

The Grand River flows east to west across Michigan, its ancient meltwater channeling from tiny Somerset Township near the state's southern border toward its namesake Great Lake. Along the way, the aquatic artery passes through Grand Rapids — a moniker misnomer ever since the rapids were dammed and dimmed more than a century ago — and just south of suburban Belmont and the green oasis that is Blythefield Country Club.

The entrance to the club is nearly within sight of the river and its 225 acres are close enough to be both blessed and cursed with a gravel base and incredibly rocky soil. The base and the soil help the course drain remarkably well, superintendent **Collin Romanick** says, but after every rain the bunkers filled with pebbles and rocks, ancient sediment pushed to the surface, some as large as three or four inches around.

That would be enough of a problem for most clubs — especially when nearly 10 percent of all labor hours for a 25-person crew are allotted to raking through bunker sand and often removing those rocks by hand. For Blythefield, the host of the Meijer LPGA Classic since 2014, it was enough to spark a renovation.

“I started planting that seed maybe five years ago with my green committee,” Romanick says. “I had been kind of pushing certain things we need to do here but I really wanted to get the bunkers renovated. Selfishly, I really wanted to get them done so I didn’t field so many complaints.”

By the end of a major project that closed at least some of the course for almost three months — and was nearly delayed a year by a potentially rescheduled tournament — Romanick and his crew wound up with not only new bunkers but also a new short game practice facility, a new putting green and putting course,



Blythefield Country Club in Belmont, Michigan, is the site of the Meijer LPGA Classic.

Grand design

Rocky soil and pebble-packed bunkers helped spur a major renovation for Michigan's Blythefield Country Club.

By **Matt LaWell**

► Before and after looks at the Blytheheld Country Club ninth hole.

as many as half a dozen new tees on each hole, new internal drainage on nearly century-old greens, and the removal of what Romanick describes as “many” trees.

“My primary goal was the bunker renovation that the club really needed,” he says. “It just sort of turned into more than that when the membership adopted the entire plan and decided to do it all at once — which doesn’t always happen.”

The real genesis of the project extends to at least 2015, when golf course architect **Chris Wilczynski** of C.W. Golf Architecture finished a master plan for Egypt Valley Country Club, a 36-hole facility that hosted the Champions Tour Farmers Charity Classic for more than a decade and is situated less than 10 miles southeast of Blytheheld. Egypt Valley golf course manager **Jeff Holmes** is a friend of Romanick and, knowing that Romanick had started researching aerial course photos and drawings by original architects **William Langford** and **Theodore Moreau**, recommended he talk with Wilczynski.

“My original contact with Chris at this property, before we even thought about a master plan, was the short game area,” Romanick says. “It was never maintained properly and I asked him to draw something up. And he did that, and it was a great drawing. He spent more time on it than he probably should have, and I think that really opened up the door for Chris here.”

“I did a little sketch for a new short game complex, really basic stuff, and it started building the relationship,” Wilczynski says. He started talking with then-general manager **Todd Loughin**, whose position is now filled by **Bob Crissman**, and “they all collectively liked the way it was going and they made a recommendation to the green committee and the board to hire me to do a master plan. It was just me developing that relationship and waiting until the timing is right.



Sometimes, I’ll talk to clubs for a year, two years, three years before they pull the trigger.”

Wilczynski completed the master plan in fall 2017 and the board approved and adopted it early the next year. Budget setting and funding followed, and Wilczynski developed detailed construction drawings in early 2019 to tee off the bid process. MacCurrach Golf Construction edged out at least two other companies around Christmas and the committee asked membership for approval to shut down the course across much of the summer in February 2020. And then “COVID happened,” Wilczynski says, “and there was kind of a pause.”

That pause was not the result of local or state restrictions, though, but rather the uncertainty of where the LPGA Meijer Classic would fall on the shuffled schedule. The tournament normally crowns a winner on Father’s Day, but the LPGA moved the event to the first weekend of October. “That set off all these wheels,” says MacCurrach vice president **Jeff**

Tourangeau, who handled project logistics for the firm. “Maybe we get in there earlier and we sod the place, maybe don’t put any seed down.”

For a few weeks, the renovation looked like it might be pushed to 2021. There was no way the course would be ready before the event and Midwestern falls and winters would preclude a later start. That uncertainty disappeared in late May 2020 after the LPGA cancelled the event altogether.

“At the last second,” Wilczynski recalls, “they said we were moving forward. Everybody was ready to go.”

Tourangeau arrived from Florida with longtime MacCurrach superintendent **Andy Alcorn** and a 25-person crew — about five more than normal, an extra protection against the first COVID-19 summer — and started the first phase of construction on the putting green, putting course and short-game practice area on July 6. The back nine closed four weeks later, on Aug. 3, and the front nine closed a little less than five weeks after that on Sept. 5.

“We work up north every year, so we know a day in August is like three or four days in October,” Tourangeau says. “That’s why these jobs, you have to start ‘em big and hard, and that’s what we did at Blythefield. We had it wrapped up early — before October 31.”

The project was not without hurdles. Michigan introduced guidelines for how many people could work on a site — indoor or outdoor — “and before they started construction it was dicey because the language stated you could only have the minimum number of people necessary to protect the golf course,” Romanick says. “Does it mean that we can just barely keep the course alive? Are we maintaining it to tournament standards? What are we doing? We had to figure that out.”

The project wrapped up under budget, though those involved with the renovation said the cost would have increased if the 2020 tournament had remained in October and pushed the start of the renovation to this summer. “I’m 28 years into doing this,” Tourangeau says, “and I’ve never seen anything anywhere near as tough as the supply chain now.”

“If this project were happening right now, with the way material costs have changed, I think we’d be looking for ways to cut some things out,” Romanick adds. “You’d have to. Or you’d be going back to membership and asking for more money, which might be harder.

Any part of the project could have headlined a renovation at most clubs. The 64 bunkers sprayed with Better Billy Bunker liners and filled with Pro/Angle sand allow the maintenance crew to focus less on the demoralizing and Sisyphean task of plucking rocks after every rain and more on fly mowing and hand mowing more steeply sodded faces. The removal of mature trees from nearly every hole that were not a part of Langford’s and Moreau’s original design have eliminated agronomic problems and reintroduced old views and new approaches to play. And how many turf pros dream about carving out space for a new practice area or larger putting green?

The most important renovations for the future of Blythefield might wind up being the five or six new tees on each hole, which open up the course to players new to the game as well as older players who will benefit from playing from proper distances.

“It was really meant to keep people playing from the first time they pick up a club to the last time,” Wilczynski says. “You give them those options. There are tees in the fairways, you can play whatever distance you want, you can play it differently every day.”

Wilczynski watches players when he works on master plans — where they play and also how they play, and he studies swing speeds and analytics. As players age, there is more reliance on roll rather than flight, which re-

quires more open areas onto greens.

“Different golfing abilities require some space between the tees,” he says. “I’ve never liked when you see the blue and the white tees on the same marker and they’re 15 feet apart. There’s more of a skill level difference than 15 feet. I base a lot of it on the science of swing speeds and what I know people’s abilities are.”

“If people are honest with themselves and their golfing ability, if they’re playing those forward tees, it gives them a chance to reach the green in regulation and have a good time playing instead of being frustrated,” Romanick says. “Once you do that, it sure makes the day more fun. I think people are realizing that.”

Would those new tees exist without the old rocky bunkers — and without the ancient glaciers that melted away and helped create them in the first place? Probably not. But they wouldn’t exist without a little initiative and action, either.

“You have to be able to plant the seed,” Romanick says. “If you need things done on your property and not just deal with them forever, you have to think about the best way to have that happen, even if it takes four or five years. We could still be dealing with crappy bunkers if nobody ever spoke up or offered a solution.

“Being proactive makes a big difference. You want to keep a property moving forward and that’s the only way to do it.” **GCI**

One more tip from superintendent *Collin Romanick*

This is all going to sound obvious and like common sense, but I think people miss it when they get involved with a project this size — or any project: You have

to have the right people working with you. Without them, you’re going to fail. All these guys we hired, I knew most of them personally and I was comfortable

with them. The work they did for us and adhering to a plan we all worked on for years really made it look easier than it was, and it made my job a lot easier. That

was the biggest thing we did right: planning years ahead of time, having a solid master plan in place, knowing the people we were working with and being comfortable

with them — because it’s not going to be perfect every day. You’re going to have a lot of things come up and you have to be comfortable with them. Having those

relationships in place ahead of time was key, and it all led to a really successful renovation.