



Classic Courses

The Country Club of Charleston

*When the U.S. Women's Open comes here in May,
don't be surprised if some of the competitors
choose to lay up at the 11th hole, a 177-yard par three*

by **GEORGE PEPPER**

USGA/JOHN MUMFERT

17th hole



11th hole

Rare are the moments, while playing a golf course for the first time, that you round a corner or reach the brow of a hill suddenly to come face to face with a shotmaking assignment so visually arresting that you stop dead in your tracks, speechless except perhaps for a murmured “wow.”

Examples that come quickly to mind are the 16th at Cypress Point, the 7th at Pebble Beach, and the second shot to the 8th at Pebble. All of them, of course, owe 99 percent of their shock and awesomeness to the pulchritude of Mother Nature. Rarer still are such moments when brought to you entirely by the golf architect. Such a moment occurs at the 11th tee of the Country Club of Charleston.

This is the work of Seth Raynor, the Princeton-educated engineer who learned at the knee of C.B. Macdonald and then followed his mentor’s blueprint, incorporating replicas of several “template” holes from the great British links to create some of America’s most highly regarded courses. The only rap on Raynor is that he lacked originality—simply copying Macdonald’s copies—but the truth is he often outdid Macdonald, pushing the envelope to dramatic effect, as at this 177-yard par three.

Remarkably, it rears up in the middle of a course set on pancake-flat terrain. This is the Lowcountry, after all, and comparatively little earthmoving went on in 1925. The previous hole plays beside marshland and the last seven holes don’t rise or fall more than your back stoop. But as you step to the tee of 11 you don’t see any of those holes, all you see is the most forbidding green imaginable, its enormous false front swooping from ground level to rooftop-height like the launch ramp of a ski jump. Protecting the front-right is a bunker that’s 12 feet deep while one of similar size lurks beyond.

It is Raynor’s take on the Redan hole, the original being the 15th at North Berwick in Scotland, but this Redan has about as much resemblance to that one as Bobby Jones to Bridget Jones. First, it’s a reverse Redan, meaning the angled green slopes from front left to back right rather than right to left as in the original. Second, it is far more severe, both in the pitch of the green and the depth of the flanking bunkers. How severe? Sam Snead once ping-ponged his way to a 13 here.

When the U.S. Women’s Open is played here, May 30–June 3, don’t be surprised if a few players decide to lay up on this little hole, pitching their tee shots to a patch of fairway below the green and hoping for a one-putt par. Canny competitors have been doing exactly that for decades in the Azalea Invitational, a prestigious amateur event the club has hosted since 1946.

But the 11th hole is just the most salient moment in a journey full of interest and challenge. Raynor made the most of the undistinguished terrain with a routing that twists and turns constantly through corridors framed by enormous moss-draped oaks. Only once do two consecutive holes play in the same direction. Sweeping views across the intracoastal waterway are frequent, and there is at least one other “wow” moment, the approach to the par-four 16th, where the massive punchbowl green wraps like a neck pillow around a menacing front bunker known as the Lion’s Mouth. Indeed it is the greens that give this course both its character and teeth. Huge, billowing, and fiercely fast—routinely putting in the 12–13 range on the Stimpmeter—they are Raynor at his finest.

Masters Champion Henry Picard was the head pro here, Hall of Famer Beth Daniel is a longtime member, and fellow member Russell Henley credits his experience with this course for his first PGA Tour title, the 2013 Sony Open in Hawaii, played at Waialae, another Seth Raynor design—but with a much milder version of the Redan. ●