



Polishing off a Gem: Knollwood Country Club



A look into Knollwood Country Club's recent restoration project.

After several years of work on its master plan, Knollwood Country Club in Elmsford, N.Y., jumped all in for its final step, putting an efficient exclamation point on the project with its most dramatic improvements. The work—which restored bunkers, removed trees, and improved several putting surfaces—all channeled the club's rich history and aimed to restore the course to play more like its original design intended.

“Over the last five or six years of that plan, we did little pieces,” said club president Nick Greto. “We did the sixteenth, the third, and we made a few other little changes.” No changes were taken lightly, especially with Knollwood’s rich history dating back to its founding in 1894.

Charter member Lawrence Van Etten designed the club’s initial layout, but at 5,300 yards it became too short due to technological advances in the game. Upon the purchase of adjacent property, a trio of big-name architects had a hand in the development of the championship course. Plans began with A.W. Tillinghast in 1925, but he dropped out of the project. Next came Seth Raynor, who revised the blueprints. However, another curve came early in 1926 as Raynor passed away, leaving his protégé Charles Banks to complete the job. Despite all these factors, the course opened in 1927—possessing characteristics of each famed architect.

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Knollwood entrusted architect Ian Andrew for the restoration plans, with work on the most daunting stage beginning early last October. Though the project could have been stretched over two or even three years, members quickly came on board when Greto also presented a one-year plan for the changes. “It was initially a two-year assessment,” said Greto. “I think people would’ve taken the two years if that was the one option, but a lot came and said, ‘Listen, we all want it done.’ So, we got it done in one year and we were able to actually save enough money to do a little more work than we even anticipated.”

A lot of the work in the \$1.1 million project focused on the course’s bunkers, which had aged past their prime and were also out of place with today’s playing standards. “The bunkers are completely different than what we had here before,” said Knollwood superintendent Matt Neus. “We even had a local rule here that you could remove rocks from the bunkers—we do not have that rule anymore.” The bunkers now have a pristine look, shining a brilliant white while also posing new challenges.

“Most of the bunkers were rebuilt and replaced,” continued Neus. “Most of them were original. They certainly look a little more daunting now—they were just these bowls before, now they’re all flat-bottomed with severe grass faces.” In relocating bunkers, Andrew was able to work alongside club historian Frank Cali, using aerial photos and even some sketches to be true to the course’s origins.

Relocation of bunkers on Nos. 4 and 14—both par-fours—particularly lend to an extra thought in terms of strategy, as previous locations only penalized shorter hitters with higher handicaps. “If you could hit the ball further than 200 yards, you were well over those bunkers,” said Neus of the previous bunker locations on the fourth hole. “Ian eliminated those and built a bunker complex more original to the first design that incorporates today’s standards of golf where guys are hitting the ball 270-280 yards. So, it makes you think a little bit more off the tee.”

Meanwhile, changes at the dogleg-left, 287-yard 14th have proved to stand among the most popular. The previous design featured a small fairway bunker on the left and two more on the right, allowing longer hitters to take no thought in hitting at the green. “Ian incorporated two very large fairway bunkers on the left side, pulled the fairway over toward the right and got rid

of the bunkers on that side,” Neus explained. “That has been a very popular change among the membership—they all love what he did there.”

Tree removal also proved to be a pivotal piece of Knollwood’s project, helping create healthier conditions for the course’s turf in several locations while also opening up splendid views of the property. “We created a lot of great sight lines and vistas with tree removal,” said Greto. “The 10th tee box, for instance, was surrounded by woods and we extended that back 20 yards and took everything down. It’s one of the highest points on our course and you can see so much of the golf course—it’s a beautiful view.”

Trees have also come down behind the first green and the fifth green, helping create better opportunities for the turf to thrive. “Our fifth green was surrounded,” Greto said. “There were a couple of oak trees behind it and maple trees to the right of it that used to shade the back part of the green. Every year Matt would have to put sod back there. It’s so healthy now, he can cut hole locations there.”

Thanks to efficient work and expenditures relating to the bunkers and tree removal, Knollwood continued its string of improvements by investing in the greens on Nos. 8 and 12. The back of the par-three 8th was raised some 15 inches to fix a severe slope and allow for more hole locations, while the par-four 12th was rebuilt to tie into the 13th hole’s teeing ground—which nearly doubled in size.

To round out the course work, irrigation loops were installed around several greens and drainage was improved on the par-four 13th—both of which have already proved advantageous this season. The majority of the project was completed in early December thanks to Andrew’s watchful eye and helpful weather conditions. Minor details were fine-tuned following the winter months and, hardly skipping a beat, the course was quickly ready for play in the spring.

“To me, it’s really exciting to restore a golf course that has had some great architects touch it,” said Greto. For Knollwood, its past remains an important piece of the puzzle. Now, especially on the course, those elements may be more clear than ever.