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Mystery Men of NorCal's Golden Age

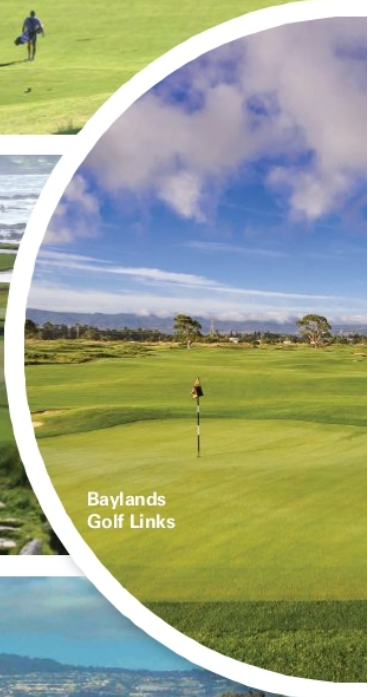
RENOVATIONS



Diablo Country Club



Monterey Peninsula Country Club, Shore Course



Baylands
Golf Links



Corica Park, South Course

Memorable MAKE



When remodeling a golf course, it isn't one size fits all. Typically, a club may choose a restoration, a renovation or a redesign. There's another category as well, of the hybrid variety. How to differentiate between remodel options? Architect Gil Hanse explains.

"Restoration is when the principles, style and objectives of the original architect are the overriding factors for decision-making on the project," says Hanse, who in January contracted to create master plans for the Olympic Club and Lake Merced Golf Club. "There's also sympathetic restoration, when those same elements are put into place as the overriding factors, but then you're accommodating the modern game and technology in placing and designing the features. Renovation is when you allow your own thoughts to creep into the equation, either because there's no significant architectural pedigree, or no desire to restore what was there, or perhaps there's something that just doesn't work based on the modern game. Redesign is when there's little of inherent value that we can identify."

Hanse has yet to leave his mark on a completed Northern California re-do, but a fistful of other acclaimed architects certainly have. Here is a sampling of the best of the best.

The first metamorphosis that rocked the region took place at

Monterey Peninsula Country Club's Shore Course in 2004. The late Mike Strantz took a handsome, if bare-boned 1961 Bob Baldock/Jack Neville creation and fashioned a stunning, nearly new layout. Many holes featured newly realized ocean backdrops, now accented by native grasses, artfully sculpted bunkers, prominently placed cypress trees and rock-studded green and tee surrounds. "It's the best renovation I've ever seen, anywhere," says architecture aficionado and eight-time PGA Tour winner Brad Faxon.

MPCC's Shore Course has only one competitor in the shock-and-awe makeover department: the **California Golf Club of San**

Francisco. Better known as the "Cal Club," this 1926 A. Vernon Macon design was updated just two years later by the legendary Alister MacKenzie. To accommodate a road expansion in the 1960s, the club lost a chunk of property. Robert Trent Jones Sr. signed on to redesign the first five holes. Understandably, they were crammed in. Enter Kyle Phillips.

By 2007, Phillips restored 12 holes to their Golden Age greatness, including those magnificent, sprawling MacKenzie bunkers. He removed trees to restore long-lost vistas. He created two brand new holes and renovated the remaining four holes. Part restoration, part renovation, part brand new – Phillips put it simply: "It's a hybrid."

Architect Tom Doak, who tosses around compliments about competitors' work as often as he does pianos, called the renovation of the Cal Club, "one of the best transformations I've seen over the past 20 years." Few would disagree.

After it debuted in 1986, the NCGA's own **Poppy Hills Golf Course** was universally consid-

Brilliant course renovations have defined Northern California golf for two decades. Here are some of the standouts.

BY JOE PASSOV

OVERLERS



California Golf Club of San Francisco

ered an excellent course. In what was a renovation centered around water conservation (primarily by improving irrigation and drainage), the NCGA acknowledged some tweaks were in order – and acted. Original architect Robert Trent Jones II and colleagues Bruce Charlton and Mike Gorman undertook an inspired renovation that solved myriad issues. Upon completion in 2014, Poppy Hills instantly blossomed from “should-play” to “must-play.”

Jones sand-capped the entire course, and eliminated traditional rough, utilizing just one fairway-height cut of grass. Native sandy areas now link fairway to forest. Mounds were eliminated and the old roller coaster greens were softened and re-grassed. By-products included improved aesthetics, more shot options and faster play.

Among the design changes were the creation of a new par-5 18th hole, a par-3 2nd that now heads in the opposite direction and a transformation of No. 3 (formerly a hard dogleg-right) to a straightaway par-4 that yields a stunning ocean view.

When three-time major champion Nick Price returned, he remarked, “It’s a huge improvement on the old course. They deserve a pat on the back for the terrific job they did.”

Fresh breezes wafted over two revered but tired Bay Area munis in 2018, with invigorating results. Architect Forrest Richardson waved his redesign wand at the Palo Alto municipal layout, reconfiguring it into **Baylands Golf Links**. For its \$12 million investment, the city received a golf course that’s much more compelling than its predecessor. It features rippled fairways and imaginatively contoured greens, requires less water and incorporates new wetlands and grasslands. There are even a

few Scotland-esque pot bunkers. What’s more, said Richardson, is that he redesigned the layout in such a way that he gave back 10 acres of land (the city had only asked for seven) for use as soccer fields and other park uses.

Four miles from the Oakland International Airport, the city of Alameda is flying high with its redesign of the Jack Clark course at the Chuck Corica Golf Complex. Now known as **Corica Park (South)**, this 1957 William F. Bell design sports virtually a brand new layout, courtesy of Poppy Ridge designer Rees Jones, associate Steve Weisser and Greenway Golf’s George Kelley and Marc Logan.

Together, they crafted a fast-running, variety-filled spread that embraces an Australian Sandbelt identity. Skillfully sculpted bunkers, run-up ramps near the low-slung greens and wispy native fescue grasses enhance aesthetics and playability and the drought-tolerant Bermuda fairways use roughly half the water that other area courses require. Recycled materials assisted in keeping costs down, notably in the synthetic turf bunker liners, salvaged from an Oakland Raiders practice field.

Corica Park’s North course is currently undergoing its own makeover, but don’t look for regulars to get bored with the South course anytime soon. “It will play differently every day, depending on the wind, the season and the weather,” Rees Jones says.

For venerable **Diablo Country Club**, which dates to 1914, water issues prompted a course renovation. However, the devil was in the details. Restore or renovate? Architect Todd Eckenrode, with fellow Origins Golf Design team member Andy Frank, chose to do both.

Nine other noteworthy recent revisions

Bayonet/Black Horse Golf Course [Gene Bates, 2008]; Berkeley Country Club (formerly known as Mira Vista) [Forrest Richardson, 2012]; Menlo Country Club [Kyle Phillips, 2014]; Contra Costa Country Club [Robert Trent Jones II, 2015]; Monterey Peninsula Country Club (Dunes) [Tom Fazio/Jackson-Kahn, 2015]; Quail Lodge Resort and Golf Club [Origins/Todd Eckenrode, 2015]; Orinda Country Club [Origins/Todd Eckenrode, 2016]; North Ridge Country Club [Robert Trent Jones II, 2018].

Course most deserving to be restored

Sharp Park, Alister MacKenzie’s 1932 seaside municipal masterpiece in Pacifica.

To reduce water use and increase water efficiencies, Eckenrode installed a new irrigation system and different grasses, with the help of superintendent Ryan Nicholson. Diablo also sought to regain the attributes of the Golden Age design that had vanished over time.

Jack Neville carved out Diablo’s first nine holes in 1915. Three years later, Neville would design Pebble Beach Golf Links. In 1920, prolific architect William Watson added another nine. No other club features a Neville/Watson design. Eckenrode honored both men.

“We restored many lost features that were exemplary, such as the bunkering and the green contouring, but we didn’t restore everything,” Eckenrode says. “Most unique was the restoration of the system of braided waterways that Watson created. They had largely degraded. We restored them as natural, seasonal creeks, and as important strategic hazards.”

In a nod to Neville’s contributions, Eckenrode cited the par-3 16th as a favorite. “Jack Neville set this into a historic horse racetrack in his 1915 design,” Eckenrode says. “We restored much of the cross bunkering, and a wonderful ridge on the left side of the green.”

While acknowledging that the drainage, irrigation, grasses and green construction were pure modern renovations, credit Diablo Country Club for successfully turning back the clock in a forward-thinking way.

For that matter, here’s a golf clap for every club that has successfully revitalized through sensitive renovation. 🍷