



US PGA : 2019

Bethpage Black

We will hear much over the coming days about Bethpage Black. Located on Long Island, it is recognised as one of the greatest public golf courses. Bethpage Black became the first public golf course to host a major, when the 2002 US Open was won by Tiger (score 277). When the US Open returned in 2009, Lucas Glover was successful (score 276). The Ryder Cup is scheduled to be played at Bethpage Black in 2024.

Of more interest to me is the architecture at Bethpage, and more particularly the man generally credited with its design, Albert Warren Tillinghast, or more affectionately known as "Tilly". Coming from a monied background, Tilly started to play the game in the 1890s and set sail for Scotland to educate himself about all things golf. On his third trip in 1895, he struck up a close friendship with Old Tom Morris, who was then in his 70s. Even after departing Scotland, they retained the friendship, corresponding regularly. One may only imagine the "golfing" content of their letters.



Albert Warren Tillinghast (1876 – 1942)

An excellent player and regular competitor in the US Amateur Championship, few golfers have had such an influence on the game of golf. From about 1906, Tilly was actively involved in the golf design business, where he embraced the design styles and principles that he had seen in Scotland. Like many since, Tilly was deeply moved and influenced by the Old Course and all that he experienced on the natural links grounds of Scotland.

Sometimes regarded as the person who “removed” bunkers from many golf courses throughout America, Tilly was engaged by the PGA to visit clubs throughout the country and advise on how they may develop sustainable golf models. The PGA was keen to develop the game and understood the advantages of open-air activity and how golf could positively impact communities. The PGA has an extensive archive of Tilly’s reports from his visits to the clubs. It seems unfair that his reputation was to “close” bunkers when his reporting suggests that his advice offered to make the courses more playable for every standard, and that necessitated the redesign of some of the bunkering schemes to make for a less penal golf course. It is an interesting model to imagine a golf architect doing a tour of the country, advising clubs how they can make better golf for their communities.

With a reputation as a rebellious youth, Tilly “polished” himself up, and became a collector of art and furnishings, and developed an exquisite writing skill. But it is his golf design work that has stood the test of time. Designer to such renowned golf courses as Baltusrol and Winged Foot, Tilly’s golf courses are recognised for their variety and scale.

Bethpage Black, designed in 1936, is recognised as one of the toughest tests of golf on the major rota.



Sign at Bethpage Black

The legend of who actually designed Bethpage Black still exercises many golf historians. It was reported in Golf World in 2002, that they were contacted by Joe Burbeck, a retired advertising executive, who contended that his father Joseph H. Burbeck, was in fact the designer of the golf course; and that Tilly was a "consultant" on the project. Joseph H. Burbeck, Joe's father, lived on the property with his family and was the long-time Superintendent at the Bethpage State Park.



Joseph H. Burbeck

Regarded as one of the most powerful men in American history, it is documented that Bethpage really started with Robert Moses. Responsible for creating most of the dams, bridges, highways and parks around the state, Moses employed Burbeck in 1929 to design and build a pitch-and-putt course at Moses' first state park, Jones Beach, on the south shore of Long Island.

In 1931, Moses "manoeuvred" an option to purchase the 1,368-acre estate of the late railroad tycoon Benjamin Yoakum, which included a 1924 golf course by Devereux Emmet. They changed the name of the golf course to Bethpage Golf Club, which opened to public play in April 1932. Burbeck's role was to prepare for the development of the park to include the development of the property into an enormous golf complex. It was planned that Bethpage State Park would include three more golf courses and a new clubhouse, and that the entire facility would be open to the public.

Tillinghast was hired by Moses, a man who knew how to court notoriety, on the 30th of December 1933. This was some months after the Blue, Red and Black courses had been laid out. His "consultancy" fee paid a mere \$50 a day for a maximum of 15 days. About this time, Tilly had fallen on hard times through bad investments and a reputed penchant for lots of hard liquor. No doubt he was pleased to secure the engagement.

Later taking the role as editor of *Golf Illustrated* about 1933, Tillinghast wrote in the February 1934 issue that he was "*honored by being selected as the consultant in the planning of these courses*". What we may assume is that Tilly guided the design process at Bethpage Black and that we will see some great golf on the public grounds, that is one of the toughest tests in professional golf.

Following recent heavy rains, the golf course is going to play very long and lush rough will penalise the crooked ball. The experts suggest that only the very long, straight, high ball-hitters will succeed. That suggests one man to me, and he is Irish!

Enjoy the tournament.