

If you read my [previous interview with Jeff Mingay](#), you know that he is a student of the game and its playing fields, and you also know that he is actively putting lessons learned to work in the field. I thoroughly enjoyed the interview with Jeff, and I continue to learn from him as he shares on Twitter. Therefore, I made a point of following up with Jeff regarding his renovation of the Derrick Club. He graciously agreed to give me even more time to discuss the project. If that weren't enough, we also managed to wrangle George Waters to participate in the discussion. George pitched in on the shaping of the Derrick Club, and by all accounts, their collaboration was a smash hit with the membership. Quick side note, if you do not own George's book [Sand and Golf: How Terrain Shapes the Game](#), I cannot recommend it enough. George knows his stuff, and he is one of the genuine good guys in the game. And now, on to the transformation of the Derrick Club...



The first hole, under construction.

PROJECT DISCUSSION

Have you worked on projects together before?

Jeff Mingay: Yes, George has worked with me on restoration and renovation projects at the Victoria Golf Club, in British Columbia, and at Seattle's Overlake Golf and Country Club in recent years. As well as the Derrick Club redo.

What do you respect about each other?

George Waters: I respect a lot about Jeff and have learned a great deal working with him over the years. I think his commitment to designing and building quality golf courses is second to none. He puts a tremendous amount of his personal time and effort into a project and is heavily involved from the big picture planning to the very small details. In addition to being an excellent architect he is also a very accomplished shaper and he crafted the majority of the green complexes at the Derrick Club himself. There aren't too many architects these days that are prepared to put that kind of personal effort into a project. Jeff is also his own toughest critic, a quality I really admire. In fact, I think one of my best contributions to the Derrick project was helping Jeff know when he had gotten the most out of a hole or feature.

JM: George is very knowledgeable about golf and course architecture. He traveled the world to see and play the best courses, and has worked with many of the most accomplished living architects on some very well-received projects.

He knows history and design theory, but most importantly the practical aspects of implementing design ideas on the ground successfully. He's very creative too, and meticulous in all aspects of his work. I also respect and appreciate that George is not afraid to speak up when he thinks an idea I have could be better or he doesn't completely agree with what I'm planning to do. I know that candid input made my work at the Derrick much better. In many cases, the best architecture is done collaboratively, especially when people are like-minded. George and I are like-minded.

What got you excited about the project at The Derrick Club?

JM: Immediately, it was obvious that a lot of work was required to fix the Derrick. The old course had a lot of fundamental problems that needed correcting. It didn't function very well at all in terms of drainage and properly catering to the enjoyment of golfers of all abilities. If the club desired to have the best course possible on that property, they needed a comprehensive rebuild of the course. At the end of the day, that's what happened. And, in an era when not many new courses are being built, that opportunity to essentially build a brand new course at the Derrick was very exciting.

GW: I loved the idea of doing a golf course in a very traditional style on a relatively flat piece of ground. People often see flat ground as boring when it comes to golf, but many of my favorite courses overseas and in North America occupy very gentle terrain. I was excited to demonstrate how interesting golf course design on gentle terrain could be.

In a project like this, how much weight do playability and functionality considerations carry respectively?

GW: Before we started, the Derrick Club had serious playability issues – the course felt cramped and awkward. It was difficult, but in many of the wrong ways. By opening the course up and striving to make it interesting as well as challenging, we really broadened the course's appeal. Now players are challenged by angles and placement, rather than trees, ponds, and rough.

JM: Those are the two factors that drove the entire project at the Derrick, and sold the idea of building a new course to a large majority of club members. Again, the property needed to be comprehensively drained to improve its function, and many architectural improvements relative to making the course more enjoyable for golfers of all abilities was essential. Without these two necessities pushing our ideas for the place, this project would not have happened.

Was enhancing the sustainability of the facility a goal of the project, and if so, was that goal met?

JM: Relative to drainage, yes. The old course was becoming unsustainable because it drained so poorly. The grass on the greens was a problem as well. Bent grass greens are essential in Edmonton's climate. Poa annua just doesn't handle cold, snow and ice well at all. In fact, before the new course was built, Darryl Maxwell, the Derrick's golf course superintendent, had the largest bent grass nurseries I've seen anywhere in my travels. He had to be prepared for each spring. There were always large swaths of the old Poa annua greens that suffered winter kill and needed replacing. The new bent grass greens have eliminated this annual rite of spring! Darryl and I are also in the process of determining where we can eliminate some currently maintained turf areas throughout the course without negatively affecting play. Replacing some of that maintained grass with fescue and native grass would not only enhance the look of the course in a natural fashion but hopefully cut down on maintenance requirements, too.

What changes did you make to the routing of the course? Why were those changes necessary?

JM: The routing of the course and sequence of play was changed dramatically. I used 12 of the existing corridors of play in the new routing. The other six corridors are new – they didn't exist before – which was necessary. One problem with the old course was that all of the par-4s measured 380 yards. All four par-3s played 210 yards from the back markers. There wasn't enough variety in the length and directions the holes played. On the new course, the short holes run the gamut, measuring 140 yards to 220 yards. The fourth is a 300-yard par-4. The 12th, 14th and 15th can play longer than 450 yards as par-4s. There are only two par-5s. The new routing created a lot more variety. The new sequence of play makes more sense as well. Many of the transitions between holes on the old course were awkward. With only two exceptions, tees are right next to the greens on the new course. In fact, George and I laughed when the new course was criticized by a few Derrick members who thought some of our tees were too close to the previous greens...we took that as a compliment!

GW: As we started finishing areas it was very hard to imagine that the course had been routed the way it was. The existing course felt tight and awkward from both a play and experiential standpoint. The new course very quickly started to feel wide and comfortable. People kept commenting on how big the property now seemed and they were right, there was a lot of wasted space prior to the renovation and Jeff did a great job taking full advantage of the site.

What was your approach to the bunkering? Were there specific sources of inspiration upon which you drew?

GW: The first couple of bunkers I shaped were a little overdone – I was trying too hard. The next pair I did were bold but very simple in their shapes, you saw a bit of sand but most of the visual appeal was in the grassed down face. Jeff and I both liked the simpler shapes better, we went back and edited the first ones and then carried on with a more traditional style. We wanted to focus on creating interesting and different bunker arrangements because we knew that was our best chance of making the holes memorable on flattish ground. We also both believe very strongly in placing bunkers in a wide variety of locations, even if on paper a bunker seemed “out of play”. Jeff and I have both spent a lot of time on classic courses and for the most part you find bunkers all over the place because traditional architects understood that golfers hit the ball everywhere and weather conditions change. Placing bunkers in a wide range of locations makes the course interesting for golfers of all abilities in all conditions, and helps make the holes different and memorable.

JM: In the planning stages, I knew I wanted to give the course a look that was distinctive to the Edmonton area, and the province of Alberta. I also had some pretty good ideas about where I thought the bunkers should be located for strategic and aesthetic purposes, among others. George and I were on-site a lot throughout the entire project, both shaping. We lived together in Edmonton, too. This gave us plenty of time for discussion that resulted in quite a bit of alteration to my original plans as the course developed. There are only a couple classic courses from the pre-World War II era in western Canada. George and I both grew up in the east, on classic courses, and felt that the best way to give the Derrick Club a distinctive course was to draw inspiration from what we know back home. We talked about the bunkers at classic New York area courses by Donald Ross, Devereux Emmet, A.W. Tillinghast – places like Garden City and St. George’s on Long Island, near where George grew up. George shaped all of the bunkers and did a great job giving them simple shapes for the most part, but bold character at the same time. The bold grass down, flat bottom look nicely reflects some of Ross’s, Emmet’s and Tillinghast’s stuff nicely.

What was your approach to tree management?

JM: In order to work a new and improved routing onto the property, and truly enhance the enjoyment of the course for all golfers, nearly 2,000 trees were removed during the project. One of the best compliments I’ve received above the new course from a number of long-time members is that they never realized the property was so expansive and that the opportunities we took advantage of in routing the new course existed. The old course was very cluttered and constricted. Many of the trees that were removed were in poor health or were less desirable specimens that cluttered the property and hid the nicest trees out there. The result of 2,000 trees going is that the property is much more attractive now. The most impressive and healthiest trees shine, there are a bunch of beautiful long views across the course, and there’s adequate room to enjoy golf and keep healthy turf. I’m in the process of creating a long-range tree management plan for the club now. This will include some new plantings, and spell out how the course should look and feel relative to trees and other vegetation into the future.

How would you describe the new greens at The Derrick?

JM: I’ve also been complimented by quite a few members of the Derrick for “not doing anything crazy with the greens”. It’s a relatively subtle property, so I didn’t want the greens and the contouring of the putting surfaces to stand out in contrast to the native character of the ground. At the beginning of the project, George and I talked a lot about greens. He rightfully reminded me on several occasions that a lot of the classic courses we admired feature seemingly subtle greens with small intricacies that create interesting and adequately challenging putting and recovery play from around the greens. This is the theme I kept in mind while shaping the greens. The word around the club is that the new greens are quite challenging to putt mainly because the subtleties are difficult to read. And I think they fit the terrain very nicely, aesthetically. The variety of sizes and shapes and angles enhances the variety of the holes, too. At the par-5 eleventh, for example, the green is only about 3,500 square feet. The long par-4 15th hole has a green that’s about 10,000 square feet in size. So, there’s quite a bit of variety.



The approach to the 4th, featuring the beautiful new bunkering.

Did you run into challenges with the membership before, during, or after the project, and how did you overcome those challenges?

JM: Selling the project was challenging. The best superintendents are often their own worst enemies. This is a compliment, because they're so good at masking all of the deficiencies of a course that need to be fixed functionally. By the time members tee off, there's no sign of any deficiencies! Darryl Maxwell did a great job of creating a list of deficiencies that the old course had, hole by hole. This info was shared with the membership as part of the Master Plan, and through a series of Town Hall meetings, and presentations over a period of months. Essentially, all of the architectural ideas in my plan were sold as directly related to eliminating and correcting deficiencies of the course.

This was the truth, and a great strategy that eventually sold the project to a large majority of the membership. Again, it was the necessity of fixing functional and playability issues throughout the property that drove the project, and allowed us to also get creative with the design of a new course. Once the project started, the club smartly limited member involvement. They stuck to the belief that the membership voted "yes" on the plan that was presented, and that we should be able to implement our design without interference. Darryl Maxwell was the project supervisor and we dealt with a construction committee made up of two Board members. It was really well done on the club's part.

GW: The Derrick Club project might have been one of the easiest I've ever worked on from a membership relations standpoint. On most projects I'll get at least a few members who come out to let me know that we're ruining the golf course and the whole thing will be a complete disaster. That never happened once at the Derrick Club. I think Jeff and the club did a great job of communicating the goals and the reasons for the project and I also think that even casual observers could see that we were making very real improvements to the course. I think the sudden expansiveness of the property really resonated with people in a positive way. Even if they weren't always sure about what they saw architecturally, I think people could feel that the course was getting better.

How did the renovation impact ongoing maintenance needs and costs?

JM: I think it will probably be a wash. In other words, I don't think the new course will be any more expensive to maintain than the old one. But the focuses have changed. For example, the necessities of pumping water from low areas and bunkers following heavy rains, and re-turfing Poa greens after a harsh winter, are gone. The new grass

faced bunkers proved to be a challenge during a hot, dry summer this year though. They're already looking at installing mist heads on some of the most troublesome bunkers, with southern exposure, to keep the turf on those bold grass faces healthy. There's more fairway area to mow, water, and treat on the new course, too; but with fewer trees, there are also fewer maintenance challenges relative to shade, roots, leaf pick up, etc.

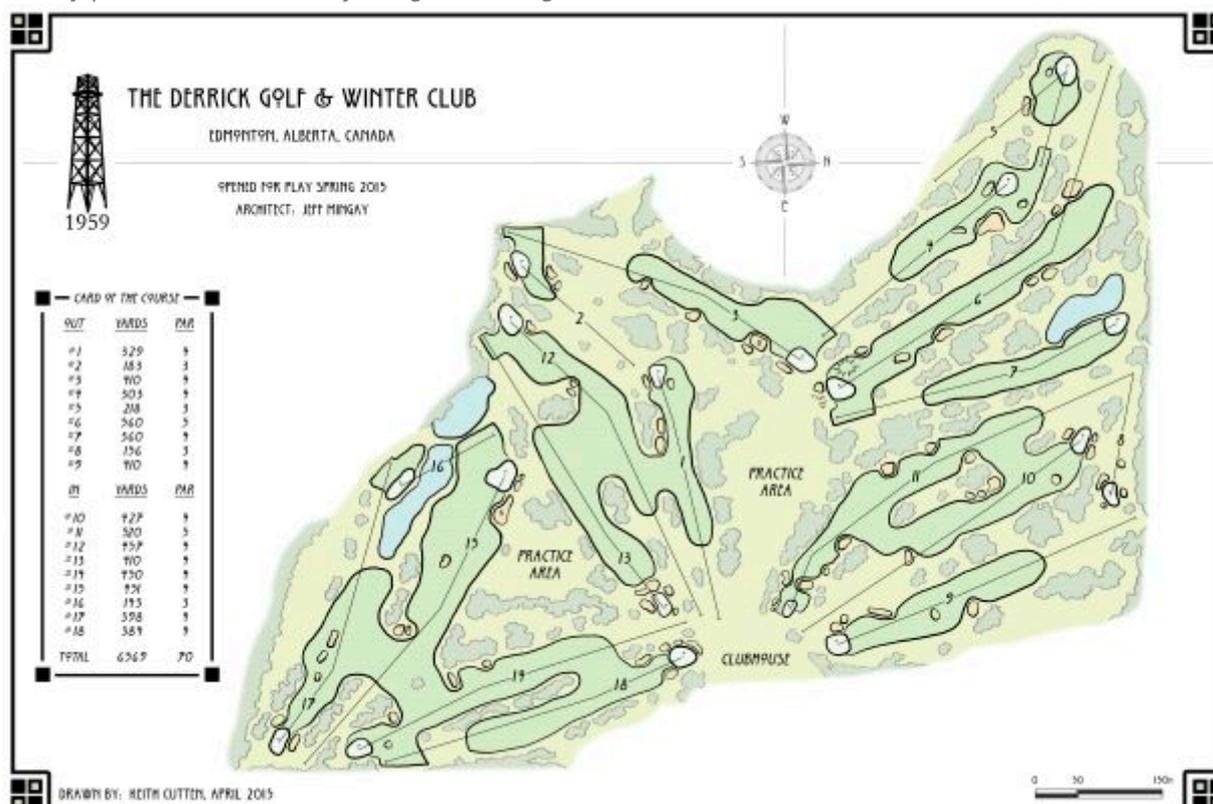
What makes you proudest about the new Derrick?

GW: I'm proud that we were able to very successfully apply the principles of classic architecture and really got the most out of the property. I think we also did a great job of demonstrating restraint throughout the process. We didn't go overboard anywhere even though we certainly utilized some unusual design features. The best examples of golf course architecture on gentle terrain typically work with the subtlety of the ground rather than fight against it. We put a lot of effort into following that example and the result is a course that looks, feels, and plays like a classic course even though it is brand new. I'm very proud of that.

JM: The fact that we genuinely improved the function of the course, particularly relative to drainage. During the planning stages, I would show up at the Derrick in the spring time and there would be pumps running every day, trying desperately to get water off the property following the snow melt. This spring, the entire property, without an exception, was bone dry. It's effectively drained. I've also received many compliments about how "fun" the new course is to play, from golfers of all abilities. There are very few opportunities to lose a ball at the new Derrick, but no one's complaining that it's "too easy" either. The course seems to be adequately challenging better golfers and at the same time it's allowing everyone else to have fun too. And, with the new routing and sequence of play, members are getting around comfortably in three hours and 45 minutes, regularly. These are all positives that we sold to the membership and delivered on. I'm proud of that.

THE TRANSFORMATION IN PICTURES

As Jeff mentioned above, the routing and order of the holes changed significantly in the renovation. A bold move that clearly paid off. *(click on any image to enlarge)*



The par-3 2nd was previously the 3rd hole on the old course.



Before



After

The par-4 12th was previously the short par-5 1st on the old course.



Fairway, before



Approach, before



George, shaping a bunker



Under construction



Grow-in stage



Fairway, after



Approach right, after

The par-4 13th was previously the 6th hole on the old course.



Approach, before



Green, after



Greenside, after

The par-3 16th did not exist before the renovation.



Before



Under construction



After

The finisher was previously the 9th on the old course.



Before



After

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