



# Orinda Country Club, USA: Rebirth of a classic design

Todd Eckenrode

Rich in history, the Orinda Country Club layout was originally designed in 1924 by William Watson, a Scot, who naturalised to the United States in 1898 and became prolific in golf course design. Some of Watson's most notable courses included The Olympic Club (Lake and Ocean courses), The Minikahda Club and Belvedere Golf Club. Many other fine California courses, too numerous to list, bare the Watson moniker.

When I first saw Orinda, I was taken with the qualities and quiriness of the site. The terrain is quite hilly in parts, underpinning the masterful original routing that took full advantage, in varied ways, of the property's slopes, hills, valleys and creeks. Watson utilised the hills as 'turtlebacks', banking side slopes, reversing slopes, resulting in a fine mix of both uphill and downhill play. In this regard, both the aesthetic and play is ever-changing and offers wonderful variety to players.

Talk about holes being memorable, even unique: the wildly captivating reverse-boomerang green of the fifth, the 'drop-shot' eighth, the drivable tenth, the creekside fifteenth—as featured in Robert Hunter's celebrated publication, *The Links*. Plus, of course, the roller-coaster adventure of the uphill eighteenth. Set

beneath the grand clubhouse, it is a special way to conclude a round. These are holes unlike any I've ever come across.

We always commence work on a historic course such as Orinda by investigating its history, anxious to understand how and why it has evolved. The club's collection of artifacts proved highly beneficial, with numerous photographs adorning the walls of the clubhouse, supported by an archive room full of great information. Images of the course were accessed—including photography of the original construction, as well as dating from the 1920s, 30s and 40s—as were original editions of *The Fairway* magazine, which featured Orinda. Club minutes dating back to the 1924 opening provided precise information, as did an annual report from 1933.

The various sources chronicled changes in the design early on by Watson himself, but also changes by Bob Hunter (golf architect and club member). Lest any confusion arise, he was most likely the son of Robert Hunter, the legendary figure who ran the American Golf Course Construction Company. Indeed, builder of Mackenzie and Hunter's finest courses here in California! Another treasure was a 1937 letter penned by A.W. Tillinghast, commenting on



**Orinda Country Club, Fourteenth hole: Acting upon a suggestion in 1937 by A.W. Tillinghast, the club modified the hole to its current configuration: a long, ribbon-like green. Although not abandoned in principle over time (the green was still in its basic form), Todd Eckenrode polished and restored this unique hole in keeping with Tillinghast's design. (Photograph by Todd Eckenrode)**

construction progress for his recommended changes to the fourteenth green [as it exists today] into a 'long, ribbon-like green to take the chipped second shot.'

Tom Naccarato, a noted golf historian, also dug a little deeper, spending days pouring through local collections. Other people contributed what they had in their collections, which we were thankful for. As a final step, we collected a host of historic aerials, from the late 1920s, 30s, 40s and early 50s, which all helped to piece the puzzle together when learning about course changes.

Pertaining particularly to bunkering, all this research reinforced the existence of two distinct styles throughout the golf course. Aerials and photographs from the 1920s show a simple grass-faced bunker style, often in quite unusual locations. A significant change to the bunker locations and style took place in the 1930s, however, including a reduction in the amount of bunkers. Rationalisation, as it was elsewhere, was most likely due to the effects of the Great Depression.

An eighth-hole photograph in a 1931 edition of *Golfdom* magazine portrays a significant change in bunker styling: flashed bunker faces; a more-extravagant use of bays, fingers and rolls;

and sand lines with a wavy character. Well, that was the style that immediately appealed to us for Orinda, and so we embraced it.

Our goal in this exciting project, accepting that it was a subjective endeavour, was to make all of the holes as good as they could possibly be. Sometimes, that involved restoration, other times renovation. Restoration can sometimes simply entail 'unwinding' the ill-effects that have accumulated over the years, such as restoring 'lost' views or a sense of naturalness. Other times, restoration can be more literal. On three holes, specifically: the eighth, eleventh and fifteenth, we provided our select shapers (Brett Hochstein and George Waters) all the information we had on-hand, enabling them to recreate the green complexes and bunkers more literally. Ensuring the holes best fit the land, a degree of artistic license was afforded; yet the results are impressively close to historic images.

The 'drop-shot' eighth hole had been significantly altered over the years. It was begging for restoration. Surprisingly, it was highly similar in its general presentation to the original design: a perched green; bunkers set into the hill on the right; and a large fronting bunker. Sadly, though, it had deteriorated into a



poor representation. The green had shrunk and it was largely unplayable. The bunkers had been simplified, and the top edges had built-up significantly from excessive sand-splash. Playability was severely compromised. Two bunkers had been added to the eighth hole (left and back); neither from the original design. A cart path had been added too close to the green and behind (where three redwoods were symmetrically planted many years before), obscuring views and taking away an important feeling of 'danger' to the shot by providing a backdrop. Basically, it was time to wipe the slate clean, and restore this beautiful hole to its former glory.

Removal of the redwoods produced an immediate three-fold effect: revealing the beautiful vista beyond; heightening the drama; and increasing the judgment required by players to conquer this exciting drop-shot. The green was enlarged to previous dimensions, while slopes were reduced ever so slightly. With the aforementioned 1931 image on-hand for reference, the bunkers were restored to this style and detail. Chipping area contours were established and the surrounds all sand-capped. The cart path was shifted up the hill (out of play) and removed from behind the green entirely, so as to provide a completely natural backdrop of fescue

grasses and native Oak trees. Golfers now enjoy an incredibly scenic and sporting hole, unlike any other. Hopefully, the feeling permeates of having taken a step back in time.

Orinda's eighth hole is but one of many that materialised as a significant improvement to the lapsed versions throughout the layout. Besides infrastructure improvements to drainage and irrigation, restoration or renovation to a classic style of other elements saw out team tackling fairway lines, tees, trees, bunkering, green reclamations, and selection of new greens, approaches and green surrounds.

This essay would be incomplete without according Josh Smith, Orinda's superintendent, due praise. He came on-board just prior to the project construction, and his presence has been vital. Josh, as many in the industry know, is a great team player. He is the person most responsible for carrying the club forward with our [and his] vision.

My hope is that we have tastefully turned back the clock a bit at this hidden jewel, and the classic 1924 design that is Orinda Country Club stands proud.

**Eighth hole: The hole's evolution and restoration is easily apparent in this set of photographs.**

**The old mono image, dating from 1931, appeared in the *Golfdom* publication. (Photograph courtesy of Orinda Country Club)**

**Below the archival photograph is the eighth hole's pre-restoration appearance. (Photograph by Todd Eckenrode)**

**The large photograph is a recent, post-restoration presentation of the hole. (Photograph by Evan Schiller)**





