



# *Baltusrol*

## **A Q&A with Gil Hanse Lower Course Restoration at Baltusrol Golf Club**

### **How did you get the job at Baltusrol?**

The committee at the club interviewed a few architects. When it was our turn, we walked the course with the committee. I said that if they were interested in us restoring the course back to what Tillinghast had done, we would be very interested in working with them. But if you want us to put our fingerprints on it and update the course, we are probably not the right guys. I think that resonated well with them.

### **What was the mandate from the club? Was this about landing major championships?**

We definitely talked about getting future majors, but Baltusrol already had the 2029 PGA Championship on the books. This was not specifically about trying to land a major. They have a championship pedigree and want to maintain it going forward. The club will always seek to host the most significant championships that exist. It is and will always be part of the club's DNA.

The question asked of us was 'how can you approach our golf course and make it best for the members and still give the club opportunities to maintain its championship history?' We had to be very aware of how the members play the golf course. You are always striking a very fine balance at courses like Baltusrol, Winged Foot, Merion, and others. These courses have a reputation, deservedly, that they want to maintain that when you come here, you are playing where the greatest golfers in the world have played and won majors. They are not apologetic for that difficulty.

### **So, were you asked to make the course harder?**

There was not a lot of talk about adjusting the difficulty. It was more about having adequate tees and creating forward tee opportunities that would let all golfers manage the course better. And to be honest, work done before us had maximized the yardage. We did not lengthen the course much, mostly on number 8 by doing some earthwork. Otherwise, the course is pretty much as long as it can be.

### **Explain what you did.**

One of great things about Baltusrol is that they have hosted majors since golf's earliest days so there are lots of photos. We literally could see what it looked like. The archives at the course are great, with a ton of historic information. We already had very good knowledge of what we thought Tillinghast would have wanted, but having those photographs verified our instincts.

We widened fairways, but that was Tillinghast's intent, his scale. We widened fairways primarily where the average member would hit a tee shot and retained some championship width further down the hole.

We also took out trees. We looked at photos of the property when Tillinghast designed it. Were there segments of the property that were tree-lined then? Yes, and we kept those. But over time well-intentioned committees and architects sought to fill in the open spaces; we removed trees from them. When there was an agronomic situation where trees were detrimental to the turf, we sided with the turf. We combined the historical perspective of what the property looked like with the practical of providing the best playing surfaces.

On the greens, we expanded them back to what we could glean to be the original scale and size, using old aerial photos and plans that we found, also the construction markers in the field that hadn't changed over time provided us with great clues. Architects of the Golden Age moved earth efficiently and economically; where they intended the greens to go was marked in the field by the extent of their earth moving.

**What would you say was the biggest change you made?**

Lowering the golf features. Generally, the green was the high point of the green complex, the focus, and bunkers were set down below the putting surface. There was very little framing of features. Over the years, bunkers and green surrounds were raised for framing, and it was our belief that the golf course would present itself more authentically if we removed these raised features. Now the course better fits the ground and our perception of how Tillinghast presented it.

Adding depth and raised surrounds to the bunkers also made it harder to get in and out of them. We tried to make bunkers more accessible for all members playing the course.

**The Lower Course is well known for a few holes, notably 4, 17, and 18. Did you do much work to them?**

Interestingly, some of the most dramatic changes were to those very holes.

No. 4 was almost joined to the third green by tightly mown grass that went right to the giant fourth tee. We restored all that short grass. We also expanded the green significantly to the right: We found—this was basically like archaeology—old photos that showed the horizon line behind the green was dramatically different, so we dropped the right side of the green to create a lower section.

On 17, we took the "Sahara" bunkering and moved it 40 yards down range to put it more in play for better golfers and give average guys the chance to lay up short of it. That's the scale and presentation the way Tillinghast had it, back to the massive sand hazard and something similar in front of the green. It was basically the 7th hole at Pine Valley, with Hell's Half Acre and the front of the green shut off, although on this hole Tillinghast left a narrow approach to the green.

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On 18, we raised the entire fairway so now you are level with the pond. It feels more natural as it goes downhill. We also took out four bunkers along the right side and the one Robert Trent Jones had put in front of the green. Plus, we merged the fairway of the two 18th holes, from the Lower and Upper Courses, again back to what Tillinghast had designed.

**Speaking of the Upper Course, what is the plan there?**

The plan is to shut the Upper in November 2023 and do the work in 2024, to re-open in 2025. The Upper Course has always remained much closer than the Lower to what Tillinghast originally designed. There's still significant work to do to get the style back, but architecturally it is a lot closer.

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