

Two Tales Of Golf



Oak Hill Country Club — host site of the 2011 MGA Open from June 27-29 — enjoys the fruits of the Bay State's two most prolific golf course designers.

BY MAXWELL M. CAREY

“IT IS BASICALLY TWO TALES OF GOLF,” says Henry St. Cyr, president of Oak Hill Country Club. “We have a challenging front nine with rolling fairways that are quite doable in the golf sense but characterized by tough greens. The game changes on the back nine. The holes get progressively longer and narrower with woods on both sides... and the greens are as tough on the back as they are on the front.”



Wayne Stiles (left); Donald Ross

Longtime members urge newcomers to score well on the more tranquil front nine originally designed by Wayne Stiles before crossing over Oak Hill Road to the longer, tighter back nine designed by Donald Ross.

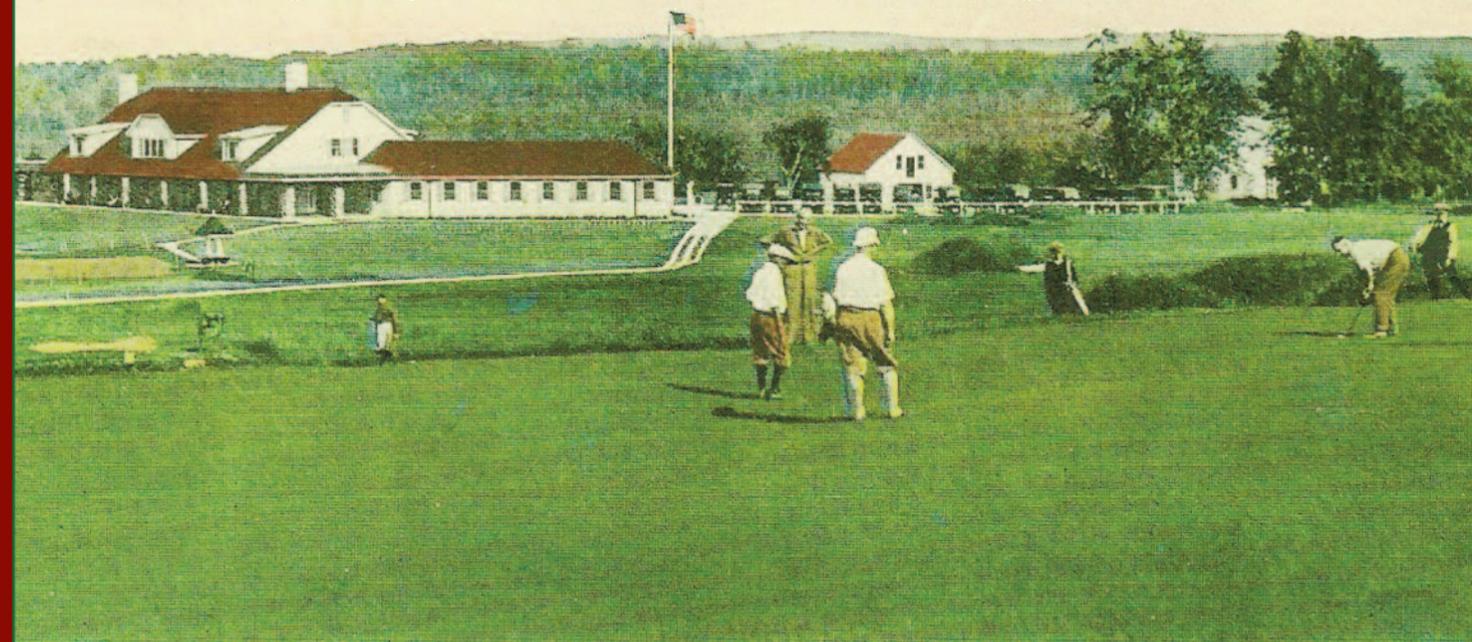
Admirers of golf course design can study how top competitors deal with these contrasts by journeying to

the club — located on a rolling hillside in Fitchburg — to take in the 2011 MGA Open.

What will be enjoyed is the intertwining stories of two renowned golf architects



THE CLUBHOUSE history also sports two tales. Above, a mighty oak frames a photo of today's handsome facility. The vintage postcard, circa 1926, depicts the first clubhouse — built in 1921 and destroyed in a 1941 fire — with golfers putting on the original Wayne Stiles' 5th green. Looking closely into the distance, one can see the tree clearing underway for Donald Ross' new nine holes, built in 1925-26 and opening for play in 1927.



Oak Hill's original nine-hole golf course was laid out by Wayne Stiles, the Boston-born designer who would eventually work on more than three dozen Bay State courses. Built under his on-site supervision in 1919-20, the course formally opened on July 4, 1921 — making it most likely the first Stiles layout to come to fruition in Massachusetts.

According to a contemporary account of the course opening in the *Fitchburg Sentinel*: "It is undoubtedly the equal if not the superior of any nine-hole course in this region and it will be even better later."

In historic retrospect, that "even better" line seems to foretell the coming arrival of Donald Ross. In 1925, the club secured additional land on the eastern side of Oak Hill Road; there, during the years of 1926-

27, nine holes were added, built under the direction of Ross, who would design some 400 courses in all from his Bay State office.

Significantly, Ross was also on site for the Oak Hill course development.

The new nine holes formally opened on July 30, 1927, when two of the world's foremost touring professionals, Tommy Armour and Johnny Farrell, played an exhibition match. Farrell's round of 70 established the new layout's record.

Ross soon proceeded to remodel the original Stiles holes 1, 2, 4, 6 and 9. Since that time, most of the remaining Stiles holes have been remodeled

by Geoffrey Cornish, William Robinson and Brian Silva.

In 1935, the fully-mature 18 holes was ready to host its first significant championship — the MGA Open. Gene Sarazen entered the field, fresh off his victory in the second-ever Masters where he double-eagled the 15th hole in the final round that led to a playoff which he won by five shots.

Sarazen won too at Oak Hill by 14 shots and set a new course record of 66. On hand was Ross who was presented a medal by the MGA in recognition of his victory in the inaugural 1905 Open. The Open would return to Oak Hill in 1936, partly due to Sarazen who noted it was an "...ideal place."

Recently, Oak Hill hired Ron Pritchard, an expert in Ross courses, to work on a long-range plan to restore the original Ross design features and strategy. Today, this "ideal place" is still becoming "even better."



SARAZEN CAPTURES TITLE.
Equals Tourney Record of '285 in Winning Massachusetts Open.

FITCHBURG, Mass., June 28 (AP).—The 285 record set by George Kerrigan in 1922 was equaled for the second time today when Gene Sarazen, the farmer-golfer from East Brookfield, Conn., captured the seventy-two hole Massachusetts open championship. He had a fourteen-stroke margin over the field that competed on the rugged Oak Hill course.

Sarazen posed on the first tee at Oak Hill for the 1935 MGA Open.

Unearthing A Treasure

THE PREVAILING THOUGHT at Oak Hill for many years was that the original 1921 design for the front nine holes by Wayne Stiles was a rather rudimentary plan, one that was completely overhauled by Donald Ross just a few years later. While Ross did indeed masterfully weave his magic in re-shaping much of Stiles' work on the front nine, (soon after Ross added the back nine), a relatively recent find debunks the myth that Stiles' initial work was in any way immature.

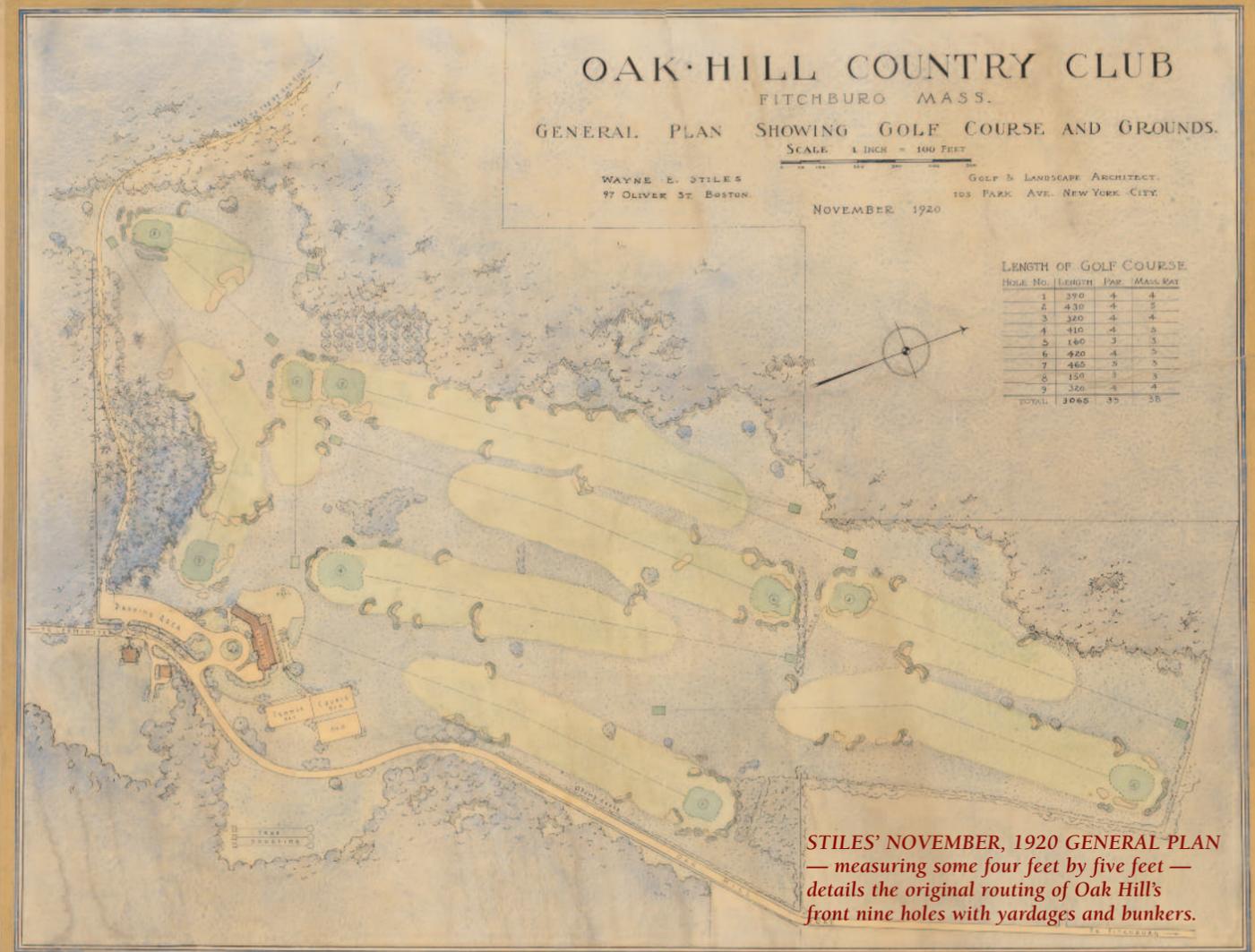
In July 2007, Stiles' general plan for Oak Hill was 'unearthed' by chance after a reader responded to an article in the *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*. Golf writer Bill Doyle had mentioned that club member Tom Bagley was conducting research for a book he is writing for Oak Hill's 2021 centennial. That rang a bell with Rosemary Smith who knew exactly where the long-forgotten Stiles' plan was — in her husband's loving custody.

Some three decades earlier, Warren Smith, then the executive director of the Fitchburg Housing Authority, was investigating a home in the city for possible purchase and conversion into alternative housing. There, on the floor of a closet on the third floor, he discovered Stiles' *General Plan Showing Golf Course and Grounds*. The document — dated November 1920 and measuring some four feet wide and three feet in height — was found ripped in half, but was otherwise in surprisingly good condition.

As it turns out, the house at one time had been owned by Dennis Dillon whose father had been one of Oak Hill's founders. Warren Smith's father had also been a member and Smith himself cad-died as a youngster at Oak Hill in the late 1930s. With his affinity for the club, Smith fortuitously turned into preservationist mode — he had the Stiles plan restored, mounted and covered.

In an interview with Doyle in 2007, Smith noted he had mentioned his discovery over the years to a few Oak Hill members. "They kind of shrugged it off, and I dropped the matter," he recalled. As for his special care for the plan, he quipped: "I'm not quite sure what I had preserved it for, but recently my wife got tired of seeing it around."

On behalf of the club, Bagley accepted the plan which now hangs in Oak Hill's clubhouse. "There



STILES' NOVEMBER, 1920 GENERAL PLAN — measuring some four feet by five feet — details the original routing of Oak Hill's front nine holes with yardages and bunkers.

are a few creases and a few wrinkles, but it's in beautiful condition," notes Bagley, who also made a massive digital image of the plan, a good idea for all historic club documents. Indeed, had the plan remained at Oak Hill all those years, it likely would have been destroyed with other items when the original clubhouse burned down in 1941.

The rediscovered general plan impacted the club's thinking about Stiles original work.

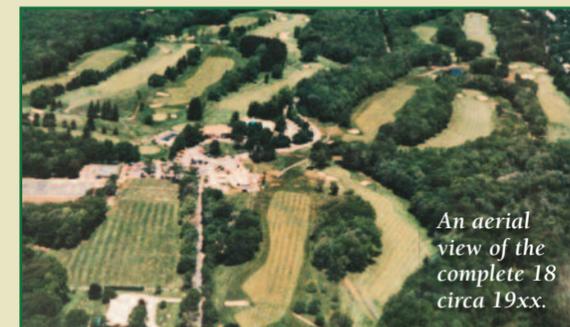
"I've seen some old, old blueprints that weren't much," Bagley told Doyle in 2007. "It was obvious, based on this plan that it was meant from the beginning to be a very sophisticated golf course. A lot of effort went into [Stiles] developing this plan."

The plan indicated the nine-hole course par of 35 and an MGA handicap rating of 38. So even before

Ross' reworking the front nine, Oak Hill was a tough, championship-caliber track for the era. In their book, *The Life and Work of Wayne Stiles*, Bob Labbance and Kevin Mendik note: "Stiles took great care in planning the 2,917-yard layout, walking the land numerous times in 1919 and directing the installation of greens and features during the 1920 season"

Oak Hill has copies of the Ross back-nine hole cards (see page 25) but not his general plan. The cover sheet to the hole cards — in Ross' writing — instructed to send the plan to "Fred Dillon, Dillon Boiler Works, Fitchburg." The Stiles' plan was found by Warren Smith in Dillon's son's former home.

"So there may be a general plan by Ross kicking around some place," Bagley told Doyle in 2007. "It's just a matter of unearthing it."



An aerial view of the complete 18 hole course circa 19xx.

There are, of course, many more than just two tales of golf at Oak Hill. The club has been the member club for some of the top competitors in local golf circles over its 90-year history, including Ted Rockwell and Joanne Catlin (see page 6 for both).

Among other notable members over the years are:

- John Mercer, the winner of the 1963 MGA Senior Amateur (contested at Oak Hill) and a three-time competitor in the U.S. Senior Amateur;
- Bob Menne, the Gardner, MA native and 1981 MGA Open winner who played on the PGA Tour — his win at the 1974 Kemper Open featured the richest PGA purse champion's take (\$50,000) for that year;
- Jim Ruschioni, the club's course record holder (with a score of 63) and 18-time club champion whose dossier includes wins in four MGA Championships and a win in the 1987 New England Amateur (contested at Oak Hill) and who has earned a total of four MGA Senior Player of the Year Awards.

One of the most memorable among a host of championship events contested at Oak Hill is the 1961 MGA Amateur where Ted Bishop won at age 48 — 15 years removed from his glorious 1946 season during which he won the MGA

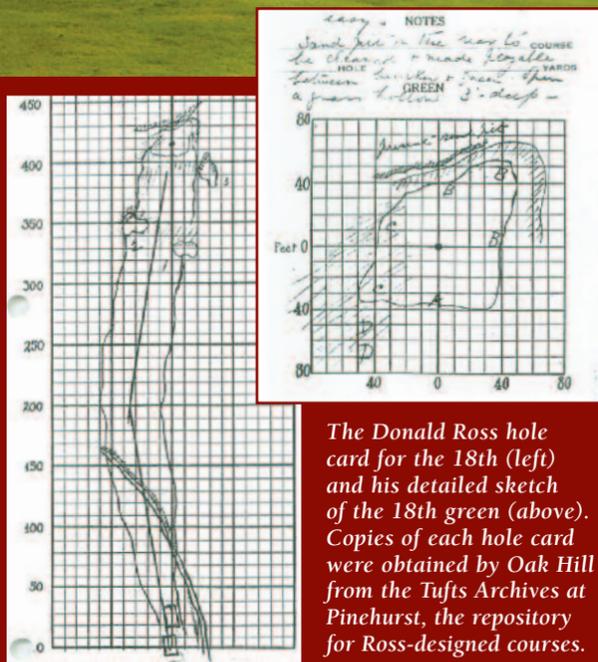
Amateur, New England Amateur and U.S. Amateur. Bishop's caddie for the week was current Oak Hill club president Henry St. Cyr, who recently recalled: "I remember Ted as a wonderful man who was a great golfer. I can assure you we spent the entire week in the middle of the fairway, on in regulation, and he holed many, many putts. I tried to recall my pay for the week — it must have been something like \$35.00, including a tip. I do remember getting paid by Ted and his acknowledging at the time that I was a positive factor in his win. I remember running into the pro shop and buying a new Titleist Bulls Eye Putter that I had been looking at for a long time. I think it was about \$30.00. Oh, my, how things have changed!"

Thankfully, one thing that hasn't changed at the venerable club since just a couple of years after Bishop's 1961 win is the guiding presence of head professional Jim O'Leary (see page 32). Now in his 47th season with the club, the winner of the 1962 New Hampshire Open was recently announced as a 2011 inductee into the NEPGA Hall of Fame. Come to the MGA Open and ask Jim to relate a few tales!

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Ted Rockwell was 1990 MGA Player of the Year.



The Donald Ross hole card for the 18th (left) and his detailed sketch of the 18th green (above). Copies of each hole card were obtained by Oak Hill from the Tufts Archives at Pinehurst, the repository for Ross-designed courses.

“Stay below this hole!”

IF OAK HILL'S 18TH HOLE could talk, it would relay many a competitor's tale of woe. The epitome of a Donald Ross long par 4, the 18th was named 'Most Challenging Finishing Hole' in *MassGolfer's* Spring 1992 issue (see page 3) based on more than 100 responses to a survey issued to both amateur and professional qualifiers for the 1990 MGA Open and 1990 MGA Amateur.

Nothing much has changed for the 441-yard monster's description from some 20 years ago: "Playing entirely uphill and into the prevailing wind, this par 4 features thick woods on either side of the fairway and a deep swale which captures balls falling short of the green. The region's best

players averaged a 4.75 over four rounds here in the 1987 New England Amateur Championship."

On the approach shot into the 18th, the local knowledge is to stay below the hole. Witness top PGA Champions Tour player Dana Quigley in the 1996 NEPGA Championship who found himself in the worst position possible some 20 feet above the hole. After his putt, he was — as is said — 'still away' with his ball having rolled off the front of the green into the catching swale. Quigley survived and won.

But coming up short is no treat either. Witness professional Joe Paesani who came to Oak Hill's 18th needing only bogey to secure the 1989 MGA Open. He came up short — on his third shot... the hole is indeed tough — and needed three more efforts to hole out. The double-bogey backed him up into a tie and, on the first playoff hole, Andy Morse birdied for the win.

A FINISHING KICK: Competitors in the 2011 MGA Open will need to pick their poison coming into the 18th hole. According to superintendent Scot Lagana, "Oak Hill's greens will roll between 12 and 12.5 feet on the Stimpmeter."

Veteran Oak Hill head professional Jim O'Leary has gone on record with this advice on the 18th: "Hit it as hard as you can off the tee — attack the hole. Although woods border the left, left-center is still the place to be off the tee due to a large overhanging tree on the right, 70 yards short of the green. The second shot requires one more club than you think due to the prevailing wind and the upsweep into the green site — so hit plenty of club. Good luck chipping if you miss it — it's easy to make a quick six. Par on 18 has won many a close competition."

Par may be a good score, but there are always two tales at Oak Hill — and the 18th hole can tell at least one joyous anecdote to this year's Open field. In the 1998 MGA Open, Hingham native Rodney Butcher (see page 26) birdied the 18th to finish his round with the event's all-time scoring record of 7-under-par, 66-72-65-203. The Donald smiled.



The swale fronting the 18th green.



RAISING THE BAR
 During the 2011 MGA Open Championship Media Day on May 20 at Oak Hill, Joe Sprague, MGA executive director, appears to set the bar high for this year's field. Listening in, from left, are: Jesse Menachem, MGA director of rules and competitions; Jimmy Hazen, 2011 MGA Open champion; and Henry St. Cyr, president of Oak Hill Country Club.

The Oak Hill layout for the 102nd edition of the MGA Open will play at par 70 and 6,609 yards, but the reality is the course plays longer because of elevation changes, wind conditions and lightning-fast greens with false fronts. The 54-hole, stroke-play championship, with 18 holes played each day, will feature only one par 5 on the front side, as the 4th hole — normally a par 5 for member play — will play as a par 4 at 443 yards. That leaves the 7th hole, playing at 465 yards, as the sole front side five.

According to Jesse Menachem, MGA director of rules and competitions, “This year we had 450 applicants which includes 48 exempt registrations. The starting field of 150 players eligible players — culled from seven qualifying rounds — will be cut to 40 and ties after 36 holes. A professional purse of \$75,000 will be distributed to the low 40 finishers and ties, with the champion taking home a winner’s check of \$15,000.”

Among the former champions in the field will be Charles Volpone (1971, '72), John Elliott (1991), Andy Morse (1989, '92), Richard Parker (2001), Eric Egloff (2005) and Jimmy Hazen (2010). This May, Hazen — who posted a 6-under par 204, 2-stroke victory at Wellesley Country Club last year — recalled his 2010 win at the 2011 MGA Open Media Day.

“It got my summer going and it gave me the necessary belief in myself. When you win something

like the MGA Open, it boosts your confidence and gets you going in the right direction.”

Indeed, after what was his second major career win (he was also victorious at the 2006 New York Open), he captured the 2010 Providence Open in August. Hazen, incidentally, attended Sacred Heart University in Fairfield CT, where his golf team pal and roommate was MGA competitor Ryan Riley (see page 27). The two remain close as Hazen was the best man at Riley’s wedding and is godfather to one of Riley’s children.

The 2011 MGA Open field will also include a ‘My Three Sons’ of sorts: Andy Miller, son of former PGA Tour player and current NBC golf analyst Johnny Miller; Andrew Giuliani, son of former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani; and, Olin Browne, Jr., son of current Champions Tour star Olin Browne.

“The field for this year’s MGA Open is one of the strongest in recent memory,” says Joe Sprague, MGA executive director. “We are looking forward to watching these talented competitors take on what will be a tough challenge at the Oak Hill layout.”

What new tales could develop? Just ask Andy Brock, who arrived a bit confused for the 1989 MGA Open after first believing the event was being contested at Oak Ridge Golf Club in Feeding Hills, MA. Brock shot 63 in his first round ever on this layout... followed by a 73. No doubt about it, this course is two tales of golf. ▲



In 1988, Rodney Butcher (left) hoisted the Clarence G. Cochrane Memorial Trophy after winning the MGA Open at Oak Hill; Jimmy Hazen (right) is defending champion.