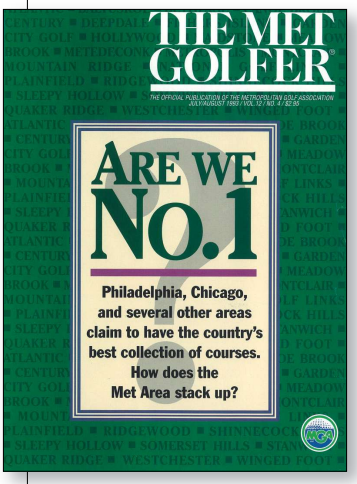
The Playing Fields

The courses of the Met Area are still the best anywhere

BY TOM DOAK



In the early 1990s, the editors of *The Met Golfer* asked me to answer the question "Are We No. 1?" The "We" was to be the Met Area. The article was to compare and rate the collections of golf courses to be found in different parts of the United States. It was a valid question, if for no other reason than that all golfers feel a sense of ownership about their golf courses, whether they live in the Met Area, Chicago, Texas or even points much farther afield. Just try telling someone from Northern Ireland that the best golf courses are to be found in Scotland.

At the time, my golf-course design business was beginning to take shape. Still, I'm a New York native, I studied at Cornell, and I've lived and worked in many of the other contending cities. And it wasn't too hard to conclude, as I did in the July/August 1993 issue, that the Met Area indeed was No. 1. Sure, Pine Valley may be voted the best course in the world, and there are those who still empty their wallets to play Pebble Beach while wanting to hear and feel the surf and spray at neighboring Cypress Point. But not a single region can match the profound depth of Met Area golf course design. Winged Foot. Shinnecock Hills. Garden City. Bethpage. Courses like Century and Inwood go almost unnoticed here, but in many cities across America they would be the cream of the crop.

All this is good news. But here's better. In the past 30 years, the Met Area's collection of courses has only become stronger. For the record, since the first year of *The Met Golfer*, 29 U.S. Opens have been held, and eight of them—more than a quarter—were in the Met Area. Yes, all have gone to pre-*Met Golfer* courses, but that's natural—and many of these courses have gotten better in the past twenty years, thanks to sensitive restorations which have brought back their great old features.

All this is good news. But here's better. In the past 30 years, the Met Area's collection of courses has only become stronger.

If you'd asked me twenty years ago, I could not have imagined so many new courses would be built in the time since that original article. I didn't think there was enough available land that could be developed at a reasonable price, but the boom of the early 2000s proved me wrong.

Who could have imagined that two spectacular courses, Bayonne and Liberty National, could be built up from nothing under the watchful eye of the Statue of Liberty?

Many of the newcomers have already hosted important tournaments. Liberty National shares hosting duty for The Barclays with Plainfield, Ridgewood, and now, Bethpage Black. One of Robert Trent Jones's last designs, Metedeconk National, became the setting for the biennial team matches between the MGA and the Golfing Union of Ireland, later to be named the Carey Cup. And near the USGA's home, Michael Hurdzan and Dana Fry designed Hamilton Farm, which hosts the LPGA's Sybase Match Play Championship. Down the road at Trump National-Bedminster, The Donald hopes one day to attract the U.S. Open.

For those who prefer companionship to championships, the Met Area has been able to produce a plethora of options, among them the Crystal Springs complex in northwestern New Jersey, with seven courses (which almost defines "daily" fee), or the 27-hole Centennial Golf Club in Westchester County, designed by Larry Nelson. And my former associate Gil Hanse designed the windy Tallgrass public course in Suffolk County.

Finally, who could have imagined that the Hamptons would produce *five* new courses in twenty years? Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw first opened East Hampton Golf Club, and then the magnificent Friar's Head for developer Ken Bakst, arguably their best work anywhere. Rees Jones built The Bridge, on the site of an old racetrack on Long Island, and nearby Atlantic Golf Club, opened in 1992 and the site of this year's Ike Championship.

And if you'd told me back then that eventually I would work with Jack Nicklaus to build Sebonack Golf Club—right alongside one of my favorite courses anywhere, The National Golf Links of America—I'd have giggled. Or guffawed. But I wouldn't have taken you seriously.

Nor would I have believed that the Met Area would *add* to its lead over the world's other great golf regions. Or that I would have the privilege to help *keep* the Met Area number one, instead of just writing about it.