

THE RESURRECTION OF MERION 2013 U.S. Open

Even the most ardent of Merion Golf Club members thought they would never see the day when their pride and joy on the outskirts of Philadelphia, the historic Dick Wilson-designed East Course, would once again grace the world stage by hosting a Major Championship.

Like many of the grand golf courses created in the early 20th century, Merion in the township of Ardmore, Pennsylvania was thought to have joined a growing list of wonderful, classic venues have been 'outgrown' by the developments in the game. Modern technology and the increasingly large logistical exercise that the modern game thrusts upon a host venue with huge spectator numbers, TV coverage and corporate hospitality had potentially rendered Merion as being 'too small, too short', to be seriously considered again to host a major event, let alone a 5th U.S. Open.

However, the club thirsted for more and during the mid-1990s, underwent the often painful task of some self analysis and came to the conclusion that the golf course was in need of more than just a tree removal program, it needed to tend to its famed bunkers and restoring green surfaces that had start to show signs of encroachment and age.

Remarkably, the club took on the changes 'in-house' without the project being lead or guided full-time by a course designer. The results were impressive even to the USGA, who granted the club the 2005 U.S. Amateur where of the 312 players entered, only six broke par and none of them shot better than 69.

Merion's membership, along with the USGA, wore broad smiles that week. Merion was back!

Following the success of the Amateur, the USGA formally made the announcement the following year that had traditionalists

cheering - the 2013 U.S. Open would indeed return to Merion, adding to the memorable Open championships of 1934, 1950, 1971 and most recently, 1981. "No potential Open site had been through such rigorous review," said Craig Ammerman, a former member of both the USGA's championship committee and the executive committee, recalling the vote and preceding debate among the 15-strong championship committee.

With the announcement, the USGA made it possible for the 2013 United States Open winner to join a roster of champions and a rich history at Merion that is second to none. They also returned the sense of pride Merion members feel for their club and its traditions. "It's kind of in the DNA of the club," 2005 U.S. Walker Cup captain and Merion member Buddy Marucci, says.

Olin Dutra, Ben Hogan, Lee Trevino and David Graham have been crowned U.S. Open champions at Merion but the venue was also the setting for the historic 'Grand Slam' in 1930, achieved when Bobby Jones clinched the final on the 11th hole to win his 2nd U.S. Amateur at Merion. Jones had earlier set himself up for a tilt at the Slam by winning the U.S. Open, British Open and Amateur, criss-crossing the Atlantic by ship over a 120 day stretch.

Jones promptly retired from tournament play following this win and a gold plaque to the right of the 11th tee commemorates the momentous occasion.

Despite its grand history, Merion will be unfamiliar territory to most golf fans

and all but a few players who were fortunate enough to have played in the Amateur and Walker Cup in recent years. Defending champion Webb Simpson was not born when the championship was last staged although he did contest the 2005 Amateur, won by Eduardo Molinari, losing in a second round match to Anthony Kim.

WGC-Matchplay champion Matt Kuchar was celebrating his 3rd birthday on the very day Merion last crowned a champion back in '81. Australian David Graham, already a major champion after winning the PGA Championship in a playoff over Ben Crenshaw not two years earlier, shot a near flawless final round 3-under par 67 to defeat playing partner George Burns and a fast-finishing Bill Rogers by three strokes.

33-year old Graham's round was heralded by none other than Ben Hogan as one of the greatest final rounds in history, an accolade of the highest honour coming from the man who set the benchmark in history for shot making and ball striking. Graham hit all 18 greens

and all but the first fairway in regulation in an exhibition of control as he climbed from three strokes behind Burns to win.

Hogan himself had famously won a U.S. Open at Merion in 1950 after returning to competitive golf following the car accident that nearly claimed his life the year previous. In the process, Hogan was captured in one of the most famous photographs in golf history following his '1 iron' approach to the final green, although Hogan later asserted that he used a 2 iron to play the shot.

Graham's win upstaged the title defence of Jack Nicklaus, who was seeking a record 5th U.S. Open title, and Tom Watson who was at the peak of his game, bidding for a first national championship which would ultimately arrive the following year at Pebble Beach. Ten years earlier, Nicklaus had lost in a playoff to Lee Trevino which is famous for Trevino tossing a rubber snake from his golf bag at an amused Nicklaus as they waited to tee off on the first hole.

Nicklaus had written his own chapter into the



The plate marking the spot on the 18th fairway where Ben Hogan played his final shot in 1950. Photo: USGA

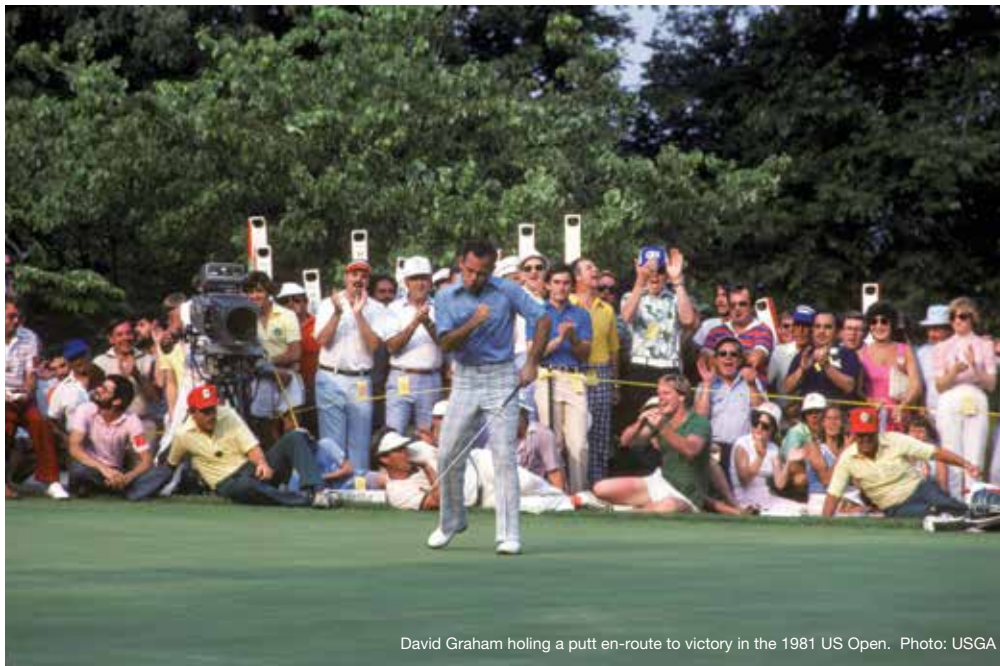


Merion Golf Club, Hole 13. Photo: USGA.

U.S. Open trophy. Photo: USGA.



Photo: USGA.



David Graham holing a putt en-route to victory in the 1981 US Open. Photo: USGA

Merion history book many years earlier as a 20 year old amateur, winning the individual title at the 1960 World Amateur Team Championship, the Eisenhower Trophy. Nicklaus' four round total of 269 was 13 strokes clear of his nearest competitor as his U.S team won the team event by a record 42 strokes.

Graham's 7-under par total in 1981 was at the time, the second lowest 72 hole score in Open history over a Merion layout that measured a little over 6600 yards. This was in the era of wooden clubs and balata golf balls and even then, the USGA were nervous about the length of the golf course and its capacity to protect itself from the greatest players in the world.

The Championship Committee ensured the small, undulating greens were lightening fast and the rough off the fairways and around the green complexes was thick enough to complement the property's sandy waste and quarry areas, along with the dune grasses and 'Scotch Broom' that frame many of the bunkers and waste areas.

Despite their concerns, the 'Old Lady' was up to the test with only five players in the field of breaking par that year.

In 2013, players will still face a golf course that will be considered short by modern standards - under 6900 yards - despite additional yardage

being unearthed here and there with the acquisition of some neighbouring land and by broader decisions to reduce spectator movement and hospitality in some sections of the property. The simple fact of the matter is that with only 126 acres to play with, the golf course can't be lengthened any further because there is simply no room.

In Merion's favour is that the Olympic Club last year played just 300 yards longer than the layout for the Open of 1987 and the course provided a stiff but fair test, as Webb Simpson's winning total of 1 over par more than suggests. Length therefore, may not be the defining factor at Merion. How firm the golf course plays and the all-important USGA course setup will most likely be the predominant factors that will dictate scoring.

Changes to the course to prepare for the championship have been made progressively from well before the USGA's announcement of a return. Strategic bunkering has been added on holes 2, 15 and 16 and No. 3 will play from the back tee area of current No. 6, creating a backbreaking 265-yard, uphill par 3.

New tees, green and bunker renovations have been progressively implemented dating back over a decade so the course conditioning will be fully matured come

the championship. Fairways will be narrowed to 22 to 24 yards and the USGA will for this year, do away with an 'intermediate' or a 'first cut' of rough in the course setup due to the prevalence of shorter holes at Merion.

"Merion is not a golf course that jumps out for the graduated rough like others because of the premium of short holes," USGA Championship Committee chair Tom O'Toole said recently. "With short holes you have to play from the fairway and if you are not, there has to be a punishment. You're not going to see the graduated rough on the short holes."

Of course, the golf world will be charmed and intrigued by the famed wicker baskets of Merion, which have been a feature since the club opened, replacing flags on top of the pins. Reputedly, course designer Dick Wilson copied the idea from a trip to Scotland to study golf course design, witnessing sheep herders with wicker baskets atop their staffs to protect their food from animals.

Other versions of the origin of the baskets abound and many golf courses of the era in the United States and the UK reportedly used

them, although most spurned the idea fairly quickly. The baskets will give no secrets to players as to wind direction but on the flipside, are equally visible from anywhere in any wind conditions and will be a constant reminder to players to pinch themselves that they are treading on hallowed turf.

"A lot of today's greatest tour golfers haven't played here, or maybe didn't even know about Merion until it came back into the U.S. Open lineup again," says Hank Thompson, the USGA's championship director. "Based on the number of tour players who came over to play Merion while they were in town for the AT&T National (in 2011) at nearby Aronimink Golf Club, I'd say there is quite a mix of curiosity and excitement."

All of the greats in the history of the game have tested their skills under championship conditions at Merion and only the worthiest of champions have been identified on each occasion, results that have no doubt pleased the USGA over the years who justify the setup of Open courses to achieve this singular goal. It will not be lost on the players that they face a rare opportunity to win a national championship at a truly historic venue and a wonderfully, unique golf course.

Jack Nicklaus has said that "Acre for acre, Merion may be the best test of golf in the world," and it will be intriguing viewing to watch the players of the modern era approach the challenge set by the 101-year old Merion. Will the subtleties of the golf course finally be overpowered in U.S. Open conditions or will discipline, controlling your golf ball and strategy once again reign supreme at it always has up until now at Merion?

No matter the outcome, having a golf course of this calibre and tradition host another USGA Championship will be a thrill for all concerned. Many thought we'd never see it here again.

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