

Opinion: Norfolk should tee up Sewells Point Golf Club



Cox's Emma Landis tees off during the Class 5 Region A golf tournament at Sewells Point Golf Course in Norfolk on Oct. 7, 2019. (Stephen M. Katz / The Virginian-Pilot)

By ED WARE | Guest Columnist
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Historic Sewells Point Golf Club is tucked away on 150 acres off Terminal Boulevard in Norfolk. Proceeding through brick columns, flanked with twin anchors, the entryway with a crepe myrtle canopy leads to a charming time-worn Spanish tile roof two-story clubhouse dating to 1920.

Famed golf course architect Donald Ross was hired in 1926 to design and build Sewells Point Golf Club then known as the Norfolk Country Club, which opened in 1927. Over his career Ross transformed golf design into an art form. He produced marvelous routing plans that merged golf holes comfortably into the landscape.

The Navy purchased the 147.1-acre property from the city in 1942 and named it the Commissioned Officers Golf Club. Of note, the Navy and Norfolk Sports Club hosted Arnold Palmer's professional debut at a course event in 1954. Golf course use was extended to enlisted service members in 1974 and eventually civilians in 2017. Course renovations were last made in 1986, mostly rebuilding greens. The original 18-hole layout and design largely remain today.

Ross also built and designed 11 other courses in Virginia, including The Homestead Old Course in Hot Springs and Country Club of Virginia Westhampton Course in Richmond. Sewells Point may be the only one lacking a recent comprehensive renovation.

The city-owned Lambert's Point nine-hole course closed in 2022, with Hampton Roads Sanitation District purchasing 40 acres that contained most of the golf course. This closure leaves Norfolk as the most underserved golf municipality in Hampton Roads with only 18 holes at Ocean View Golf Course remaining.

It also strands Old Dominion University men's and women's golf teams without a practice facility. These teams also lack a home course, forcing them to travel for nearly all matches. The site's remaining 15 acres is inadequate for ODU golf program needs.

On Aug. 9 the city held a public forum to discuss future use of the land. Based on a public survey and grass roots petition, there is significant civic support for converting this land into a public park.

Approaching the 100th anniversary of Sewells Point the time is ripe to pursue a master plan to reshape this underappreciated destination that offers a hole-in-one chance: a signature course for Norfolk citizens, military families and visitors; a home course and practice facility for ODU golf teams just 2 miles from campus; and a clubhouse renovation utilizing historic tax credits.

Nationally golf course renovations and restorations are at a two-decade high. The dominant theme is a return to the roots of golf course architecture. The venerable East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta, home to the PGA Tour Championship, recently closed for a one-year dramatic renovation of the 1913 Ross course.

Perhaps most analogous to Norfolk is the 122-acre Asheville, North Carolina, Municipal Golf Course, a 1927 Ross design listed on the National Register of Historic Places that is undergoing extensive capital improvements. "It's not often you get to restore an original Donald Ross that has not been altered over the years," said Chris Cort, director of Asheville Community and Regional Entertainment Facilities.

At 150 acres, Sewells Point is the largest Ross-designed course in Virginia. This generous footprint and a more efficient land-use plan offer the opportunity to create a premier golf destination for the public and state-of-the art training facility for use by ODU and high school teams, while respecting broad community interest in preserving the remaining acreage at Lambert's Point as open space.

With this significant opportunity looming, the Navy Morale, Welfare and Recreation Division, which manages Sewells Point, Norfolk Economic Development Authority and the ODU Real Estate Foundation should immediately form a working group to launch a feasibility study to renovate and restore Sewells Point Golf Club. Further, the working group should engage the Norfolk Historical Society, Norfolk Preservation Collective and Norfolk Sports Club to advocate and educate on behalf of this historic initiative.

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