

Righting George Wright

Golf course goes from joke to gem



It took three years, but the once brown and patchy greens at George Wright GC in Hyde Park are now lush, smooth, and green. (George Rizer/Globe Staff)

By [Michael Whitmer](#)
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It reached a point a decade ago that avid supporters of George Wright Municipal Golf Course were going somewhere else to play, fed up with deteriorating conditions that had turned their Hyde Park treasure into a brown, burned-out embarrassment.

Greens were dead. Grass was hard to find, water for the course even harder. An irrigation system wasn't properly installed, rendering more than half of the sprinklers useless. Designed by Donald Ross and built during the Great Depression, what had been a gem for the City of Boston had become a joke, with rounds and annual memberships way down, and anger and frustration way up.

Fast forward to 2009, and grab a copy of the May 23 Golfweek. Turn to page 39, and you'll find the respected national magazine's list of the top 50 municipal courses in the United States. The usual suspects are at the top: Bethpage Black, site of next

week's US Open, is No. 1; Torrey Pines South, which had the Open last year, is third. But there's George Wright 14th, ahead of San Francisco's Harding Park, which is hosting the Presidents Cup in October, and Brown Deer Park in Milwaukee, home to a PGA Tour event since 1994.

George Wright's regulars have known about it for some time, but word is starting to spread: Give ol' George Wright a try if you've never been, and stop by again if you have. You'll be amazed at what you discover.

"This is the best I've ever seen it," said Jimmy Donoghue, a retired mail carrier who lives in Hyde Park and has been playing George Wright since 1975. "The course is really coming along. We're seeing the result of what can happen with good effort and management."

Said Steve Hickey, another Hyde Park resident and a frequent George Wright visitor for 30 years: "The shape of it right now, the tees, greens, and fairways, is far and away the best."

Rock bottom

The reclamation of George Wright began more than six years ago, when the City of Boston, which has always owned the course, decided to run the daily operations again, after leasing it to management companies for nearly 20 years. Tired of hearing complaints, city officials opted for total control. They had their work cut out.

"We basically had to start from scratch," said Dennis Roache, director for administration and finance with Boston Parks and Recreation. "The course wasn't what it used to be. We knew that. Improving the condition was first and foremost, but we also had to rebuild trust with our members. It was our goal over a couple of years to get this course back, and so far, so good. We've met everything we've set out to do."

It's been a long journey, though. Restoring a decaying course doesn't happen quickly. Putting a few key figures in place was the first priority: Scott Allen was hired in 2003 to become the head professional, and Len Curtin was brought in soon after as the greens superintendent. Curtin vividly remembers the first time he walked into the maintenance building with Allen: water was pouring in from leaks in the roof, none of the lights worked, and there was no equipment, because the city hadn't purchased any for the course yet.

"I thought, 'What am I getting myself into?'" said Curtin. "We were at rock bottom when we started, but I knew they were going to be patient, because generally

speaking, municipalities are patient with things like this, and if they see improvement, people are encouraged and they'll let you do your job."

Curtin also had been part of the grounds crew at The Country Club, which had undergone a major restoration before hosting the 1988 US Open, and knew what was involved in such a vast rebuilding project. So Curtin, a noted greens grower, went to work at George Wright, plotting a course of action that has proven successful: start with the greens, and work back to the tees. He aerated the greens frequently those first years, applying plenty of sand, and placed a cover over every green during the winter, when George Wright is closed.

By Curtin's count, it took almost three years, but the greens came in nicely, lush, smooth, and green, with so many of Ross's noted design features - false fronts, run-off chipping areas - clearly visible.

Grass needs water, so an ongoing project is fixing the irrigation system that was installed in the early part of the decade. When Curtin took over, more than 500 sprinkler heads didn't work; that number is down to roughly 50.

"I knew what kind of property this was. Being a Donald Ross course, the place was put together well," Curtin said. "Plus, it was a WPA project, so the drainage going through the golf course is like something out of the Hoover Dam, you can literally crawl through the pipes in the golf course. It's unbelievable. The bones of it are terrific."

Mass exodus

George Wright was the first public golf course in the country that cost \$1 million to build. Designed by Ross in the late 1920s initially as a private club, the job was shuttered when the Great Depression hit, then was renewed as a Works Progress Administration project a few years later, using as many as 1,000 laborers. With the property sitting on a rocky ledge, the project required massive amounts of blasting and dirt moving.

The course took its name from one of baseball's first stars, Hall of Fame shortstop George Wright, who was a member of the first professional baseball team, the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings. Wright then moved to Boston, and played for the Boston Red Stockings and the Boston Red Caps for the next 10 years. He died in Boston in 1937, a year before the course opened.

Its link to Ross and Wright couldn't help the course when things started to sour a decade ago. Granted, the property's ledge makes it a challenge to grow grass and

have it thrive throughout the summer, but it was apparent that neglect was setting in, sending customers away. Donoghue said he still played at George Wright, but had the course mostly to himself. Hickey gave up his annual membership; part of a weekly Wednesday group of eight players, they found other places to play.

"We said 'You know what? We can go anywhere and play, we don't need this,' " Hickey said. "I brought nobody up here back then. It was a very frustrating time."

That began to change when Curtin was hired. Craving some attention, George Wright began to flourish, reminding many regulars of what it was like years ago, when they'd wait 90 minutes for a weekday tee time.

Resurrection

Golfweek's ranking was a pleasant surprise, and more validation came last week, when the Massachusetts Golf Association held a qualifier for the state amateur at George Wright. Max Champion was the only player under par (4-under 66), but to Allen and Curtin, it was what some of the area's best players were saying that meant more than the scores they were shooting.

"Guys were walking off the course saying how great the course is," Allen said. "It really is gratifying, especially when we have the MGA things here. I've worked at private golf clubs around the area and I know a lot of people. This golf course has a great reputation. It's always had the bones, it just needed the attention."

Any money the city makes at George Wright goes right back into the facility. According to numbers provided by Roache, the number of rounds in 2008 (35,116) was more than 9,000 higher than in 2005 (26,042). Revenues in 2009 already exceed those in 2008 through May, with the course showing an operating surplus of \$187,121. The roof on the maintenance building has been fixed, and a new sprayer has been purchased.

Said Bernie Lynch, assistant commissioner for Boston Parks and Recreation: "We're operating it as a business, albeit a public business. They have to stand on their own. Everyone knows things have to be watched. The numbers are tight, and they're meant to be tight because we don't want to charge too much. In the end, people realize there's a value to controlling all aspects, as opposed to having to manage somebody controlling your property. It simplifies the playing field."

Perceived as a gamble back in 2003, the city's decision to take over the course has proven beneficial to those who enjoy George Wright and want to see it succeed. It

took a few years, but the vision was clear: Let's make this Donald Ross layout as good as it can be.

"There's still a lot more that can be done," said Roache. "Lenny's got this place looking spectacular right now, and we've brought it back to a respectable level. Now it's time to take that next step. This place can be whatever it wants."

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