

Eighty-year-old golf course fights to stay open



Richard Harris, of the San Francisco Public Golf Alliance, is fighting to save Sharp Park.

At 87, Pete Bistolfi has outlived many of his playing partners. But he still fills a foursome two mornings a week at Sharp Park Golf Course, a scruffy seaside muni just south of San Francisco that he thinks of as his home track in more ways than one. When Bistolfi was a boy, his father farmed the land where Sharp Park sits today, raising his family in a wood-framed house that stood on what is now the 8th green. Beans and cabbage grew there in abundance until the early 1930s, when the famed golf architect, Alister MacKenzie, fresh from designing Cypress Point in Monterey, traveled up the coast to embark on another ambitious project, sucking sand from the sea to sculpt a layout that, he later wrote, bore a “great resemblance” to a Scottish links. The course opened for play in 1932.

Over the decades, elements of the original design were lost, victims of natural causes and neglect. But 80 years later, the bones of what MacKenzie built remain. And on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when Bistolfi puts a peg in the ground, he feels, as always, “like I’m in my own backyard.”

Only one thought plagues him when he plays his beloved course: He worries that he might outlive it, too. “Nothing in life is guaranteed,” Bistolfi says. “But I can’t stand the idea of losing this place. I just hope it never goes away.”

Whether it does depends on the results of a drawn-out dispute that pits environmentalists who would like to close the course against Sharp Park advocates, who are pushing for its preservation. The former depict Sharp Park as a subpar course in a region abundant in public golf alternatives, as well as a dire threat to two endangered species, the California red-legged frog and the San Francisco garter snake; the latter peg the layout as a treasured gift to the public good that also happens to be a habitat for frogs and

snakes that wouldn't be present at Sharp Park if the course hadn't been built in the first place.

Since the mid-2000s, when the fight began, these arguments have consumed hundreds of hours of public hearings and given rise to legal and political squabbles with more moving parts than Jim Furyk's swing. Recent rounds in the bout have gone to the golfers, including a November decision by a San Francisco judge to reject a bid by conservation groups to halt maintenance at the muni until a lawsuit seeking Sharp Park's closure goes to court this fall. In her ruling, the judge noted reports by biologists that frog populations at the course have actually increased over the years.

This month, as the U.S. Open unfolds 10 minutes up the freeway at storied, private Olympic Club, play continues at Sharp Park, as does the battle over its future. Though the fight hinges largely on environmental issues, the prolonged standoff has also touched on less-scientific questions, arousing differing opinions on, for one, the historical value of MacKenzie's work at Sharp Park, and, more broadly, the proper role of golf in public life.

"A community defines itself not only by what it builds but also what it decides to keep," says Richard Harris of the San Francisco Public Golf Alliance, an organization working to preserve Sharp Park. "In the 1970s, [U.S. Senator] Dianne Feinstein had to explain to San Franciscans why it was important to keep the city's cable cars. This is not so different. Sharp Park is an Alister MacKenzie course, one of the small handful in the world he built for the public. It's historically significant and should be treated that way."

Harris and his group advocate what they describe as a light-on-the-land restoration of the course, attuned to environmental concerns and to MacKenzie's original intent.

But to Brent Plater, executive director of Wild Equity Institute, one of the organizations pushing to shutter Sharp Park and transform it into a wetlands preservation area, such plans are the essence of romantic hokum, founded on the flawed idea that just because it bears MacKenzie's imprint, the course qualifies as hallowed ground. "Alister MacKenzie designed many fine courses," Plater says. "But Sharp Park isn't one of them. Environmentally and economically, it's unsustainable. The move to restore it is driven by the fantasy of a few elite golfers, dreaming of recreating their anachronism of a golf course that only a wealthy few can play."

Whatever becomes of Sharp Park, there is nothing highfalutin about it today. The en-



Sharp Park Golf Course opened for play in 1932.

former Teamster, who, on a recent Saturday, ambled off the 18th green in blue jeans and a 49ers sweatshirt. In retirement, Charney plays roughly 120 rounds a year, and Sharp Park is his first choice for proximity and price: He lives three miles away and pays \$28 for weekday greens fees. He's been a regular for 30 years.

Time was when Charney also liked to play at Harding Park, San Francisco's best-known municipal course. In 2003, however, a \$26 million renovation project at Harding triggered a rate-hike that priced him and many other golfers out, nearly tripling their greens fees. "Who's going to pay that kind of money to play golf?" Charney said, "especially when you've got a course like this where you never get bored."

Aside from Sharp and Harding, San Francisco has four other munis, but three are nine-hole courses, one little more than a pitch-and-putt. The fourth, Lincoln Park, is priced competitively with Sharp Park, but the hilly layout is less walker-friendly and less appealing to golfers like Bill Williams, 77, a former cabinet draftsman who played behind Charney in his morning round.

"I don't hate frogs and snakes," Williams said. "But I'm a senior with a bad hip. What about me?"

He made a sweeping gesture that took in the first fairway.

"I mean, look at this place," he said. "I don't know what I'd do without it."

No one denies that Sharp Park as it stands is not the same course that MacKenzie designed. In 1941, the third and seventh holes, built hard on the water, gave way to a sea wall, constructed to guard against winter storms. A jerry-rigged routing today takes golfers across Highway 1 to four holes in a canyon, built after MacKenzie's death in

trance to the course, off Highway 1 in Pacifica (the course sits outside San Francisco's borders, but the city owns the land), spills into a parking lot flanked by a chain link fence and a shabby putting green that calls to mind an absent neighbor's unkempt lawn. Its low-slung, Depression-era stucco clubhouse is a pre- and post-round gathering place for a diverse host of dress-code violators, among them Al Charney, a 74-year-old

1934 by his associate, Jack Fleming. The indignities of time and deferred maintenance have also had an impact: traps are overgrown, creeks culverted. But a dozen of MacKenzie's original holes remain, and his signature, though faded, is apparent throughout in deceptively placed bunkers, artful fairway mounding and the curl of doglegs, framed by Seuss-ian cypress trees, that conform to the contours of the land.

In his designs, MacKenzie emphasized harmony with nature. But his motive was aesthetic, not environmental. And Sharp Park advocates acknowledge that any restoration of the course would have to accommodate habitat concerns. "It's a new world since the original plans were drawn," says Bruce Charlton, chief design officer at Robert Trent Jones II Golf Course Architects, who has consulted with the Golf Alliance on a possible restoration of Sharp Park. "But we feel that this could be an opportunity for both golf and the environment. We believe the two can coexist harmoniously."

Already, the course has made concessions to environmental pressures, adding staked preservation areas astride some holes and instituting a cart-path only policy in deference to frog breeding patterns. But environmentalists like Plater contend that mowing, water-pumping and other maintenance practices represent unmitigated threats. In their view, it's not a matter of coexistence. It's a question of either-or. "In the long run, 30 or 50 years from now, the fact is that this course is going to go away," Plater says. "It's simply not viable. The problem is, endangered species like the garter snake don't have that long."

Any debate over public golf invariably turns to economics. In this regard, the sides differ, too. Environmentalists depict Sharp Park as a money-pit; course advocates say it's in the black. The truth, says Katie Petrucione, director of administration and finance for San Francisco's Recreation and Parks Department, lies in between. Since 2004, she says, when the city started tracking individual golf course profits and losses (rather than lumping the balances into a general golf fund) Sharp Park has posted year-end profits three times, topping out at \$105,000, and losses four times, maxing out at \$180,000.

Beyond the numbers, though, lies a question that a balance sheet can't answer: What is the value of muni golf? Though his marquee courses—Augusta National and Cypress Point—are private, MacKenzie saw great import in public golf. "I hope to live to see the day when there are the crowds of municipal courses, as in Scotland, cropping up all over the world," he wrote in 1933. "It would help enormously in increasing the health, the virility and the prosperity of nations, and would do much to counteract discontent."

Were he still around, he might have noted the fulfillment of that last promise on a recent weekend morning at Sharp Park, where lively chatter filled the clubhouse. Sitting in one corner, sipping a post-round beer, Craig Heden, a 60-year-old semiconductor engineer, spoke of his favorite muni as more than just a golf course.

“This is the kind of place where guys volunteer their time to pick weeds on the greens, or get together when they’re not playing,” he said. “We’re friends, it’s a community, and that’s where the strong emotions lie.”

Sitting at another table, Bistolfi, the longtime regular, surveyed the scene, a social ecosystem that ranged across age, class and ethnicity. Among the possibilities for Sharp Park’s future—a restored layout; a wetlands preservation—Bistolfi’s vision for the course, simple as it was, seemed like the only one with no chance of coming true.

“I’d be perfectly happy,” he said, “if they left this place exactly how it is.”