sometimes they're wondering what Donald Ross or A.W. Tillinghast would do if he could come back, but the bigger question might be, 'What do we need to do now? What does this club need going forward?' They have to examine themselves and decide what kind of club they want to be."

To articulate this forward-looking vision is never easy. As much as club members might grumble about their courses, they generally love the old tracks and have a tough time acknowledging the effects of aging. The adage that golf courses age like wine, becoming more textured and mellow, is comforting – but it happens not to be true. The fact is that golf courses age like most people, which is to say they slowly lose the spring in their step. They get tired and frumpy and cranky and creaky. Their hair thins and their bowels, excuse

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Golf courses are the victims of time, nature, maintenance practices, and well-meaning but meddling green committees. Over the years, bunkers deteriorate, fairways get sick, topdressing changes the surfaces of greens and mowing patterns change their shapes. Old drainage systems fail. Old irrigation systems can't keep up. Trees start to crowd the fairways, changing the character and strategy of golf holes.

The list goes on and on, and clubs eventually realize that they can't avoid the inevitable. It's time to call the golf course architect. Every renovation project develops its own logic and its own goals, but here are a few case studies of how the process can play out.

#### **CASE STUDY NO. 1: THE OLD WHITE COURSE AT THE GREENBRIER, WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.VA.**

When Lester George was tapped for this project, he realized that he was dealing with a masterpiece that had been alternately neglected and tampered with. The original architect, Charles Blair Mac-

donald is an iconic figure in American golf, a fountainhead in golf course design – but he left behind relatively few courses. Since The Greenbrier is a resort, George didn't have to win over a membership but a small, informed board that understood the value and historical importance of the Old White. The paramount consideration in this project would be to recapture the character and spirit of Macdonald's original design.

For George, a key tool was an early aerial photograph of the Old White; he had it blown up so that it was eight feet long, and then pored over it with a magnifying glass, measuring shadows in millimeters to gauge the exact height and shape of many features. Guided by this research, George rebuilt a huge Biarritz green, a Macdonald signature feature, with a deep trough in the middle (the entire front portion had been converted to fairway); restored the "dragon's teeth," the steep, gnarly mounds used as original hazards; and even uncovered a stream that had been inexplicably piped underground, thus restoring the strategic challenge of a hole.

When he was done, George had turned a lackluster layout with small greens and dumpy bunkers into a stemwinder with monster greens and scary bunkers. In a few places, he did have to guess what Macdonald might have done, but on the whole he had presided over a 99 percent pure restoration, infusing the Old White with its former vitality and magic.

#### **CASE STUDY NO. 2: BELLE HAVEN COUNTRY CLUB, ALEXANDRIA, VA.**

Belle Haven Country Club had hosted prestigious events for many decades, but with almost 70 percent of the golf course lying in the floodplain of the Potomac River, many holes were dead flat and the drainage problems kept getting worse. Head PGA professional Steve Danielson swears that after one heavy rain he saw people in canoes on the low-lying fairways.

Like many clubs, Belle Haven started by pecking away at the problems. They hired and fired two architects before they decided to engage Arthur Hills for a full-scale, no-expense-spared renovation. They went for the whole package: new irrigation, new drainage, new ponds and streams, new cart paths, new tees and

fairways and bunkers and greens. And before it was all over, they even decided to sod the whole place – about 30 acres of sod for the fairways, tees, and greens, another 75 acres for the roughs.

Superintendent Mike Augustin – the "unsung hero" of the project, says Hills – was there every day, making sure that all the infrastructure work and design work stayed in synch. A solid foundation had to be in place for what was essentially a brand-new Arthur Hills design laid down in the old routing corridors. Those flat, low-lying fairways were raised and given plenty of rolls and ripples; greens were raised, lowered, reshaped, recontoured, and sometimes relocated; deep, muscular, Ross-style bunkers with grass faces and flat bottoms were built; intricate green complexes were coaxed into shape; and though the basic rhythm of the course was preserved, the new design added length on several par 4s, starting at No. 8, so that bringing home a low round would demand strong, straight driving.

In other words, Hills delivered the tough, elegant, tournament-worthy course that Belle Haven wanted, and the club has been selected to host the 2010 VSGA Amateur Championship. And best of all, as far as the members are concerned, the course doesn't shut down for days after a heavy rain.

#### **CASE STUDY NO. 3: WILLOW OAKS COUNTRY CLUB, RICHMOND, VA.**

The problems at Willow Oaks were in many respects similar to those at Belle Haven. With much of the course in the James River floodplain, the drainage was a fundamental problem. Also, the club wanted to maintain its standing as a venue for high-profile competitions, having welcomed the SunTrust State Open of Virginia from 1989-97 and again from 2003-06.

Willow Oaks called on George, who elevated fairways, enlarged ponds and built almost a mile of streams to carry off excess water, and placed a thoroughly redesigned course in the former routing corridors.

Yet the new Willow Oaks could hardly be more different from the course Hills designed at Belle Haven. While Hills designs with a clean simplicity, George has a more quirky, mischievous, eclectic approach. His bunkers are laced with tongues and fingers of grass;

## Golf course architects on renovation

*Keith Foster, who renovated Hermitage Country Club in Manakin-Sabot, has earned a national reputation for his sensitive renovations at renowned clubs like Southern Hills Country Club and Baltimore Country Club at Five Farms.*

"When I have the opportunity to work on a great old course, I check my ego at the door. I want to polish what was there originally. These clubs were there before me, and they'll be there long after me. I don't want to put a heavy stamp on them. When we leave a course, I want it to look as if we've never been there. I want it to be timeless."

*Tim Liddy's most recent renovation in Virginia is the Princess Anne Country Club, but he also worked with Pete Dye at Kingsmill – two very different kinds of remodeling.*

"At Princess Anne, we could do things we couldn't do at Kingsmill because it was a tournament course. We could play over roads, and we could put all kinds of movement in the greens – you can't do that with tournament greens because they have to roll so fast. I could put in some blindness, and widen the fairways to create room for strategies, and use other features from a lot of the old masters – Raynor, Maxwell, Mackenzie

– to make it a fun course, fun in the way that so many classic courses are. I did the kinds of things that would have made a tournament committee scream."

*Drew Rogers is a principal in the Arthur Hills / Steve Forrest and Associates design firm. To illustrate some of the difficulties an architect confronts in renovation, he likes to repeat a tale often told by Dye.*

"Every time Pete talks about renovation, he mentions the greens at Pinehurst No. 2. Everybody talks about how great those turtleback greens are, about how Donald

## DURING CONSTRUCTION



AFTER RENOVATION

JON HOOD / ARTHUR HILLS / STEVE FORREST AND ASSOCIATES (CONSTRUCTION PHOTO)

**Changes by Arthur Hills Design at Belle Haven resulted in improvements to its infrastructure. The northern Virginia layout offers a stern test of championship golf. The par-5 16th hole is pictured during its renovation (inset) and following the completion.**

his greens feature a lot of contour, with many falloffs at the sides and back; he doesn't mind using the old arts of deception and blindness to plant a touch of uncertainty in the golfer's mind. Belle Haven is the kind of golf course that shows the golfer what has to be done; Willow Oaks is full of little secrets and surprises, nooks and crannies.

Willow Oaks and Belle Haven are both thoroughly modernized, tournament-worthy tracks with many traditional touches – but they're as different as a duck hook from a double eagle. The moral of this comparison is that full-scale renovation provides the architect with a chance to display the range of his talent and imagination.

RENOVATION PROJECTS COME IN ALL DIFFERENT SHAPES AND SIZES, and there's never a one-size-fits-all solution. The issues, as any golf architect will tell you, are usually far more complex and challenging than

the problems of new construction, where the land is unencumbered by history and the only person who has to be pleased is the owner.

The good news is that many golf designers have embraced the work, approaching it as an opportunity to re-energize their skills by a close study of their predecessors, a process that deepens their appreciation of the enduring appeal of solid, sensitive design. Students of golf architecture have all read about the Golden Age of design that took place in the early decades of the 20th century; in the future, golfers might be studying the Golden Age of Renovation – the age that's happening right before our eyes.

*Author Stephen Goodwin is the author of Dream Golf: The Making of Bandon Dunes. A professor at George Mason University, he has written extensively about golf course design and golf history.*



SCOTT K. BROWN

Ross tinkered with them over the years, kept building them up, creating all those undulations and making chipping such a challenge.

But Pete claims that Ross never meant for those greens to be as crowned as they are today – they just grew up, sometimes as much two feet, because of the topdressing put on them. The maintenance crews kept putting sand on them, and they turned into something that Ross never intended.”

**Designer Pete Dye (right) during renovations at Kingsmill's River Course.**

*Lester George coined his own word to suggest the balance of qualities required in remodeling a golf course.*

“‘Restovation,’ I call it, because it's a combination of restoration and renovation. It has to be. You can't just go in and do a pure restoration because you've got to make the course work for modern conditions. And you don't want to renovate by destroying all the great old features. It's like finding a Dusenbergs that's been sitting in the barn – you want to make it road-worthy, but you're not going to slap a Chevy engine in it and paint it purple.”

*– Stephen Goodwin*