

Unsung Architects, Vol. 3: Herbert Strong

The English pro turned a sidelight in design into a lasting legacy.

Even for people with a deep interest in golf course architecture, the name Herbert Strong is a bit of a footnote. If they know of him, it will be for his designs at Inwood and Engineers, but they've probably not even seen those. And he wrote little about his work, so it's more difficult to reconstruct his career today than it is for George Thomas or Walter Travis.

In his time, Herbert Strong was much better known, especially in the Met Area. He was a popular club professional, first at Apawamis Club and then at Inwood, and as one of the founding members of the PGA of America he was asked to serve as secretary/treasurer of the national organization. From such a position of influence, it's no surprise that some of his early courses were chosen as host sites for the brand-new PGA Championship, including Engineers Club in 1919 (just two years after the course opened) and Inwood in 1921. Inwood also hosted the U.S. Open in 1923, when Bob Jones broke through for his first major championship win.

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Born in Ramsgate on the southeast coast of England, Strong was introduced to golf as a boy caddie at nearby Royal St. George's Golf Club. He turned professional just after the turn of the century, taking up the post at Gog Magog GC near Cambridge; in 1905 Strong emigrated to the United States to take the professional's job at The Apawamis Club. While there, he competed in several early U.S. Opens, and earned a reputation for being a long driver – pretty remarkable considering that young Herbert stood 5 foot 6 and weighed only 120–140 pounds.

Strong's most prominent tournament result came in 1913, when he contended at Brookline for the U.S. Open. He played alone in the first two rounds, accompanied by a walking scorer, and at the end of the day's play was tied with Ted Ray, two strokes in back of Harry Vardon. A third-round 82 dropped him from contention, but he bounced back in the last round to finish in a tie for 9th. Had he won, not only would he have greatly altered golf history – this was the Open where Francis Ouimet captured the American imagination by defeating Vardon and Ray in a playoff – but he would have carved out a unique distinction, because for the last two rounds Strong was again the odd man out, playing by himself with a scorer alongside, so he could have been the only golfer in history to win a major playing alone!

In 1911, when he moved to become the professional at Inwood Country Club, he was asked to remodel the club's original 18-hole layout, his first foray into golf course design. His work took the golf course further out into the edges of the marsh across from today's Kennedy Airport, and introduced long sand hazards alongside several holes: they look like forerunners of the "waste bunkers" popularized by Pete Dye in the 1980's. Inwood's design also boasted a few sharply contoured greens, notably at today's par-four 8th and par-five 15th.

His design of Linwood Country Club in New Jersey is quite similar – it, too, sticks out into a marsh, this one opposite Atlantic City – but on hillier ground his work is much more varied.

The site for Engineers Club on the highlands

of Long Island's north shore could scarcely have been more different than Inwood, which is only 10-20 feet above sea level. Given strong slopes to work with, Strong positioned greens at the brink of trouble at Engineers to add drama and teeth to his design. The very first green falls abruptly away from the line of approach, divided into sections by abrupt internal contours. There are short par-fours playing from hilltop to hilltop, and longer holes up and down the hills. The greens at the 16th and 17th both sit right on the edge of steep fall-offs, while the drop to the right of the green at the short 14th is so severe that it became known as the "Two or Twenty Hole" in vintage editions of *The American Golfer*. The course was controversial from the start: Walter Travis proclaimed it too severe, and Devereux Emmet made a few changes in its early years. Over time, some of the more distinctive greens have been softened: the par-three 9th was among the wildest I've ever seen, and the terrace in the 16th green was twice as high as it is today.

After the success of the two PGA Championships, Strong's name was out in the public eye, and he began to get commissions from further afield, while the Met Area market became increasingly competitive for golf course designers. During the boom years of the 1920s, Strong worked on a wider radius away from New York City. His ease around people with money certainly helped his cause: Among his noteworthy clients were the Grace family of Bethlehem Steel, the DuPonts, and the founding families of Northeast Harbor in Maine.

His two highest-ranked courses today both opened in 1922: the Old Course at Saucon Valley in Pennsylvania, built for the president of Bethlehem Steel; and Canterbury in Cleveland, which has hosted multiple major championships. Both courses feature strongly tilted back-to-front greens, requiring good players to hit a straight shot right up under the hole if they want to avoid a breaking putt for birdie.

It would be nice to have more to go on, but Herbert Strong left very little in writing about his philosophy of golf course design. Interestingly, one of the few quotes attributed to him was more about aesthetics than about shot requirements: Asked about his philosophy of design upon the opening of Saucon Valley, he replied, "The duty of the golf architect is to build natural beauty into every possible feature of play." Even on his tamer parkland designs, his bunkering varied in size and shape, with abrupt faces; when given a dramatic site, he went right for the grandest views with his routing.

Compared to most architects of his day, Strong was open to bringing water hazards into play, a noteworthy feature of his work. Saucon Valley has four holes that play across Saucon Creek, two of them with the green adjacent to the hazard; Strong's course for the Ponte Vedra Inn and Club included an island green at the par-three 9th – just three miles away from Pete Dye's famed 17th at the TPC Sawgrass, but fifty years earlier! Indeed, some of the stylistic elements of Strong's courses bear more resemblance to Pete Dye's work than to any of his contemporaries.

Further afield, Strong built the scenic and hilly course at the Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu in Quebec, with sweeping views of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and the second nine for Northeast Harbor GC in Maine, also on hilly and difficult ground; he also did a routing for 18 holes at Irenee DuPont's Xanadu estate in Cuba, the site of today's Varadero Resort. In the Met Area, his other noteworthy designs are Metropolis CC in Westchester (later tweaked by A.W. Tillinghast), Brooklake CC in Florham Park, N.J., and Island's End GC in Greenport on Long Island.

In his day, Strong was a respected and innovative course designer and professional. He did some great work, but because his name no longer carries the brand recognition of a Ross or MacKenzie, his work hasn't been preserved in the same way. If Engineers had been a MacKenzie course, they might not be so cavalier about "fixing" their greens. ■

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