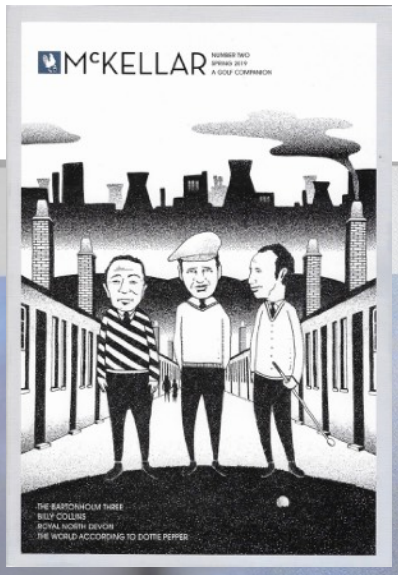


RETURN OF THE MISSING LINKS

A DONALD ROSS MUNI'S LONG ROAD OUT OF PURGATORY

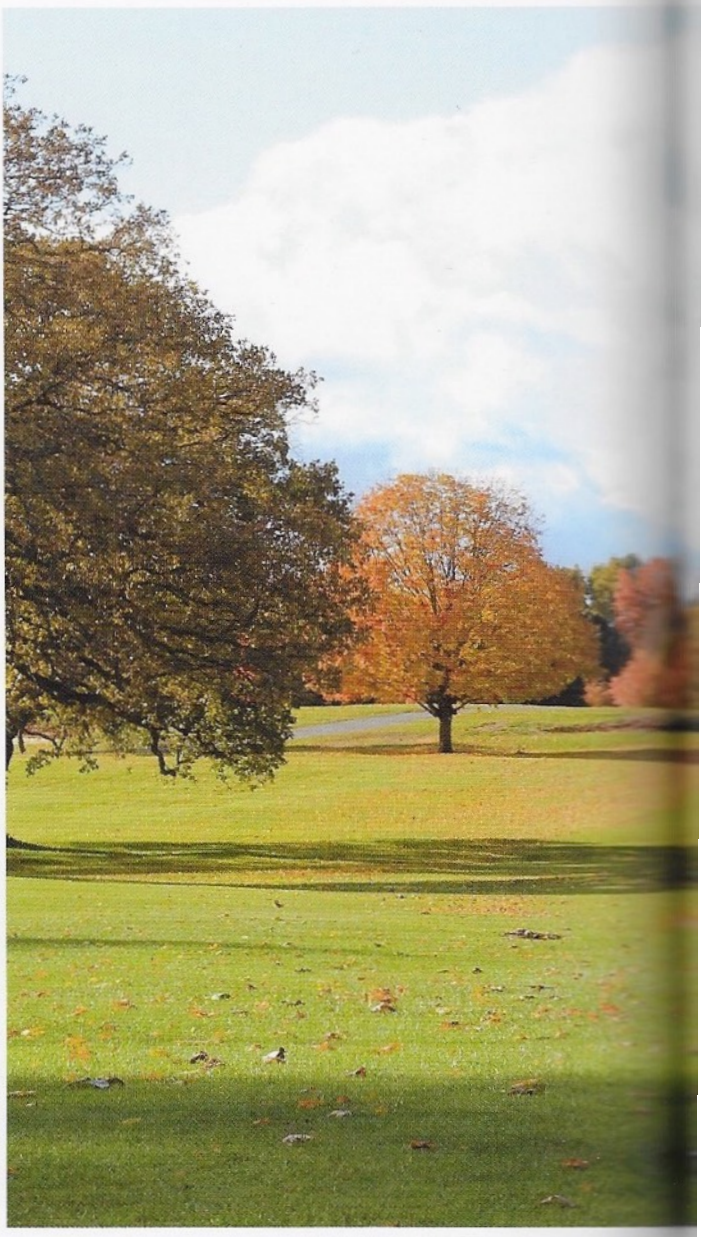
BY HAL PHILLIPS

WITH MAJOR CHAMPIONSHIP GOLF set to return to Bethpage State Park for the 2019 PGA, this is an opportune moment to remind ourselves just how much lemonade Depression-era bureaucrats made on behalf of workaday American golfers, then and now.This was first brought into focus at the turn of the century, when municipal gems like the Black Course and Harding Park received Tour-enabled makeovers. The results were magnificent—new tournament venues wrought from ancient, once-moribund environs, with prime leftovers for public golfers to pick over once the circus left town.

While this phenomenon was originally somewhat limited (driven as it was by the money and cachet generated by professional golf), today the serendipities appear to be trickling down more organically.A glorious collection of classic municipal layouts have subsequently been the subject of their own sympathetic renovations. Keney Park GC in Hartford, Wilmington Municipal in NC, and San Antonio's Brackenridge Park are but a few, and more are on the way. Memorial Park in Houston, Charleston (SC) Municipal, Schenectady Municipal…such developments are all the more sanguine in the post-Great Recession period, during which the U.S. has lost some 150 courses a year to economic attrition.

Where I grew up, in Eastern Massachusetts, muni golfers and devotees of early American architect Donald Ross had long sought the same treatment for the No. 1 layout at Ponkapoag Golf Course in Canton. So derelict was the state of play there, for such an extended period of time, that Rick Reilly used the course as inspiration for his 1988 novel "Missing Links," an entertaining romp that centers on a gaggle of golfing lifers who call a ludicrously run-down muni home.

Ponkapoag GC, which we affectionately nicknamed "Ponky," happens to be where I played my first tournament golf, not to mention dozens of youthful rounds that can best be described as "casual."Yet even as kids we could see the inherent quality lurking beneath its notoriously shabby playing conditions, especially on the entirely Ross-designed No. 1 course. The transplanted Scot laid out twenty-seven holes at Ponky as part of a Depression-era public works project; longtime superintendent Samuel Mitchell added a fourth nine in the 1950s.The dissonance between



what was and what could be made the crappy conditions doubly agonizing.

I departed for college from the parking lot at Ponky following a New England Junior Championship quarterfinal in late August 1982, and had never gone back. I settled in the Great State of Maine, and while I still have lots of friends and family in the Boston area, the golfers among them maintained that Ponky had only deteriorated further. By 2003, rumor had it that the state of play had become so ropey that half the holes on No. 1 had been closed down completely.

More than a decade later, the news broke that the classic-municipal renovation trend had finally reached Beantown—Ponky, after a half-century of neglect, would finally get its dollop of tender loving care, courtesy of architect Brian Silva.As is often the

THE PAR-5 9TH AT PONKAPOAG IN PEAK AUTUMN DRESS

case, however, that TLC would not come without strings—including a protracted court fight.

Ponky re-opened all eighteen holes in 2015. As recently as the fall of 2017, though, more than one local source warned me that No. 1, despite its recent makeover, was not doing so well; it had quickly reverted back to its moribund agronomic state. This struck me as tragic—and worthy of investigation. Indeed, after 35 years away it steeled me all the more to see the place again, for myself.

TO SAY I KNOW PONKY BACKWARD AND FORward is to sell my familiarity short. Nothing burns every nook and cranny of a golf course into one's brain like scores of grinding tournament rounds (in the rain; it always seemed to be raining during competitions there). The 18th, a down-and-up par-4 with blind, internal out-of-bounds stakes right of the landing area, was where I lost the first truly competitive match I ever played. My opponent, a churlish sort named McKenna, laid up down the hill, near the stakes. "Uh, what did you hit there," I murmured, "because if you hit 2-iron, you'd better reload…" McKenna glared at me. It had been a testy encounter. "I'm gonna have to call it on you," he finally responded. All square on the tee, I lost the hole and match right then and there—for asking advice of someone other than my playing partner or caddie. Lesson learned.

Golfers never tire of bitching about the state of their home courses, public or private, and Reilly's winningly over-the-top book gave voice to this time-honored tradition. The subject of "Missing Links," a fictional Bay State dog track called

Ponkaquoque Municipal Course & Deli, featured absurd netting systems, brutalist concrete drainage schemes, and vaguely ominous on-course conditions due to crime seeping in from the surrounding neighborhood. In truth, Ponky was never that bad, though there certainly are municipal golf facilities in Greater Boston where some or all of these conditions have indeed persisted at one time or another (at Leo J. Martin GC in Weston, Franklin Park GC in Dorchester, Fresh Pond in Cambridge, or George Wright GC in Hyde Park). I played them all as a kid—a kid who thought nothing of cops chasing (alleged) perps across fairways, or using two hands to drive a peg into an all-dirt teeing ground.

The 12th green on No. 1 is where I once hucked my putter after missing a four-footer during a round that had, up to that point, been something worth prosecuting with a putter. The toss was so epic the flatstick came to rest twenty feet up in a pine tree. (Defiantly, I left it there, then a few days later hiked back in after dark to retrieve it.)

Rounds at Ponky might take six or seven hours. Our parents just dropped us there for the day (junior green fee in the 1970s: $2). My friends and I were liable to simply take a break sometime during the round, stash our clubs in the woods and start exploring the backcountry thereabouts.

Human frailties aside, the Ponky experience, such as it was, invariably centered on the course itself—on playing conditions so motley they were the stuff of legend. Ponky was a veritable goldmine of nose-wrinkling, eye-rolling and slack-jawed wonder: tees devoid of turf; putting surfaces that were equal parts exposed soil, poa annua, broadleaf weeds and diseases we could not have recog-

nized at the time. Bunkers were so unkempt and scruffy their edges bled seamlessly into neighboring rough areas (little did we know back then that such "natural blowout" transitions would make the careers of guys like Doak, Coore, and Hanse).

These conditions held course-wide, but holes 3 and 4, 7 and 8, and 11 through 13 stood out for being complete and utter bogs all season long, save for the dog days of summer. Special rulings were required there because nearly every shot that landed in the fairway plugged. It's no surprise these were precisely the holes abandoned in 2003.

Back in the day, Ponky and Leo J. Martin were administered by a bureaucratic monolith called the Metropolitan District Commission. (George Wright and Franklin Park were looked after by the City of Boston, and that remains the case today.) Apparently the old MDC has since been replaced by something called the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). These are delicate times for state-sponsored acronyms nationwide, where every outlay of public money is scrutinized by disillusioned Baby Boomers-turned-Tea Party cranks. All the more reason to heartily applaud the DCR, which did indeed spend $2.1 million in 2014 to spruce up Ponky and reopen those holes that had fallen into disrepair.

The work also rescued indirect victims of the neglect. Holes 5 and 6 are set much higher on the property and are perfectly dry—the 6th, in particular was always a first-rate par-4 that swept downhill and to the left through a vast expanse of heathery upland. The problem was that once the swampy linking holes became untenable, one couldn't get to 5 or 6. So they had been decommissioned, too.

"Your recollection of the routing is excellent," Silva told me over the phone in the summer of 2014, just as the renovation had gotten underway. "The 6th is a wonderful hole. The environment up there in that field is extraordinary. The landing area must be 100 yards across! And there are some incredible specimen trees to the right of that green. One is a hickory, I think; the other might be a black gum or tupelo. I almost don't want to say anything about them, though. I'm afraid the American Tupelo Society will come and want to build a fence around them."

The son of a course builder, Silva grew up some twenty miles northwest of Ponky, in Framingham, so he brought to this project a special fondness and the appropriate Boston accent. He also brought something more practical and vital: forty years of experience and perspective in studying the work of Donald Ross and his contemporaries from golf's "Golden Age" of design—a period roughly bounded by the World Wars, when a significant portion of America's great golf courses were built.

Gone some 70 years, Ross remains an outsized figure in the game. A Scot who emigrated to America early in the 20th century, he was the first U.S.-based architect to truly make a go of the profession—not on a project here and there, but on hundreds, over the course of four decades; not as some patrician artist, but as a businessman with staff and bills to pay. Ross got his start here in Greater Boston, as the young golf professional and greenkeeper at Watertown's Oakley CC, then a primitive, eleven-hole layout the Dornoch native soon set about refashioning. He would eventually design or similarly "formalize" some of Greater Boston's finest private courses (Salem, Charles River, Belmont, Winchester, and Brae Burn) before taking his act across the country. When the Great Depression hit, Ross kept the lights on by designing munis that doubly functioned as public works projects.

One matter of particular relevance to Ponky's renovation—and to the renovation of any course built in the 1920s or '30s, for that matter—was the fact that Ross's generation of designers operated under none of the environmental restrictions architects do today. The federal Environmental Protection Agency would not exist until the 1970s, of course, and its state equivalents had taken shape only a decade earlier.

Which leads us to a sobering perspective often overlooked by classic design fandom: A laissez-faire attitude toward wetlands played a huge role in making the work of the Golden Age architects so laudable. For starters, designers of this vintage often worked on superb pieces of terrain, owing to the relatively undeveloped and sparsely populated nature of urban and suburban areas back then. What's more, if they encountered a boggy area that in any way detracted from a prospective routing, they didn't think twice about simply filling it in.

One cannot blithely fill or even drain a wetland these days. Wetland protection and other environmental statutes complicate modern course construction and renovation processes mightily, especially efforts to "restore" a Ross-designed hole to its original state—something that many

clubs want, and something interested third parties (read: slavish fans of Golden Age architects) hold particularly dear.

The wetland dynamic made approval of the renovation work at Ponkapoag complicated. Were these bits soggy when Ross was on site, designing and building them? Almost certainly, and Ross responded the way any architect of that period would have: He strategically filled them, creating causeways of dry, golf-friendly terrain with wetlands on either side.

"These were always wet holes, and once all the homes got built around the course, it changed the watershed," Silva explained. "They eventually became so wet that they couldn't mow them anymore, so they were abandoned [in 2003]. 'Fallow' is really too nice a word for the state of these holes when we found them."

The renovation plan at Ponky was straightforward: raise up the boggy fairways some three or four feet; equip them with proper drainage capability below ground, plus add surface-draining contour above ground; re-grass the new fairways and abandoned putting surfaces; then re-establish the bunkers, which had similarly gone to seed. Significant tree removal was also on the docket.

There was just one problem.

"What held up the permits for six or seven years was the filling and raising of these fairways," Silva explained. "It was written in a book somewhere, by some 'expert,' that this couldn't have been a Donald Ross original, because he wouldn't have built a course in a swamp. (Never mind that Seminole, other than greens and tees on primary and secondary dunes, was built entirely in a mangrove swamp...) Whatever the case, it came down to this: If these holes were in fact designed by Donald Ross, from a historical perspective it was worth it to fix them up. But first we had to prove this was a Ross design."

To assign this sort of environmentalism to Ross—or any course architect working in the 1920s—was the height of historical anachronism. But this was indeed the holdup.

In due course, Silva and Ponkapoag's then-GM, Joe Leary, produced for the DCR Ponky's original plans, signed by Ross in the Scot's own hand. Case closed? Not quite. Opponents pivoted to a new argument, which posited that the decommissioned holes, since their abandonment, had become established indigenous wetlands, by virtue of the plant life that had grown there since 2003. This argument, too, was eventually dispatched by a state appeals court, and so the renovation work lurched forward once again.

COMPREHENSIVE EIGHTEEN-HOLE COURSE renovations today—the ones conducted at fancy private clubs, with all the bells and whistles (the ones we normally read about in golf magazines)—can run upwards of $10 million. The $2.1 million allotted to Ponky's makeover might seem like a lot of money, but these DCR funds, while generous, were not nearly enough to return the nine abandoned holes to their "original state"—often the goal of Golden Age course renovations. This is a muni, after all, and this was one project where the Tour wasn't there to throw its television money around. Budget accommodations had to be made.

For starters, that $2.1 million also covered new irrigation for the entire eighteen-hole No. 1 course, according to Leary. Silva further explained that the nine new putting surfaces were not entirely rebuilt, something a comprehensive renovation project would normally include. "The greens are back to 99 percent of the contouring you would remember," he said, "but we didn't core them out and rebuild them, like we would normally. We got rid of the old grass, checked the contour to make sure they drained properly, then re-grassed them."

Similarly, Silva and the construction team (Vermont-based NNP Golf) rebuilt bunkers where they stood, meaning they weren't repositioned according to the Ross plans or necessarily expanded to the sizes and shapes for which Ross had called in those plans. No way was there money for all that. "The bunkers were a little different from what Ross had in the plans, in terms of size, shape and position," Silva explained. "We rebuilt them, but in terms of shape, left them pretty much as we found them. The bunker work was unique in that respect. If this was anywhere but Ponkapoag, someone would have insisted that we get rid of the tall grass—the blue stem, fescues and ferns—that had grown up in and around these bunkers over the years. But we left that stuff there and worked around it. For better or worse, these bunkers look exactly like they did for decades."

The DCR commanded neither the funds nor the political will to restore Ponkapoag to the full extent of Ross's original vision. But these well-meaning bureaucrats did spend a great deal

BRIAN SILVA TOOK AN ECONOMICAL APPROACH TO REBUILDING PONKY'S BUNKERS

of public money nevertheless, and they retained one of the few men in the game equipped to make the most of it.

In June 2018, I finally returned to Ponky to see how well all this change was wearing. I picked up a game with Ed Flynn, a genial septuagenarian from nearby Dorchester who has played here every Tuesday and Thursday for twenty years. Ed couldn't say enough about the recent changes and I could not but agree: Rumors of Ponky's agronomic recidivism had been greatly exaggerated.

The greens were most excellent—one would have never known that until recently nine of them had been left for dead. The tees were replete with healthy turf (indeed, half a dozen had been aerated the day before). The serially boggy holes were preposterously dry. A few fairway bunkers had clearly been abandoned and were in the process of going to seed, but those remaining, especially at greenside, had come through the renovation in fine, purposely rough-hewn fashion.

The high-borne 5th and 6th were, as I remembered, magnificent—and none the worse for wear after over a decade on the shelf. Massive pines no longer bound the 12th green on the right, thanks to some judicious tree removal, something that has opened up many tees and greens to additional sunshine and air circulation. When I somehow managed to double the 12th from the front edge, instead of my putter I hurled only a bit of invective, which traveled unfettered to the 13th tee, where a foursome of ladies shot disapproving looks in our direction.

Unlike Mr. McKenna, I laid up perfectly on 18.

I'm not sure where else in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts I might have derived more golfing pleasure in exchange for a $27 weekday green fee. Perhaps at George Wright GC, or at William H. Devine GC in Dorchester's Franklin Park. Both of these, municipal Ross designs in their own right, have been recently refurbished by Silva's former design partner, Mark Mungeam, in time to co-host the 2018 Massachusetts Amateur. Our friend Joe Leary now presides at George Wright. He reports that weekday green fees run $39 for walkers. The same price holds down the street at Franklin Park. I'd like to think that somewhere the Original Donald—a flinty Scot, among so many other things—is smiling.