The Fox Chapel Golf Club is standing the test of time with a major renovation and a focus on fairways and families.

BY CHARLIE STEWART
PHOTOS BY MELODY FARRIN

Above: An aerial view of the golf course, taken last summer when it was set up for the Constellation Senior Players Championship.
Below: The clubhouse at the Fox Chapel Golf Club.
Until 1910, members of the Pittsburgh Golf Club enjoyed exclusive access to the 18-hole course they had created in city-owned Schenley Park. But after Mayor William A. Magee rescinded those rights and opened the course to the public, members sought and eventually found another location where they could play their favorite sport in private.

In 1923 the new golf club was organized by some of Pittsburgh’s most prominent citizens, including William L. Mellon, co-founder of Gulf Oil Corporation, who was elected the club’s first president. It was Mellon’s uncle, Richard B. Mellon, who suggested that the club be named Fox Chapel, after the country road that provided access to the property.

The firm of Alden & Harlow, which had designed the Pittsburgh Golf Club, was appointed to draw up plans for the new clubhouse. The esteemed partnership—responsible for the Carnegie Institute and Library in Oakland, the Oakmont Carnegie Library, and the Duquesne Club downtown—gave the Fox Chapel clubhouse stucco siding and a red tile roof, in the Spanish Colonial Revival style that was popular at the time.

Renowned golf course architect Seth Raynor was selected to lay out a course on the property described in the club’s prospectus as being “of a gently rolling nature [which] has running through it a beautiful stream.” Raynor, a protégé of the legendary Charles B. Macdonald, routinely replicated holes from famous European golf courses, adapting them with each project to fit the given landscape. Modifications of Raynor’s classic templates—Redan, Punchbowl, Alps, and Biarritz—appear at Fox Chapel, while the meanderings of the stream, Glade Run, add character to his imaginative layout.

The course was opened for play on June 13, 1925, and the club enjoyed instant success. In just a few years the membership outgrew the facilities, and plans for enlarging the clubhouse were requested from Brandon Smith, whom local architect David Vater refers to as “Pittsburgh’s most sought-after, high-society architect” of his day. Smith’s more formal, Georgian-Revival addition was completed in 1931 and replaced most of the original clubhouse.
nal structure. It conforms to the hillside by cascading down two levels, affording stunning views over the golf course from the terrace. Since then the club has grown to a current membership of about 350 families, more than half of whom live in the Fox Chapel area, and many of whom are likely to value the club as much for its other amenities as for its world-class golf.

The tennis program, conducted from spring through fall on six outdoor courts, is run by tennis pro Craig Perry. He and his staff start kids off at the age of 3 and are well known for developing some of the region’s finest high school and collegiate players. “We are so lucky to have Craig Perry,” says Heather Kennedy, who joined the club seven years ago, after moving to Fox Chapel from Atlanta with her husband, Sam, and their two children. “He is energetic and fun and one of the best tennis professionals in western Pennsylvania.”

The outdoor swimming pool is open seven days a week between Memorial Day and Labor Day and is a huge draw for families like the Kennedys. Pool Area Manager Mark Nigro has seen its popularity grow over the 29 years he has been with the club. “Last year we had as many visits to the pool area as we had rounds of golf,” he says, laughing. Members insist that the pool never feels overcrowded, despite a busy schedule of water aerobics, swim-team practices, movie nights, Wednesday family nights, and live music on Friday nights.

The four paddle-tennis courts are getting more use than ever before, with weekday and weeknight league matches involving six women’s teams and four men’s teams competing in varying divisions against Longue Vue Club, Fox Chapel Racquet Club, the Pittsburgh Field Club, and the Edgeworth Club.

Trap shooting occurs on Saturdays from October through March. Events include straight trap, skeet trap, international trap, and inter-club competitions. “We also have a Sunday program,” says Vance Smith, chairman of the shooting committee. “Sunday shoots with complimentary instruction by Ken Darroch, a 20-time Pennsylvania state champion, are designed for beginners and families to learn in a safe and helpful environment,” he adds.

Meanwhile, in the clubhouse, Chef Chris Brown and his staff of 25 are busy year-round, collaborating with Assistant General Manager Carrie Glass on preparations for the many joyful occasions when family and friends gather to enjoy first-class dining. The club
accommodates private parties of all sizes, and popular club-sponsored events include Easter Brunch, Mother’s Day Dinner, and celebrations for every major holiday. Over the years the membership profile has become less representative of corporate Pittsburgh and now reflects the current Fox Chapel community, including doctors, lawyers, and other professionals associated with the region’s new economy. “If you look back to the 1960s and ’70s, when the vice presidents of all the steel companies and banks were members, there was a lot of corporate golf entertainment,” says President Tal Heppenstall, whose grandparents on both sides were members. “That changed with the 1986 tax code, when companies no longer paid for their executives to be members.” In the early days there was little effort to foster a “family-centric” community at Fox Chapel, but that is a primary objective of the club today. To that end, all the sports programs are designed to encourage the beginners and challenge the experts, while embracing participation by the entire family. Special social events are also planned for kids and families, including a Polar Express pajama party, Dog Day at the Pool, and an annual father-daughter dinner dance. “The club is making itself more attractive to young families by offering a variety of interesting things to do,” says Jeness Calihan, a Fox Chapel resident and mother of four who has been a member for 15 years. Naturally, the golf course still remains the showpiece of the club, where golf pro Alex Childs and his staff run clinics, provide private lessons, and sponsor competitions. In recent years it has hosted a number of very prestigious international tournaments, including the 2012 Curtis Cup and the 2012, 2013, and 2014 Constellation Senior Players Championships. The events have attracted such talents as Bernhard Langer, Kenny Perry, and Tom Watson. Watson, winner of eight major championships on the PGA tour and a respected golf course designer, praised Fox Chapel in 2012 after his first time playing there. “It’s a hidden gem,” he said. “I really, really like what Seth Raynor did here … People should wake up and realize what a great course this is.” People are indeed waking up, with both Golfweek magazine and Golf Digest ranking it among the top 100 courses in the country. And Platinum Clubs of America placed Fox Chapel on its list of the top 50 golf courses at the most respected private clubs in the country.

Besides the prestige that the Senior Players Championships brought to the club, the hundreds of members who volunteered to run them also benefitted. “The process of working together for a three-year period was a major step in revitalizing us as a membership,” says Heppenstall. “And that actually led to a lot of enthusiasm for—and being proud of—our facilities, which then led us to look at them.” In the early days there was little effort to foster a “family-centric” community at Fox Chapel, but that is a primary objective of the club today. To that end, all the sports programs are designed to encourage the beginners and challenge the experts, while embracing participation by the entire family. Special social events are also planned for kids and families, including a Polar Express pajama party, Dog Day at the Pool, and an annual father-daughter dinner dance. “The club is making itself more attractive to young families by offering a variety of interesting things to do,” says Jeness Calihan, a Fox Chapel resident and mother of four who has been a member for 15 years. Naturally, the golf course still remains the showpiece of the club, where golf pro Alex Childs and his staff run clinics, provide private lessons, and sponsor competitions. In recent years it has hosted a number of very prestigious international tournaments, including the 2012 Curtis Cup and the 2012, 2013, and 2014 Constellation Senior Players Championships. The events have attracted such talents as Bernhard Langer, Kenny Perry, and Tom Watson. Watson, winner of eight major championships on the PGA tour and a respected golf course designer, praised Fox Chapel in 2012 after his first time playing there. “It’s a hidden gem,” he said. “I really, really like what Seth Raynor did here … People should wake up and realize what a great course this is.” People are indeed waking up, with both Golfweek magazine and Golf Digest ranking it among the top 100 courses in the country. And Platinum Clubs of America placed Fox Chapel on its list of the top 50 golf courses at the most respected private clubs in the country.

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America. For Fox Chapel, that trend started six years ago when the board decided to allow jeans to be worn in certain areas of the club. "Although there was initial resistance," says board member Beau Beard, "the reality is that people are dressing more casually, and we want our members to be comfortable coming to the club."

Fitness facilities, as well as a children’s activity center where babysitting services will be available, are two other elements of the revitalization project. "This is huge for young families who are trying to join somewhere," says Shelley McIlroy of the membership committee.

"Babysitting? Family-friendly? Jeans? Fitness facilities? Casual dining? This is definitely not your grandfather’s country club. But the goal of the club’s founders was not so very different from that of today. "When you drive through those pillars at the entrance," says Beard, "everything gets left behind, and then it’s still all about spending time with friends."

Links to the Past & Aim for the Future

At the club’s annual meeting last December, members of the board of directors in attendance included (standing) James Walrath, Tom Reading, Tal Heppenstall (President), Fala Fukui, Rob Marsh, Tom Ruppel, Barry Hull (seated) Liza Hazel (no longer on the board), Janet McIlroy, Julie Reid, and Heather Kennedy. Not pictured are Beau Beard and Randy McCombs.

Charlie Stewart is a lifelong member of Fox Chapel Golf Club. His grandfather, Samuel A. Hartwell, Jr., was an original member.