

Shining link in the Emerald Necklace: Devine golf course in Franklin Park

By **Tom Mulvoy, Reporter Staff**

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City jewel: The third green at the Devine Course at Franklin Park beckons from 421 yards away as this free-swinger finishes his tee-shot backswing. Photo by Bill Forry

As the sun slowly climbed into the August-blue eastern sky on Tuesday morning, Russell Heller and Dennis Roache sat down in the small patio outside the clubhouse at the William J. Devine Golf Course at Franklin Park to talk a bit about the expanse of fetching greensward in front of them.

“We do what we can when we can with what we have,” said Heller, the green superintendent at what is popularly known as the Franklin Park course. “We level, we strip, we re-sod, we pay attention to what’s in front of us.” Roache, the general manager of the Devine layout as well as the city’s other golf course, George Wright in Hyde Park, while noting that in recent years the number of rounds played has averaged 35,000, said that the improvements across the breadth of the golf course have more or less followed the guidelines of a master plan that was published in 1998. “The plan set out some specific goals and as time has gone by, many of them have been met, piece by piece, like some of the areas around the tees and greens.”

The marked improvement on several of the teeing grounds, notably the par-three fourth hole and par-four sixth, is one testament to the dedicated work that Heller and his grounds crew of permanent and seasonal workers keep putting into making the course more and more attractive to those who come by for a game.

It was not that long ago that a player approaching the fourth tee, which sits high above the bunker-enclosed green some 190 yards away at the bottom of a steep hill, would be using one of his clubs to hammer his tee into the surface of a small and ragged patch of hard dirt. Today, golfers tee off from a flat section of turf that is mindful of a well-tended front lawn. The same is the case at the sixth hole and several others.

But the Devine course, with a mailing address in Dorchester, offers more than attractive tees over its 116 acres, which are set inside the 527-acre Franklin Park, a key section of Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace that is a neighbor to five city neighborhoods, Dorchester, Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, Roslindale, and Forest Hills. On Tuesday morning, the layout, a product of the architectural genius of the famed early 20th-century golf course designer Donald Ross, was verdantly clothed as far as the eye could see ("We are lucky for the setting we have" said Heller looking out to large sections of the course that get 100 percent of the sun's delivery every day). A playing tour of the course a few days earlier was a walk across neatly kept grass-full fairways, playable bunkers, and greens that are tricky but puttable. In short, the Devine course is a treat for the golfing set, a what-you-see-is-what-you-get par 70 of some 6,000 yards in length from the back tees that is an attractive, straightforward challenge for golfers of all ages and talents. As for amenities, PGA professional Kevin Frawley offers players a fully stocked golf shop (and opportunities for lessons) and the inside grille makes lunches to order at reasonable prices.

The course at Franklin Park, which was established in 1896 as the second-oldest public track in the country (after Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx), has seen its ups – in the early years, legendary golfers like Bobby Jones and Francis Ouimet logged time on the grounds, which were also favored by the business and political elite – and its downs – from mid-20th century on, especially the decades of the '60s, '70s, and '80s, the course found itself in the midst of dramatic social changes and a city in crisis over school busing; at one point, only four holes were playable.

But thanks to a small, dedicated group of local golfers, whose members held the fort over the long decline, and the city, which, under Mayors Raymond L. Flynn and, for the past 20 years, Thomas M. Menino, moved to reclaim the course, and its cousin in Hyde Park, for the common good, golfers in 2013 have for the taking a gem of link in the Emerald Necklace at Franklin Park.

And that "taking" comes at a modest cost for the times: City residents pay a greens fee of \$35 for 18 holes, and \$22 for 9 holes; non-residents pay \$40 and \$25. There are lower rates for seniors and juniors. Golf cart rates are \$20 per person for 18 holes, and \$11 for 9 holes. For more such information, go to cityofbostongolf.com.

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