

RBC Canadian Open

Press Conference

Saturday, June 8, 2019

Martin Ebert

Sean McDonough

Chris Hamel

Rhod Trainor

SEAN MCDONOUGH: Welcome everyone, and thanks very much for coming, taking the time. I'm Sean McDonough, the current president of the Hamilton Golf & Country Club. I've been on the board for seven and a half years, and I'm halfway through my presidency this year.

Been a busy year, but I'm so pleased to be involved where the Canadian Open and our future golf course improvement plan. On my left is Chris Hamel, past president of the golf club. He was very influential in drawing up the golf course improvement plan. He's been a great guy follow through for the last seven and a half years for sure. Fantastic.

CHRIS HAMEL: Thank you.

SEAN MCDONOUGH: On my far right, Rhod Trainer, our superintendent of 30 years now. Rhod is retiring December 31st, 2019, but luckily he has acquiesced and is going to stick around for another year as our project manager for our new project.

Right, Rhod?

RHOD TRAINOR: You got it.

SEAN MCDONOUGH: And so as a project manager, he's starting, you know, after the Open. His junior superintendent, Jordan Kitchen, he's going to elevate into a full superintendent's role for the next year anyway, and we look forward to that.

Jordan has been well trained by Rhod for sure. He knows this golf course not quite as well as Rhod, but he's doing a fantastic job. We're happy to see Jordan is sticking around in the role as head superintendent.

On my right here is Martin Ebert, our architect, who has been advising us over the last four or five years on a potential project to the golf course. We're happy to have him here today to give you an update on how we



got here. Martin is going to go out on the golf course and just see how it plays with the pros today.

So without further ado, I think we're going to go to Chris just to give an update on how we got to this point.

CHRIS HAMEL: Thank you, Sean. I think I'll give everyone a bit of background on how we got to the golf course improvement plan. As a starting point, we're very proud to have the world-class golf course that we have, so when you're thinking about any project, you want to make sure you have some world-class help. It's been phenomenal to have Martin Ebert on board as our course architect. He's been on board since 2014.

And having Rhod as our superintendent and Jordan as assistant superintendent, we've got great knowledge, great institutional knowledge about our course and about world-class facilities, so it was great to have that advisory through the process.

But it's been a great and I think very constructive process over the last two years. We've got a very engaged membership, so we've been able to receive a lot of feedback over the last few years on priorities, interests, concerns, et cetera. We have been able to bring all that into the process.

I think one of the parts that I felt was really rewarding is with a lot of the components that could have been available, we really went back to the basics, back to the drawing board, to ensure what should this project include.

So for some of the conceptual ideas from a few years back, we looked at three primary options. We knew we had some aging infrastructure. We knew we needed to look at the bunkers and our irrigation system. We had an option that really got us to that base scale, that base scale of bunkers and irrigation only.

The second option looked at further enhancements that would include some tee blocks; not just for the long players that are playing here that week, but also for the members, the average and the playing-it-forward-type concepts.

We also included a third option that included full green reconstruction.

When we looked at the three options, we also wanted to look at different approaches in terms of implementing the project. We're very lucky here at Hamilton Golf & Country Club; we have full 27 playing holes, so we have some flexibility on how we can stage our projects through the course.

We looked at can we just go through and essentially not close the course, but give our contractor the ability to work on as many holes as he wants to reduce the time frame. So that was one approach.

A second approach was really to control the work on the holes to ensure that we had at least 18 holes playable for our members as we went through the project.

The third option is where we could close nine holes at a time, so spread that over three years.

And then a fourth where can we control the work in the shoulder seasons only and really leave the golf course open during the summers.

So when we worked through all three options and all four approaches all those permutations and combinations, we felt there was a great opportunity here to tackle the full project. We thought with a lot of the advice that we've been given on where we could take our greens and the efficiency we would gain by completing that work in combination with the bunkers and irrigation.

And then we look at further enhancements, whether these forward tees, back tees, different locations for cart paths. There is some great design features that Martin has brought forward for us. Really became very clear to us that being able to complete this project all together including the greens and doing it as quickly as possible and really within about 18 months, it was a great opportunity, plus it would still leave our members playing this course while that work is happening.

If we start this project in the fall of this year and carry through in 2020, we can really get our championship course, which we would tackle first, the west/south nines. They would be back growing before the end of next year and be ready to have the pros see the new course back in 2023.

So many things lining up for us. We're really excited to see it come together, and we're excited to showcase that new golf course with Martin's touches and a little bit of that Harry Colt heritage brought back for the pros to enjoy in 2023.

So that's the history. Thank you.

SEAN MCDONOUGH: Thank you, Chris. Martin, I forgot to mention Martin is a global expert on Harry Colt designed golf courses. There are two in Canada: Toronto Golf and Hamilton Golf & Country. Since Martin has been coming back and forth to our course he's got some great ideas to kind of bring our course back to a total Harry Colt design.

MARTIN EBERT: Uh-huh.

SEAN MCDONOUGH: He also designed Goodwood just east of Toronto, a very good golf course, private golf course. And you've done some renovations Angus Glen.

MARTIN EBERT: Angus Glen.

SEAN MCDONOUGH: Anything else?

MARTIN EBERT: Well, Red Tail any partner designed in London.

SEAN MCDONOUGH: Oh, really? Okay. Didn't know that. Another beautiful golf course.

MARTIN EBERT: Ladies and gentlemen, lovely to be here on such an auspicious week. Yeah, I think when we first were asked by the club to have a look at the project, excited as to the fact that it was a Harry Colt design, one of the very few in North America.

I think it was great to hear the club's brief as well, that they well wanted to restore the some great ideals that Harry Colt practiced through his career.

So with all of those projects we love to study the history of them, look at the old plans, and it was great that the club did have the old Harry Colt sketches. Not that many clubs would've that resource available.

We looked at the old aerial photography as well just to see how the course has changed over the years. It quickly became apparent that when Harry Colt designed the course in 1914 he only was here for a very first period and the First World War intervened. He left a fantastic layout out here, but we've always said that he wasn't around and his people weren't really around to make sure that the detail matched the great layout.

His partner, Charles Alison, came along in 1920 to look at the course after the war. He did all the company's work then in North America after the war. He said, Done a great job in implementing Harry Colt's layout plans. That's great. But there could be a little bit of attention to detail improved with greens, and bunkers in particular.

So I guess that has sort of happened a little bit through the years, but in a piecemeal way. It's great that the committee and the club have decided now to go forward and really have one major project to get that side of the project exactly as it should be so that we think that if Harry Colt came back today that he would be very proud.

I think it's tied in as well with Rhod's side of things and Jordan's side of things in terms of presenting greens with a pure bent grass, standard grass on them, rather than poa. So I think agronomically there is an opportunity to improve things, but for us in particular it's taking those greens which are beautifully positioned in every instance and making them a little bit more interesting, I suppose, in the same style that Harry Colt would've done if he had had that chance way back in the early part of the last century.

We excited about it. It will be fascinating. The Players obviously love the course as it is, so our challenge is to make sure they love it even more when they come back in 2023. It's great that there is that opportunity to play it just before the project and pretty close to its completion. So we're extremely excited about the potential of everything at Hamilton.

SEAN MCDONOUGH: I think that was a great line, Martin. From our perspective this is really more about enhancement than change. I think you said it well. Everybody loves the course as it is. I think the subtlety and the enhancement that we can bring forward in this project is just really going to top things off.

MARTIN EBERT: Just to give a bit of background on our side of things, we are very fortunate based in the U.K. but working on a lot of courses that Harry Colt and his partners designed. That we think stands us in good stead and we hope is one of the reasons the club selected us.

We are very fortunate in advising seven of the ten British Open, or as we call it Open Championship venues, Portrush being I guess one of the key ones.

So that will be under the spotlight this year. We're used to trying to get the very best conditions for the world's best players to play for that one week every seven or eight years. We know the course has got to be great for the members day in and day out. That's 99.9% of the golf played here, so that's uppermost in our mind.

SEAN MCDONOUGH: Perfect. Rhod, do you want to say anything?

RHOD TRAINOR: From my standpoint, I'm the guy this

looks after everything so I understood the weaknesses over the years of our old greens. Basically from being able to look after the golf course and going forward, there is a lot of infrastructure when you do a project such as this. Our old greens, there is in drainage in them and they were designed back in the early days when green speeds weren't anywhere near what they are now.

It's interesting, because restrictions to the green speed is paramount with the PGA TOUR and being able to present fair putting surfaces for basically five pin placements. When we get some of the speeds up around here like we would have for a member-guest day or something, we're using that one pin placement or that marginal pin placement that we may have.

So from an infrastructure standpoint, the new greens will be more receptive to being able to spread wear and introduce lots of movement in the greens for putting interest and get square footage.

This is Canada, and everybody is well aware of what winter can do to some of our golf courses. Some of the things we can do when we're building new greens and new features to alleviate some of those things that happen when we get ice and snow up in this part of the country, I'm excited about that.

So we can have a more consistent kind of golf course going forward, and as well the grasses. That will give our members more consistent playing conditions from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. Poa has its moments. It has times when it's a very excellent putting surface, and times when it's a struggle to keep smooth and those kinds the things.

So that on top of the irrigation system, which it's just time to replace it. We need to replace our irrigation system, and our bunkers are past their prime and need to be replaced.

As Chris kind of alluded to, when you look at all those things together and the amount of construction involved in just that, really made sense to look at the greens as well and do everything and make sure that we address everything and we set the golf course up for the very long future ahead.

So I'm very excited about getting started on that.

SEAN MCDONOUGH: Thank you, Rhod. Rhod was also in charge of the golf course for our last Canadian Opens in 2003, 2006, and 2012. Every Open up to this week and weekend, Rhod has done a fantastic job, as I'm sure you'll all agree. The golf course looks beautiful. From 2003 to 2019 the course just gets better all the time.

There was also one instance in the winter of 2014. We lost all our greens. Rhod said, I can grow them back, and he did. Took him about two months and they were right back in great shape.

He's one of the best growers of grass in the country. (Laughter.) Well, he is. Anyway, thank you.

Anything else?

Q. Martin, two-part question: First, with the changes that are going to be implemented at Hamilton Golf & Country Club, how do you see the scoring being impacted? We see lots of birdies this week. Do you think we'll continue to see that in 2023?

MARTIN EBERT: I think quite possibly, yeah. I think the venues we work on back at home, for instance the Open venues, if the conditions are right these guys will score brilliantly. They're fantastic golfers.

People enjoy seeing the talents of these great players, I think. What we want to do is off the tee make them think a little bit more. Is driver the right option? Bunker the course in a position where, again, maybe we're updating it from Harry Colt's original concepts, but there are a few more thoughts then in terms of what they should do off the tee.

But then also up at the greens just give the guys setting the flags just a few more opportunities to make them tougher to get to, I suppose. We've got some very slopey greens out there as Rhod has alluded to. Just a question of using that slope and breaking it up into different areas on occasion.

I think it'll be perhaps harder to get close to the flag on all 18 greens. Put it that way.

Q. Second part is you alluded to earlier making changes to Royal Portrush. What sorts of changes do we expect to see and the challenge it presents for best golfers in the world in less than a month or so?

MARTIN EBERT: Oh, Portrush? We've got two new holes, two completely new holes which had to replace the old 17th and 18th, so they are just on the most magical ground imaginable. So I think previously the course has been -- some people regarded it as the best 16-hole course in the world. The last two are a bit disappointing.

When the RNA said we need those last for the for the spectator village, fantastic news. We've given two holes which really /fit in with the other 16 on the course now, we think.

What else? I think the grasses on this course, our traditional fescue dominates through the greens. Should be able to present it pretty firm and fast, I think. Obviously depends on the weather conditions.

I think for any of these players that is the ultimate test. If the ball stops on the green, if the green is like a dartboard, it's relatively easy for them. When they've got to judge where to land the ball, that's when it becomes a lot more testing. Hopefully you then got the best ball striking come to the fore.

Yeah, going to be a tremendous festival. The landscape of Portrush is unrivaled I think. You see the sea from every hole I think, and the June scape is the best of any of the venues.

I always have to be a bit careful because we have worked for Mr. Trump as well at Turnberry. I say that's the most majestic of the Open venues, but Portrush has the best June structure. I always have to make that qualification. It will be -- I think a lot of the players would never have seen it. They did have the Irish Open there, but that's obviously European Tour event so a lot of the Canadians and Americans perhaps wouldn't have played in that. A completely new course for them.

I think a bit like this week it seems to have a feel-good factor. I was watching the coverage back in the U.K. on Thursday and just the comments were glowing from everybody. So we have got a tough job on making sure that that -- if anything increases. But I feel the same way about Portrush. The Northern Irish people are the friendliest in the world, and I think it would be a real party atmosphere from start to finish.

Hopefully you'll be there.

Q. Sean, beyond 2023 what are your goals with respect to hosting this tournament and what does this work have to do with those?

SEAN McDONOUGH: We have no plans for post-2023. We are still on schedule to host the tournament again in '23 and look forward to that, but otherwise I think -- you know, if we get the golf course improvement plan done properly and the next Open, I think I we'll take a rest for a while and let our members just enjoy this great place.

Q. And one follow-up question. What is your budget for this work?

SEAN McDONOUGH: The budget is \$11 million and \$1 million contingency included in that \$11 million for loss of revenues in carts and guests and things like that.

MARTIN EBERT: 27 holes as well, isn't it?

SEAN McDONOUGH: 27 holes, so it's a lot of work. We're going to be probably -- you know, originally the whole project came about because we were going to replace just our bunkers. With Martin's plan now we're going to get rid of some of our bunkers. There are just too many of them and they're kind of expensive, the upkeep. Every time it rains you lose the facing on the bunkers.

With Martin's expertise and design of bunkers, well, I think we can make them a little more playable and less maintenance.

Thanks for your question.

Q. Martin, we know that on the west/south layout some of the greens aren't Harry Colt's at all. Do you wander around and go, That's not Harry Colt; how am I going to make that look like a Harry Colt? If so, how many are there that you think you'll have to make changes in?

MARTIN EBERT: Yeah, I mean, you're quite right. There are a number of greens that have been changed several times over the years. Seven west maybe four, five times. A lot of times. There are severe slopes on that green for instance.

Harry Colt wasn't beyond creating greens with fairly significant slopes on, as you probably know if you've experienced a lot of his courses. But it's just making sure that that's appropriate for today's green speeds really to a certain extent. Rhod is alluding to 11, 12 on the stimpmeter. Big slopes mean reduced pin areas.

But I think really all the greens are in the locations that Harry Colt planned, apart from six south, which got moved, didn't it? 15 as it's played now. So that's the only change in location of a green from Harry Colt's original layout.

As I say, the detail wasn't really applied to any of them in the first instance, and I think that's what Alison was alluding to in 1920 when he came and reviewed the course.

I think with these projects from these great Golden Age architects, it's fascinating to imagine how often they got to these courses. We're working in Japan at the moment on another Colt & Company course. Alison designed it in Hirono. Known as the Pine Valley of Japan is its moniker.

Alison was there for three days. It was the guys that did the construction work that were so talented and deserve probably as much credit as Colt, as

Mackenzie, as Tom Simpson, Stanley Thompson, all those great guys. I don't think they could get there that often in those days.

So here with the First World War intervening it was probably difficult to focus on it and get the right team constructing the course at that stage. We're trying to imagine what Harry Colt might want to have put out there for every green on the golf course. In fact, that's the next part of my design process which is going to be fascinating. I love this side of it.

Even more enjoyable when it's being implemented on the ground.

Q. One follow-up. We know the east nine was not designed until about the 1950s. We know that's not a Colt.

SEAN McDONOUGH: '74.

Q. '74. I believe it was on your website you said something about wanting to make even that nine look a little more like it fits in with the Harry Colt design. How would you do that with something that's cut through the trees like that?

MARTIN EBERT: Yeah, I think if that was a nine hole standing on its own, yeah, people would be delighted with it. It's a great nine of its own right. It really is.

But clearly the greens are a little bit different again in style, so I think we can just tie all 27 greens together in terms of their design style. Through the trees, yeah, there are some -- there is more tree cover on that nine. That's one of the proposals, in fact, is to open it up. There is a lovely big triangle if it was cleared of trees and planted with fescue. Would give a much more open feel like Rhod and Jordan actually has achieved in recent years.

This course was a lot more tree bound three, four years ago. Rhod quite clearly pointed out that that was causing huge problems with the green conditions, all the shade that was being cast.

So this is opened up a lot more and I think the same can happen on the east. Not to the same extent, but certainly there are opportunities.

RHOD TRAINOR: I can add to that that we play all 27 holes in three different combinations, so we in fact play three 18-hole golf courses here for our members in daily play. Having a similar design on the east nine just makes all three of those golf courses more harmonious with each other no matter what combination you play them.

Q. You spoke to it already, which is one of the

things I was going to allude to. A lot of trees been removed over the last few years, especially like towards the back of the front nine there and along the hill to open up view lines. Is that something that's going to be continued to be worked on to help with turf conditions and the greens? How many more trees do you plan on taking out?

RHOD TRAINOR: Most of the trees that we took out back in the last few years were correctly related to shade on greens surfaces and some tees, maybe a few landing areas, but a lot of it was the trees that were planted back in the day, poplars, willows, silver maples, very, very dirty, messy trees.

I can tell you right now we're out there today with some blowers blowing some pollen coming out of the trees. If we had those trees here for this Open I don't know how we would be able to keep up with the debris coming out of the trees at this time of the year.

Part of it was to eradicate some of those dirty and invasive and quite frankly the size that some of them were dangerous with large branches coming out of them in windstorms and things.

So the side benefit of that was getting sunlight to the ground, and so it was kind of a reset. The club planted trees -- there was a tree committee here and still is. A very good, strong committee that is now constructively planting trees where we want them, but also removing trees still where they don't look proper.

What's happened really is the removals is the reveal of the topography that was originally here. This is what Harry Colt saw when he came here 100 years ago.

The comments coming back from the members as a result of tree works are exactly the contours, views, vistas. It's a spectacular looking property; why bury it in trees?

Carrying forward there is a small amount of tree work remaining to do from a tree removal standpoint to be able to grow good, quality turf on our greens. We're there already. There is not one of these green sites -- starting this project, one of my criteria was if we're going to plant bent grass and grow bent grass and have good, strong greens, that plant needs a lot more light.

One of poa's features is it does survive a little bit of shade. That's how it invades. It invades when other turfs get weak. So we have to keep bent grass strong to be able to keep the poa out going forward. There is not one of these green sites I don't have full confidence we can have a good strong bent grass green.

Q. And speaking to the greens, for Martin -- I know Chris talked about it as well -- square footage, is that something that plans on being enlarged on a lot of the complexes, or kind of keeping a lot of the detail work we see now similar but just changing the topography as you said?

MARTIN EBERT: In general the greens are being enlarged. What we've seen probably throughout most of the courses that we advise is that greens have got smaller over the years. Sort of a natural -- or a man-made thing, but it does just naturally happen over the years. I think for Rhod and Jordan to produce good turf conditions going forward they need enough space, they need places to put the flag.

That's where we need to be creative in the designs of those greens to still make them challenging, interesting, fair at the same time, but playable and maintainable. Yeah, there will be an increase in size.

Q. Wondering for the fans in 2023 when they come back, will many of the fans notice differences or look and say, This is the same course we saw in 2019 in a broader scale from the specifics?

MARTIN EBERT: Yeah, depends on just their attention to detail, I suppose. When it comes to the greens I don't know if they'll notice. Will they notice a different species of grass on the greens? Unlikely. Different contouring? I think if they've got a reasonable attention to detail that might be the case. They would appreciate that.

The bunkering, the style of the bunkering will definitely be a difference they'll notice.

But the broad -- as Rhod said, most of the tree work has been done, so I think from that perspective there won't be -- I think everyone beholds this great landscape -- and let's not fool ourselves. It was a great one to root a great golf course around. The elevation changes are so significant. That's the brilliance of Harry Colt's original layout done in a fairly short period. He got all those par-3s in the right places. You've got to walk uphill sometimes, but the holes themselves are all 18 outstanding golf holes. So won't be any noticeable difference in that respect. No point in changing something that is so good.

CHRIS HAMEL: I could add to that, Martin, because one of the things I enjoyed through the process is, you're right, if you come back four years later you might not remember every hole perfectly. We were able to see some before and afters that Martin was able to produce with technology, so the subtlety of what it looked like before to after was great to see in the conceptual designs.

MARTIN EBERT: The tee position side of things is a big part of project as well. That said, this has been to be for the members principally, and it's great that it will remain and be strengthened as a championship test.

But with 60 positions, there will a lot more flexibility in had playing the golf course as well.

SEAN MCDONOUGH: Thank you everybody. Greatly appreciate your time.