

St. Louis Country Club

As you drive onto the grounds of St. Louis CC you immediately become aware you are entering a club with some very serious golfers. Sunningdale Road, Gleneagles Road, St. Andrews Lane and Pine Valley Drive are just some of the paths you take on the winding drive toward the clubhouse. You look left, then right and you catch your first glimpse of the course. Your pulse quickens as you see the range, knowing the first tee is close-by.

You recall the comments made by Gene Sarazen as he stood on the first tee in the 1947 Open. Resplendant in his plus-fours he gazed at the thick rough on the left and then to Barnes Road on the right - Out of Bounds - and commented to those standing nearby "I've seen wider bowling lanes." Part of you can't wait to test your skill, while your subconscious whispers "better stay left". As you pass the 18th on your right you envision Lou Worsham stopping Sam Snead from putting as he calls for a measurement. The delay, a seemingly minor one, so un-nerves Sam that he errors on the 21-inch putt and with it another chance at his Open. Approaching the pro shop you see the first tee and beyond, the range, this time from the opposite end. You recall stories of Bobby Jones from the 1921 Amateur, hitting in the driving contest which was a part of each event then, taking his hickory-shafted driver back ever-so-slightly longer to gain a little extra yardage as he drove the ball over 250 yards to win the event. This is hallowed ground. This is where golf history has been made. This is The Country Club.

If you speak with the areas top players, you hear the same refrain over and over, their choice for the top club, their favorite layout is St. Louis. So it is that your expectations are high. You've walked Bellerive at the PGA and seen the ponds and multi-colored flowers which dot the course. You've also walked Boone Valley with it's native grasses, waterfalls and granite wall. You've played courses like Persimmon Woods and Meadowbrook and seen the rock formations surrounding island greens. You've roamed Old Warson with it's majestic views and splendid lakes. You've seen courses which rival nurseries for fauna, and would be a landscape architect's dream. Some of them might qualify as ads for the Home & Gardens channel! You've played the areas top courses complete with "signature" holes. St. Louis CC is none of those. You won't find numerous ponds or lakes on the course, nor railroad-tie embankments or water-fountains; just a lone pond, which hardly even comes into play, and a stream which meanders through the course in serpentine fashion. What you will find is a golf course that has all the subtleties that only a master like Charles Blair Macdonald could muster; simplistic, daring, dramatic and very challenging. Built in a day before "Signature" holes, to Macdonald, the entire course was his signature. Like a beautiful woman, much about this course is understated. No cosmetic surgery required, no heavy blush or dramatic eye-liner. She looks good first thing in the morning!

St. Louis is recognized as one of the 100 oldest clubs in America, having been founded in 1892. The original site was just north of Lambert Airport on the Collier Farm, and the existing home was used as the original clubhouse. But golf was not played here as polo was the main attraction, having been brought west by college men returning from eastern schools where they had first been exposed to this unique sport. As a result the logo for the Club is not golf clubs and balls, but horseshoes and a riding crop! It wasn't until the club moved to Clayton in 1895, with plans for a golf course in addition to polo, tennis and other sports, that golf would be played in the area.

When the first match was contested over the Country Club grounds on October 8, 1896 at the Hanley Road site, it marked the first official golf matches in the area. The initial 9 hole course in the area had been designed by Jim Foulis, the winner of the US Open that same year, and the golf professional who had served under Macdonald at the Chicago GC. The course was described as one of the best in the country.

Macdonald didn't design many courses; 11 are all exist throughout the Americas. National Golf Links, Sleepy Hollow, Piping Rock, North Palm Beach, Old White GC at The Greenbrier, Blind Brook, Yale GC, Mid-Ocean GC in Bermuda, The Creek Club and Chicago GC. His National Golf Links is considered the first truly great American course and was the one committees from around the country visited before attempting one on their own! Sadly, another six courses built by Macdonald and his partner Seth Raynor have not survived the years. Only the two he built for the Chicago GC were completed before the turn of the century, and he had completed only two others before St. Louis in 1914, with his last coming in 1925. The Chicago and St. Louis Clubs were the only two he completed in the midwest, as he concentrated mainly on eastern courses. It has been stated that Macdonald never charged a fee for his work - but he did expect a lifetime membership in the club - however Raynor was not as generous, and he was paid for his efforts. Macdonald was also the first person to coin the term "golf architect" to describe his work in 1902, and the description has stuck ever since. Four of the courses above are listed in the Top 100 Best Classical Courses, while Raynor, an outstanding architect on his own, has another seven. St. Louis is in very rare company indeed.

Macdonald would have liked to be remembered as the father of American Golf, but it was not to be. That title fell onto John Reid and the original members of the Apple Tree Gang at St. Andrews in Yonkers. But Macdonald has been termed the autocrat of golf in America - he believed that his stay in St. Andrews gave him a special insight into golf and that he, more than anyone else, could create the perfect golf conditions in America. He set out to make that his legacy.

He was perhaps the first great amateur in America - having won the initial US Amateur in 1895 - and with a personality so strong and domineering that changes to his courses just didn't happen without his express permission. In fact, during his lifetime, the only changes done to the Chicago GC were suggested by Macdonald himself.

He was keenly aware that for golf to succeed it would need a national governing body. Once again, his persistence paid-off as he pushed for, and got, the formation of the United States Golf Association. With his ever-present partner, Seth Raynor, they moved from site to site lending their considerable talents to select projects. Raynor, one of the most respected of all architects, was also the man initially chosen to design Cypress Point. Only his untimely death in 1926 prevented him from completing his task. Raynor was the detail man for Macdonald, insuring that the completed course was not only aesthetically pleasing, but used his engineering skills to solve the many involved problems which arose at the sites.

If you have been fortunate enough to play the Chicago GC you will notice that it definitely favors a player with a fade. All of the trouble, and out of bounds, lie to the left of the holes. Macdonald did not lay St. Louis out for faders-only, though many of the holes suggest that would be the preferred shot. But to make the mistake of shaping your shot to follow the terrain would make for a very long day.

In his day, Macdonald's architectural style would have been considered rather daunting. While the natural lay-of-the-land dictated many of the bumps and mounding in Scotland, to create these was considered rather unusual. But Macdonald, and a few years later Alister Mackenzie, would give character, style and grace to their designs in this manner.

But like most 85 year-old courses, the terrain of the Club today is different than originally designed. The trees which provided only minor annoyances in years past, today force you to be able to shape your shot to hit the fairways. Pictures from the 1921 Amateur show no trees at all along the left side of the 14th tee, a hole which today is lined with over-hanging limbs. Modern technology has also taken its toll on the course, as it has on many of the great, classic layouts. At just over 6,500 yards, to experience it as it was played in 1921 at the Amateur, you would probably hit a 3 iron off the tees, and to simulate the 1947 US Open, you would hit a 4 wood. But regardless of the distance, it never was a John Daly-like course - "length is it's own reward, but length without accuracy should be punished" was one of Bobby Jones' favorite sayings, and here accuracy is the key.

There are other little signs which tell you that this is not a modern layout. The tees are well within walking distance from the greens, sometimes so close you must wait for others to putt-out before hitting. The bunkers on several holes would appear to be very unusual distances from the tees - seemingly designed more to make you think about your shot than hoping to catch the errant one. There are cross-bunkers on several holes - placed there to add strategic value to the hole - challenging you to carry them in an heroic shot, or take the less aggressive approach and play an alternate line to the green. Upon reaching the putting surface, many - at first glance - appear fairly level; it's only after your first stroke that you realize that your first impression wasn't even close. Like other great courses, the greens are where the game is ultimately played-out.

There is another aspect to the course which reflects it's early birth - each of the holes is named - something, sadly, that is done infrequently these days. Having the ability to refer to a hole by name gives it personality, character, with a visual description tied to it. The terms "Eden" or "Hill Top" mean more than calling them the "third" or the "tenth"! The holes are named as follows; on the front, Preparatory, Double Plateau, Eden, St. Andrews, Punch Bowl, Blind, Shorty, Cape and Ladue; while the back is Hill Top, Valley, Crater, Club House, Dome, Narrows, Redan, Log Cabin, Oasis. Just reciting them conjures up impressions of each, while recalling memories of your last round.

While much of the history of the club relates to the National Championships it has hosted - five in all - there have also been many outstanding players from the club. Stuart Stickney and his brother Albert were among the early champions from St. Louis, both winning City Championships. Stuart was also the first St. Louisan to compete in the US Amateur, having done so in 1897, and in addition to his City Titles, he won District and State crowns. He was also among those who worked toward the formation of other clubs in town, having recognized that this type of competition was healthy for the game. Later, when St. Louis-member Dwight Davis, the recently appointed City Parks Commissioner, was seeking help in forming the area's first public links at Forest Park in 1912, Stuart was one of the first to offer his assistance.

But the first member to achieve international recognition was Albert Bond Lambert. He went to the Paris Olympics in 1900 and while there competed in a golf competition held in conjunction with the Games. These were not Olympic Golf matches, they would be held at Glen Echo four years later, but his title received full-page coverage in not only the local papers, but throughout

Europe as well! The Cup he won for this honor now rests at the USGA museum in New Jersey. If the name Lambert sounds familiar, it should. He and several other St. Louis members were among the original backers of Charles Lindbergh's flight to Paris, and the main reason why his plane was named the "Spirit of St. Louis". And of course, our own Lambert Field was named in his honor.

Several outstanding women have represented the Club in area and national competitions. The first ladies to challenge the national ranks were Edith Collins and Mrs. Lilburn McNair who ventured to Chicago in 1903 for the US Amateur. But the most talented of the early players was Grace Semple, who captured the first Missouri Women's Amateur in 1915, and competed in several US Women's Amateur and US Women's Open, doing so from 1906 to 1915, reaching the semi-finals in 1912. But perhaps the most outstanding lady golfer from the Club would be Audrey Faust Wallace. She would win five District titles in an eight year span from 1924-32, and would compete in the Trans-Miss, the Women's Western, the US Women's Amateur and the British Ladies Amateur. Her game was almost flawless, and over a 10-year period she was the Queen of area golf. But there was much more to Mrs. Wallace than just golf; Rich Craden, long-time assistant at St. Louis knew her and would give her an occasional lesson. He commented that there was not a finer lady he had known, and her generosity was un-matched. More recently Ellen Conant captured the Ladies District title three consecutive years in the late 50's.

The Country Club, as it was referred to in the papers, was among the top clubs in the country and was the stopping-off point for many of the games top professionals. Willie Anderson, Freddie McLeod, Jim Foulis, Stuart Maiden, Jim Barnes, Ralph Guldahl and Dave Douglas have all called St. Louis their home. Between them, they would win 9 US Opens, 1 Masters, 1 British Open and 2 PGA titles - 13 Major titles - and compete on two Ryder Cup teams. It may be one of the few courses in the country, perhaps the only one, who can boast that their Professionals have won the Career Grand Slam among them!

The Club has had many ardent friends among the USGA and as a result has hosted five Championship events in it's history; the 1921 and 1960 US Amateurs, the 1925 and 1972 US Women's Amateur in addition to the 1947 US Open. It was slated to host the 1994 US Women's Amateur but following the Shoal Creek incident in 1992, and the knee-jerk reaction of the USGA at that time, the club withdrew it's application for the event. Still some of the nations greatest players have tested their skills over the layout; Jack Nicklaus, Dean Beman, Ben Hogan, Sam Snead, Jimmy Demaret, Bobby Jones, Glenna Collett, Alexa Stirling, Francis Ouimet, Chick Evans, Bobby Locke, Paul Runyan, Lawson Little, Gene Sarazen, Dutch Harrison, Virginia Van Wie, Opal Hill, Harvie Ward, Phil Rogers, Hollis Stacy, Carol Semple Thompson, Mary Ann Budke, Beth Daniel and Jess Guilford. The events in 1921 and 1925 marked the first time those USGA events were held west of the Mississippi.

Playing the course with head pro Steve Spray was a combination history and golf lesson. As pro here since 1975, he has played the course as much as many members, and knows it's subtleties better than most. He has tremendous respect for it, and knows that he is the most recent in a long list of outstanding professionals who have graced the grounds.

First and foremost, this is a players course. This is for golfers who enjoy playing a variety of shots throughout the round, who rely more on their crisp iron play than their ability to hit the ball 280 yards. It is for those who can read the subtle rolls in the greens, along with having a good sense of

“pace” that allows for the occasional birdie. It is never dull or monotonous; every shot offers new challenges, every round seems special.

If you were to look over the card of the course, it doesn't look that intimidating. The first hole is a straight-away par-4 of 400 yards. It is called Preparatory, but don't try to prepare for the other seventeen here. The narrow fairway begs you to stay left for OB awaits those who flirt with the right side, but the bunkers which surround the sloping green, several of which are very severe, demand accurate approaches.

The second, as noted earlier, was originally a short, strategic par-4. It is today a 225-yard uphill demanding par 3! The green is a double plateau with a large swale slicing across the huge green. If the pin is back and you come-up a club short, two puttings would be considered outstanding. Once again, the green is well bunkered on the left and has a lone bunker on the right to catch the faders.

The third, another par-3 of 203 yards, is the traditional “Eden” hole of Macdonald designs. It is perhaps the most beautiful hole on the course. While the tee shot must carry the only significant water on the course, and it doesn't really come into play, the green is surrounded by six traps which await the errant shot. Usually playing into the prevailing wind, the 3rd will test even the best, calling for accuracy, distance control and confidence.

The fourth is the toughest hole on the front, at least from a handicap rating, a 413 yard par-4. It doesn't look intimidating at first glance. But a huge swale dissects the fairway about 240 yards out, just far enough to catch the average drive and direct it toward the left rough, and wide enough that the drive of 250 hits into the uphill side and dies. From the fairway the green looks relatively level, but it is deceiving. The green runs away from the player left to right and the depth ranges from approximately 10 yards on the left edge to 30 on the right. With subtle undulations and some great pin locations, the well-trapped green had been called one of the best in the area.

The fifth is a relatively short par-5, only 505 yards. The hole has undergone many changes over the years. The green is in its original location, as it was in 1913. But for the 1947 Open it was moved some 42 yards back, up on the hill where the tee for the 6th hole is today. It was relocated to its original site about 8 years ago and a few other changes were added to improve the hole. Original writings indicate that several bunkers were in the fairway short of the green and these have been re-created. In addition, moguls have been added to catch the short approach and force a more heroic shot for those going for the green in two. Standing on the sixth tee and looking back down the 5th fairway you see what an outstanding hole it is today. One interesting feature is a deep bunker on the right side of the fairway, about 240 yards out, just at the right spot to catch the errant fade and diminish your chances for par.

If you can picture the sixth hole, a 353-yard dogleg right, with no trees down the right-hand-side, you get some idea of the original hole design. Today it calls for a blind tee shot to the split fairway which ends about 260 yards out and falls into a small valley, calling for an accurate short-iron, into an extremely difficult double-plateau green. Gazing at the green from the fairway the outstanding design of the bunkers and mounding on this hole create a design that is spell-binding. Though the green is not as large as the 2nd, the same demanding approach is required.

The seventh is the “Shorty” hole, a 155-yard well-bunkered gem, typical of the “short” hole unique to Macdonald designs. The horseshoe shaped ledges on the green, with a swale cut in the middle, make the green extremely difficult. Tee shot to the elevated green frequently land short into the large bunker at the base of the hill, forcing an uphill explosion almost 20 feet above you. With the pin cut on the right, if your tee shot should find the left side, you had best be ware, many a putt has gone down the swale and, hit firm enough to get up the other side, picked up speed and left the putting surface!

The eighth is the “Cape” hole; so called after the 14th at the National Golf Links, which forces a player to hit across a bay with the green perched very close to the water. At St. Louis a heavily wooded area is substituted for the bay, with a creek winding its way near the edge of the fairway coming ever-so-close to the green. At the 1921 Amateur Bobby Jones attempted to “cut-the-dogleg” here and bit off a bit more than he should have in his match with Englishman Willie Hunter, and would lose the hole and later the quarterfinal match. The trees today are much too tall to attempt to challenge them and go for the green, tough when Steve Spray first arrived, he could clear them and did land on the green a few times with his tee shot. A slight cut shot leaves you with about 100 yards into a small, well guarded green with bunkers and the creek snuggling up to the green.

The ninth is a wonderful hole which sharply rolls from right to left. From a blind tee shot uphill, the creek cuts across the fairway about 330 yards out, forcing you to position your second shot on this par-5 if you hope to secure at least a putt for a birdie. Many shots are hit from a right-to-left lie in the fairway, while the green sits on a left-to-right angle. With trees guarding the left side, and the slope taking your shots to the right, your second here is crucial. Designed to receive a short iron, the green is similar to the seventh with a ledge surrounding the left side of the green, funneling balls to the right. At 515-yards it is the longest hole on the front, but a good tee shot gives you an opportunity to “get one back” before the turn.

The tenth; dogleg right par 4 which takes you downhill then back up to a small green. Hit driver here, or even a good 3-wood and you’re through the fairway - dead! A slight fade will put you dead center for a 120 yard uphill shot, but don’t miss on the left.

The 11th, a dogleg left, makes the return just to the left of the 10th tee. A slight fade will leave you with a 130 yards into a well-bunkered green. The fairway slopes right to left, so a hook can leave you in dire straits.

The 12th when viewed from the tee, especially near sundown, with the sun casting long shadows off the mounds and across the green provide a dramatic view. Though only a 178 yard par 3 - a solid 6 iron will get you home - the bunkers on both sides of the green must be avoided if you are to have any chance at par.

The 13th is a gently rolling left to right fairway leading to a very tough green on this par-5. You must hit it straight, or with a slight fade in order to keep it in the fairway. But your second shot here is the key. At 568-yards, getting home in two is almost out of the question - plus there is a swale in front of the green - so positioning your second is vital to giving you a shot at a birdie. You must avoid three bunkers, one left and two right, plus the trees on the right to set up a 9-iron or wedge into this back to front sloping green.

The 14th has you hitting out of a “shoot” with large trees down the left, effectively blocking that side of the fairway. But a good shot down the right side will leave you an 8 or 9-iron into a kidney-shaped green. 40-50 foot putts are common here as players tend to leave their approach short, or risk running through the green into the rough.

The par-5 15th is another of those devilish holes that force you to hit the right kind of shot. The fairway slopes right to left, with OB on the right and a grove of trees down in the rough on the left. Hitting it straight can still leave you in the left rough, but a fade will keep you in the fairway, though the ball will be somewhat above your feet for your second into the seemingly-reachable 499 yard hole. But your shot is not only a blind second, but there is OB right and over the green, and bunkers down the middle that must be carried to give yourself a short pitch to the pin. The green is large, especially for a par-5, but the pin locations demand a high soft shot to get close. A 3-wood or 2-iron screaming toward the green is likely to leave the owner less than happy with the results. And if the back center pin location is used, and thankfully it wasn't the day we played, getting down in two from anywhere on the green would be considered outstanding.

The 16th is the Redan hole, so named after the 15th hole at North Berwick in Scotland. Redan holes have similar characteristics in common; a par 3 with bunkers usually left and right just short, and a green which runs away from you on a diagonal. Very tough club selection, and equally tough to get the ball close. This 183-yard hole is no exception. A 5-iron is the club, though a 6 could get you there, but long left and short right are common misses here.

The 380-yard 17th is a dogleg right with a lone bunker at 260. Once again, the fairway runs right to left toward the trees, while the hole is shaped from left to right. A slight draw started at the bunker should leave you with a 120 yards into a heart-shaped green.

The 18th is perhaps the unkindest cut of all. At 410-yards it gently turns right to left, calling like a Siren for a slight draw. But with a huge “knob” in the fairway on the left, you could very well be addressing your ball at belt-level for that 160-yard approach. Keeping it down the right side, even slightly in the rough, is preferably to the left, though that's just the beginning. The green sits some 10 feet below the level of the fairway and a long, narrow bunker awaits shots that come up a club short. Sitting in a natural-bowl, shots which carry the green result in a difficult downhill chip to a fast green.

This grand lady does not bend to suit your game; rather she awaits your best, to see if your game is up to the task. Nothing here is bold or overdone, though some features might be considered unusual by today's architectural standards. Back to back par-3's (though when built, the 2nd originally played as a short, strategic par-4), and greens with 15-foot flagsticks; required because they sit below the level of the fairway. Right-to-left holes that seem to call for a slight draw, but demand a tight fade to be played correctly, and if you want to see par. A par-3 - the 16th - that has probably given players as much fits as the 12th at Augusta; a green that slices diagonally away from you, requiring not only an accurate shot, but with precise distance control. Yes, Ole' C.B. must have been the one who first used the phrase heard frequently at USGA events these days, “...I don't want to embarrass the best players in the world, I only want to identify them...”! The first US Amateur Champion must have thought that we all had the potential to reach such a plateau, and built courses to help us achieve that lofty goal. He teases you with seemingly generous fairways and large greens, but then added subtle breaks and sharp contours that mystify all but the most talented; allowing only years of experience, and most likely many bogey's, for you

to select the proper line. But most wouldn't trade a single bogey for a birdie, even-up, for the opportunity to play this beauty weekly.

When a Club dares to take the name of the city in which it resides, it makes a bold statement. Atlanta CC, Chicago CC, Denver CC, Kansas City CC, San Francisco CC, Los Angeles CC; not only are they saying that they were most likely here first, but that they're proud enough of their club and their course to have it wear the banner for the area. St. Louis can not only make the claim as the areas first club, but they can hold their head high in any gathering of great clubs and courses!