

# Trusting Tillinghast

BALTUSROL, NEW JERSEY

In restoring Baltusrol's Lower course, Gil Hanse relied on the principle that original architect AW Tillinghast got it right. Tom Mackin reports

Per his own request, you won't see Gil Hanse's name on the scorecard for Baltusrol Golf Club's Lower course, but the thorough work he and his team did recently to bring back AW Tillinghast's original design at the storied New Jersey club has left an indelible imprint.

In fact, when interviewing with the club for a renovation project, Hanse put forth the idea of a complete Tillinghast restoration of the Lower and Upper courses, which both debuted on 17 June 1922 as the first dual-designed courses in the country. The Lower has hosted numerous major championships, with upcoming events including the KPMG Women's PGA Championship in 2023 and a third PGA Championship in 2029.

"We were glad to be under consideration but told the club if you

want to hire us, we will propose a full restoration to Tillinghast on all 36 holes," says Hanse. "If that's okay, or something you want to pursue, then we'd be interested. If not, then you probably need to find somebody else. They were very enthusiastic about that thought process."

Implementing the Lower course project last year during a pandemic only raised the challenge. "It was the strangest of strange times," says Hanse. "But we worked our way through it." Hanse was joined by long-time colleague Jim Wagner, associates Ben Hilyard and Kevin Murphy, and Baltusrol superintendent Greg Boring, plus contractors Tanto Irrigation and Total Turf Golf Services.

The project included the widening and twisting of fairways, eliminating existing bunkers and creating new

ones, installing new irrigation throughout, and adding a PrecisionAire subsurface air system for every green, all of which were rebuilt.

Balancing member needs and championship play at such a high-profile club is, as Hanse puts it, the magic sauce for architects. But that was not his primary focus at Baltusrol.

"We trust enough that he [Tillinghast] was able to strike that balance," he says. "If the golf course is designed properly, that means on any given day you can set it up to play as difficult or as easy as you want. Those architects got that. We do our job right by moving some things around and putting bunkers where they are more relevant today, but at the core of it is that Tillinghast got it right."

Despite previous experience restoring Tillinghast's work at multiple courses

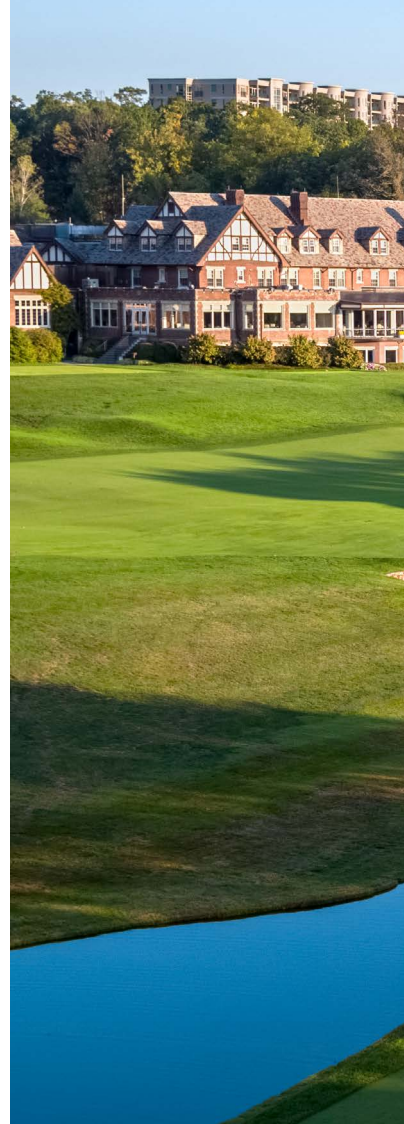




Photo: Evan Schiller

*The eighteenth fairway has been raised to bring it level with the pond*

in the New York and New Jersey metropolitan area, including Winged Foot, Quaker Ridge, Fenway and Ridgewood, Hanse approached the Lower course with fresh eyes.

“If we research fully what Tillinghast did here, that’s more important than what he did at Quaker Ridge or at Winged Foot,” says Hanse, who credited having unfettered access to Baltusrol’s rich historical archives as critical to the project’s success. “What is applicable though, is some understanding of where Tillinghast was as a person and where he was in the arc of his career at the time. This [the Lower course] was early in his career and he wasn’t an established architect. But he was never lacking in confidence.”

That archive is described by club historian Stuart Wolfe: “Baltusrol has a dedicated archive room to store and

preserve the club’s historic documents and objects. Some items housed are the board of governors minutes dating back to the founding of the club in 1895, a copy of the original Tillinghast concept drawing of the dual courses, our founder Louis Keller’s bond certificate, and ephemera from most of the 18 major championships played at Baltusrol. Over the past several years the club has embarked on digitising its photograph collection and the board minutes. We also actively seek to build the archive through acquisitions and donations.”

Tillinghast’s varied approach to each course project was another reason why Hanse didn’t rely on past experiences. “He didn’t seem to have real hard and fast rules,” he says. “I think he was one that you could never put a ‘typical’ label on. It’s important with every golf course

architect, but probably none more so than Tillinghast, to do the specific research on that particular golf course versus trying to extrapolate what was similar from course to course.”

After getting into the dirt to reveal Tillinghast’s work, Hanse came away most impressed by the original green complexes. “The way they are presented again now, where the green is actually the focal point and the high point, and the bunkers are carved back down into the surrounds, I think is the biggest change,” says Hanse. “That’s what most impressed me looking at the old photographs.”

As for any original design elements that made him scratch his head, Hanse demurred. “I’m not too big on second guessing Tillinghast.” But there was one Lower course feature he would love to ask him about.



*The Sahara bunker complex on the seventeenth was moved 40 yards down the fairway so that it is more in play for the bigger hitters*

“I had seen him use the cross bunkering at the seventeenth [a massive hazard restored but moved 40 yards up the fairway on the 653-yard par five], which is kind of a tribute to Hell’s Half Acre at Pine Valley where

over a hill. That was the one hole that seemed fascinating, in and of itself. It made us wonder what his thought process was there.”

Hanse was also left curious about the par-four eleventh’s green, the largest

Overall, the biggest challenge for Hanse and his team had to do more with aesthetics than hole design.

“It was removing the flowers behind the fourth green,” he says, referring to a palette of colourful azaleas and rhododendrons on that par three. “And I’m not joking. The members got used to it over a period of time, and we were coming in and asking to make changes more reflective of what Tillinghast had out there. We wanted that to be consistent across the golf landscape as much as possible. When a decision gets made that is about golf but not really impacting play, I think members tend to be less understanding of that.”

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he was a member and on Crump’s design panel,” says Hanse. “But I’d never seen the way he used it on the second hole on the Lower course, which is kind of a shortish par four up

on the Lower course. “It’s big, huge and rolling. There are no dramatic contours, but there’s so much going on – tilting and tipping in all different directions. That was really fascinating.”

*Hanse expanded the fourth green to the right, close to how Tillinghast originally designed it*

Photos: Evan Schiller



The hiring of Hanse also marked a departure for Baltusrol, where the architectural legacy of the Jones family on the Lower course is both lengthy and involved, beginning in 1948 when Robert Trent Jones Sr was hired to modernise Tillinghast’s original layout [his son Rees later worked on both courses].

“Trent Jones knew Tillinghast, he knew Donald Ross,” says Hanse. “They were not deities to him. They were guys he was competing with for jobs. So, there wasn’t this level of reverence given to these designs by him back then. There now tends to be a corrective action to try and restore the original designs.”

Hanse is glad to take up that mantle. “We believe those original designs are the best examples of golf course architecture and I think that bears out over a long period of time. Yes, we have to make alterations to keep them playable for the modern game, yet the work still remains rooted in those classic principles.”

A new Rain Bird IC irrigation system has also been installed as part of the project. “It is much more efficient than what we had,” says Shawn Haverdink, the Lower course’s superintendent. “The IC system is easy to use, precise, expandable and uses at least 90 per cent less wire than what we had.”

With a restoration of Tillinghast’s design of Baltusrol’s Upper course set to take place in 2024, Hanse will get another chance to step back in time while adding his own modern mark.

“The greatest satisfaction and compliment we get out of these kinds of projects is that this generation of members will be the first in almost 80 years to see the picture as Tillinghast painted it,” says Hanse. “If we can get the features and scale plugged into the landscape right, and trust that Tillinghast got the playability and strategy right, then the result should turn out to be pretty good.” **GCA**