

Hanse helps WGC expose Ross's picture

Bill Doyle, Worcester Telegram & Gazette
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Legend has it that **Donald Ross** didn't agree to design the nine-hole Whitinsville Golf Club until he was offered his 18-hole rate.

Gil Hanse, another golf course architect who is in high demand, also needed some convincing four years ago to develop a master plan to restore Whitinsville.

Hanse renovated TPC Boston, home of the Deutsche Bank Championship each Labor Day weekend. He restored The Country Club in Brookline, which will host the U.S. Amateur in August to celebrate the 100th anniversary of **Francis Ouimet's** U.S. Open victory at the club. Now he's designing a golf course in Rio de Janeiro for the 2016 Olympics when golf will be contested in the Games for the first time since 1904. Rest assured that Hanse has plenty of other design projects, too many to all be mentioned here. He can afford to be picky about the job offers he accepts.

So when greens chairman and perennial club champion **Art Fitzgerald** called Hanse to ask him to restore Whitinsville to what Ross had in mind when he designed the private course that opened in 1925, he wasn't interested.

Ben Crenshaw, the two-time Masters champion, U.S. Ryder Cup captain at TCC in 1999 and a long-time fan of Whitinsville GC, urged him to change his mind.

Four years ago, Hanse devised a master plan and superintendent **David Johnson** has implemented many of his ideas. In March, Golfweek magazine ranked Whitinsville among its top 100 classic golf courses for the first time. Whitinsville joined the list at No. 97 and was the only golf course in Central Massachusetts among the top 100.

During a downpour in the fall of 2009, Hanse walked six holes at Whitinsville with Johnson and the greens committee. Then they all met in the clubhouse. Hanse was so intrigued by the course, after the meeting he convinced Johnson to go back out to walk the other three holes even though the rain hadn't subsided.

Hanse relied upon overhead photos of WGC from the early 1930s and an original sketch of the golf course located at the Donald Ross Library at Pinehurst CC in North Carolina.

"He said he didn't want to change anything," Johnson said, "he just wanted to expose the painting that Donald Ross had painted here."

When Hanse made his most recent visit to WGC in the fall of 2010, Golfweek architecture editor **Bradley Klein** accompanied him. Johnson remembers Klein saying that WGC was fortunate not to have had the money to make changes to the course over the years, so Hanse didn't have to undo some unwise alterations.

Whitinsville is wide open and hilly, but Hanse recommended removing more trees and expanding fairways and greens to make the course more visually pleasing. On the par-5 first hole, seven pine trees were removed and about 20 yards of rough were replaced by fairway to bring bunkers on the left side more into play.

In 2006, before Hanse was hired, Johnson removed more than 1,000 trees from the exterior of the third and fourth and fifth holes to allow the sun and air in and provide a more scenic view. The third green no longer dies each year due to a lack of airflow. Hanse had Johnson remove 37 more trees from the interior of the course. The size of the greens were increased by 35-40 percent, but they're as severely sloped as ever. Each green is pitched from back to front so the rain runs off of them. Many putts do as well.

Johnson is returning the greens to their original square shapes and that can make for some interesting pin

placements for the members.

It took a while for members to appreciate Hanse's recommendations.

"At first," Johnson said, "there was a little bit of resistance, but once everybody learned how it plays and how it affects the golf course, everybody loves it."

Whitinsville is a golf club, not a country club. The clubhouse isn't fancy and there are no tennis courts or pool. WGC has 175 members, but general manager **Frank Iannetta** said only about 100 of them actually play. The club is not well known outside of the Blackstone Valley.

"The true enthusiasts know about it," Johnson said, "but the golfers in general, they don't even know the golf course is here."

Crenshaw, who used to play on the PGA Tour nearby at Pleasant Valley CC in Sutton, has referred to Whitinsville as a "hidden Ross gem." Iannetta called Johnson "our hidden gem."

Johnson, 38, grew up across the street from the Dudley Hill Golf Club, then called the Nichols College Golf Course. He played golf for two years at Shepherd Hill, then graduated from UMass-Amherst in 1997 with a degree in business as well as plant and soil science.

Johnson is in his ninth year at Whitinsville and his first as secretary of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of New England.

Johnson wakes up at 4 a.m. and arrives at WGC six days a week by 5 a.m. and leaves 11 or 12 hours later. He tries to take Sundays off to spend time at home in Dudley with his wife **Maryann** and daughters **Valerie**, 9, and **Samantha**, 7.

So what's WGC like at 5 a.m.?

"Peace on earth," he said. "It's the best thing in the world to see the sun come over the horizon every morning."

Other projects, including restoring bunkers, removing more trees and adding back tees, are under consideration.

The demanding, par-4 ninth hole, which plays 446 yards from the back tees, is considered one of Ross's best holes anywhere. It requires a long, accurate tee shot over water and a long approach to a well-bunkered, severely sloped green atop a steep hill. If the approach comes up just short, it could roll to the bottom of the hill, leaving a shot of 140 yards or so. Crenshaw ranks the ninth among Ross's best 18 holes anywhere.

Whitinsville is private, but for the second year in a row, the public can play 18 holes at selected times, even on weekends, for \$40 to \$60 by booking tee times at www.golfnow.com. Iannetta said about 100 golfers booked tee times through the website last year and two of them became members this year.