



HISTORY & CHARM

FEW CLUBS CLING TO THEIR HISTORY AS TIGHTLY AS TOLEDO COUNTRY CLUB. SOME THINGS HAVEN'T CHANGED MUCH SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN 1897. CHANGES THAT ARE MADE ARE DONE WITH A CLOSE EYE ON THE PAST. **BY JON HALE**

While it may not have the same ring as “Jewel of the Nile,” the expression “Jewel of the Maumee” might be an apt description for Toledo Country Club, one the oldest private clubs in the Midwest, if not the country.

“I call it a great members’ golf course. It’s a true shot-makers course,” says long-time head pro Don Kotnik. “Tree-lined with very small greens. For the average player it’s really a good test of golf.”

Situated on approximately 100 acres and coming in at just over 6,400 yards from the championship tees, Toledo CC’s narrow layout boasts what Kotnik believes are the three most beautiful finishing holes in the state – holes that happen to be the exact same ones that witnessed the club’s first golf swings 110 years ago.

Founded in 1897 with the purchase of 30 acres of prime land along the Maumee River – five miles inland from Lake Erie – Toledo Country Club officially came into being on February 20th when The Country Club Company met for the first time. A handwritten “Record of Proceedings” of that meeting of 10 original “Incorporators, Stockholders and Directors” (reproduced on the club’s Web site) documents the group’s fledgling efforts to serve as “subscribers of articles of incorporation, desiring for themselves, their associates, successors and assigns, to

become a body” and lay the groundwork for today’s country club.

The original three-hole layout was created by British Open champion Willie Park Jr. – holes that are preserved today as Nos. 16, 17 and 18. Six additional holes were soon finished, and club historical records show that by 1899 golf lessons cost members “seventy-five cents, while golf clubs were \$2.50.”

Scorecards pictured on the club’s Web site and dated 1898 and 1901 pay tribute to a time when it was customary for golf holes to be named. Toledo Country Club players in the late 19th century teed off on Bend o’the River (No. 1) and proceeded to play To Nor’ard, Thorn Tree, Zion, White Wings, Easy, Southerly, Ravine and Roadside. Three years later, only a couple of holes retained the same monikers, as others were re-dubbed with names like Straightaway, Toboggan and Last Chance.

An almost constant state of upgrades and renovation began immediately after the original course opened, beginning with the construction of the clubhouse designed by George S. Mills and built by Henry Spieker, who broke ground that first year and completed construction in 1901. The same building, with amenities ranging at one time or another from a bowling alley to employee living quarters, is still the center of club life.

“The main dining room is actually the same as it was then,” says Kotnik. “And our men’s locker room has always been located right there.” General manager Tom Wiland says an upgrade to the men’s locker room, which started in November, is complete and he’s received calls from other club managers with questions about how Toledo actually pulled it off.

“That locker room renovation was fully-funded by voluntary donations from the membership, with no assessment,” Wiland says. “I’ve had calls from quite a few other managers who just can’t believe we have that kind of support.”

Within a decade of opening, the club had added nine more holes and a swimming pool, cementing a family-friendly atmosphere years before most country clubs would consider expanding membership beyond men.

“We’re proud that we’ve always been so family-oriented,” says Kotnik. “We’re really the family club in Toledo.”

An active youth swim team calls the club’s new pool home each summer, while the tennis courts host not only youth tennis, but also regular men’s and women’s league and recreational play. And Toledo Country Club features an activity rarely found at clubs not fortunate enough to be seaside – sailing lessons from docks located just off the clubhouse lawn.

“With Lake Erie as close as it is, it makes it very attractive and the Maumee River is really known as a big recreation area anyway,” Kotnick says.

Family activities extend to the holidays throughout the year. An annual July 4th celebration features games, a cookout and fireworks viewed by as many as 600 from the club’s amphitheatre behind the clubhouse that overlooks the river. The amphitheatre also serves as a seating area for spectators watching tournaments as players finish.

Kotnik began his golf career at Toledo Country Club as a student at the University of Toledo in the mid 1960s, when the club was the home course for the school’s golf team. In 1970, he became assistant pro for two seasons until a head pro position at nearby Highland Meadows lured him away. He returned seven months later, and has served as the Toledo’s head pro ever since, having recently celebrated his 34th anniversary.

In 1979 the club’s practice range was moved on-site from a mile away and the existing golf shop and office facility was built in 1980, just as the course was redesigned and upgraded by Toledo architect Arthur Hills. Hills was commissioned again to rebunker the course in the mid 1990s and new irrigation lakes were added in 2003.

A fairly steady membership complement of 300 golf and 130 social members has allowed Toledo Country Club the freedom to maintain its position on the cutting edge, while featuring unique

benefits other clubs cannot always offer.

“We’ve been very fortunate because we’ve been able to maintain membership, with some attrition that every club goes through, of course,” Kotnik says. “Still, we’ve really been very consistent in our numbers over the years.”

One unique feature at Toledo Country Club is the practice of not requiring tee times to play – a policy that has been standard procedure from the very beginning. Kotnik believes the practice affords a more relaxed overall atmosphere, as well as less waiting and closer member relationships.

“When you have tee times, it seems like you end up playing with the same foursomes all the time,” he says. “This way we start in mini shotguns – you go to four, you go to five, you start on 10, and we can match these two players with these two if we need. It helps our members get to interact with a lot more people.”

The club has also had an active caddie program from the very start. Current caddie master, Jim Daniels, annually oversees a crew of 50 junior and senior high school kids.

“We have a great deal of support for the caddie program,” says Kotnik. “It’s a big tradition here and something we certainly take a lot of pride in.”

Dining and hosting many member functions also remain very important to the life of the club and with the river as a backdrop, the country club annually hosts many weddings, receptions and events. In 2005, the food and beverage manager received national recognition for wedding planning, and the National Association of Catering Executives recognized the club’s

annual Lobster Fest in 2006.

Wiland also praises the remarkable relationship between members and staff as one of the biggest factors in the club’s success.

“This is my fourth country club, and I’m constantly impressed by this incredible relationship that in my opinion is beyond explanation,” he says. “From holiday parties thrown for the staff by members to a college fund, it’s just unbelievable.”

Settling firmly into the 21st century with little physical expansion room left, Toledo Country Club nonetheless continues to formulate plans for future improvements. A committee constantly reviews every aspect of club operations, and several years ago the board of trustees authorized formation of the “1897 Society.”

Reported by the club’s Web site as a volunteer organization of “past, present and future members,” the 1897 Society is built around the concept of “voluntary deferred giving.” Membership is open to those who make a monetary commitment to the club within their estate plan, helping to ensure the continued success of the club for future generations. ■

TOLEDO COUNTRY CLUB

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The course has spectacular views of the Maumee River and plays across rolling terrain with natural ponds, narrow fairways, mature trees and small greens. Originally designed by British Open Champion Willie Park Jr. and later redesigned by Arthur Hills, the course offers a professional and rewarding experience for avid and occasional golfers.

The club was founded in 1897 and in addition to the course has a practice facility, swimming pool, tennis, sailing, dining and year-round family events.