



**Reborn:  
How Oak Meadows  
became The Preserve**

BY TIM CRONIN

Ed Stevenson / Oak Meadows

## *An easily-flooded layout has been transformed into a landscape balancing the need for floodwater retention with the fun of golf*

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REPORTING FROM WOOD DALE

**T**he delightful reinvention of Oak Meadows Golf Course into The Preserve at Oak Meadows began with a fire.

It was early in 2009 that a lightning-sparked fire destroyed the clubhouse of the former Elmhurst Country Club. That caused management of the DuPage County Forest Preserve District, which had taken over the 288-acre property in 1985, to take stock.

“Some said we’ve got to replace that building right away, but we saw increasing flood damage and an eroding customer base,” said Ed Stevenson, longtime pro there and now the executive director of the district. “The greatest clubhouse in the world won’t succeed if you can’t bring in the golfers. We had to think to ourselves, what’s the dog and what’s the tail? This being a forest preserve district, we had to start with the land. Why don’t we start with making the land better, more functional, and improving the golf course on the land? That will bring the people back.”

Floodwater mitigation – storing the water pouring into the property via Salt Creek from the north and releasing it slowly downstream – was the first goal. A better golf course was the second. To create the new environment, architect Greg Martin was selected to envision it.

“One of the things that I pitched early is this wasn’t a golf project inside a preserve, this was a preserve project that had a golf course within,”



Tim Cronin / Illinois Golfer

**OPENING ACT** The first hole of The Preserve follows the original routing of C.D. Wagstaff. After that, Greg Martin went in new and intriguing directions.

Martin said. “That sounds nuanced, but it had a huge impact on what we were going to do and how we were going to do it. At the end of the day, that stuff had to work before the golf worked, and if that stuff worked, the rest of it was going to be just fine.”

Martin’s final plan was approved by the district and all the associated agencies, including the

Army Corps of Engineers, which controls waterways, in 2015. Two years of work began that July 8, after a final round on the original C.D. Wagstaff layout. Some \$16.5 million later – \$300,000 under budget – the course reopened as The Preserve at Oak Meadows.

“I told Ed a number of times, this was just one giant math problem that happened to be a golf



Tim Cronin / Illinois Golfer

**TAKING THE FIFTH** The new fifth hole crosses Salt Creek and runs east through the old Maple Meadows nine to a well-bunkered elevated green.

course. You had to figure out not only the storm water management, but figure out where every cubic yard of dirt goes, plus yardages, entry rules, linear feet of erosion control, and any number of other things. It's typical on many golf courses, but it was really the storm water management that had to work backwards from where the routing plan started."

The property has always held a lot of water, but much of it was held on the golf course. Martin's charge was to hold that much water or more, but not on the course. Some 10 routings later – two of which, he said, included keeping the Maple Meadows nine on the north end of the

property – he had a plan for 18 holes, most of them new, while keeping the corridors of the original first, 17th and 18th from Wagstaff's Elmhurst layout.

And it would hold more water, with a golf course sitting above it.

"When Greg Martin first showed me some concepts for the routing, I said, 'Oh no. Greg doesn't get it. We can't put a hole in that location. It's the first place to flood.'" Stevenson said of what had been the third hole and now is the place of the seventh.

"Greg reminded me though we're dealing with another dimension here – the change in to-

pography," Stevenson said. "The middle of that fairway now is about six feet higher than it used to be. The beauty of what Greg did is it was done gently enough and gracefully enough that to stand on the tee, it looks like perhaps the land had always been that way. That was really one of the goals. Could we come and make changes where someone might be able to feel like this had always been there, yet experience something completely new?"

The answer is yes. Martin oversaw the removal of just over 1,000 trees west of Salt Creek, most of them planted decades ago to make the fairways tree-lined corridors.

“What was cool about that it was part of the re-use story,” Stevenson said of the tree removal. “As our river restoration went, we used trees of appropriate size, 30 to 40 feet long with roots intact, and they got implanted to take care of erosion control. The roots of their trees are left exposed to the water, and that helps churn up the water, which creates higher dissolved oxygen content, and it creates habitat for aquatic life. The ducks, herons, egrets love this place. The bird life has gotten way more diverse.”

The course is hardly barren of trees. Specimen trees were kept, and precisely 517 saplings have been planted, all of them native to northern Illinois, but in spots that make sense. The result is a course with wide playing areas and a landscape with broad vistas. Someone on the 17th tee at the southeast corner of the property can see a mile to the northwest and the fourth tee. It’s a remarkable change, and closer to the early days of Elmhurst Country Club, before tree-planting binges common to many clubs.

“The long sightlines were something I didn’t expect to see,” Stevenson said. “I’ve been around this property for 20 years and thought I knew it.”

Once the plan to start and finish in the original spot was settled, Martin had the benefit of starting and finishing on Wagstaff’s first and final holes, though the greens are new. But everything else had to fit correctly.

“I think the routing is as good as it gets in terms of setting the table, getting a taste and then experiencing the full extent of the environment and having an appropriate finish,” Martin said. “For a golf architectural standpoint, the routing does make a huge difference in the green-to-tee relationships.

“No. 16 was a hole that we devised early on.



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**TAKE TEN** The back nine begins with a brute of a par-3, 223 yards from the tips, 177 yards from the whites.

We knew we needed 16-17-18 and we knew had 1 and (the new) 2-3-4. So we had to figure out how to get from 4 back to the clubhouse and from 10 back to the 16th tee. Those were the holes that really needed to be massaged.”

Five tees on each hole allow scratch players to tee it up from 7,015 yards and duffers to give it a go from 4,906 yards. There’s something for everyone, including three short par-4s. The fourth in particular is a daring risk-reward hole that lists as 352 yards from the tips but might be 285 over a pond if a player dares to drive the green.

“You’ve got the choice to be challenged, and

I think that’s one of the true marks of good architecture,” Stevenson said. “How do you make something for the less skilled golfer and yet challenging for the better player? If you can accomplish both, I think you’ve got something good. Some people have commented, it’s harder than it used to be at first blush.

“Greg was very deliberate in the routing to make sure there was always somewhere to hit it. On 15, there’s a lot of bunkers, and there’s a center fairway bunker. It appears there’s not a lot of room between that bunker and the bunkers behind it, but there’s 40 yards. There are moments where it may



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**ON THE MARK** Left, a player escapes from the centerline bunker on No. 15; right, the familiar closing hole, as re-envisioned by architect Greg Martin.

look challenging or even intimidating, but there's always somewhere to play. There's more landing area to the right if you want to take a more aggressive path. The layout will reward a good shot well-executed, and yet it will provide some relief to needs to find a more conservative route."

The decision to eliminate the Maple Meadows nine was easy, Stevenson said, because of the overall decline in golf business. But, aside from the one homeowner at the northeast corner of the property who decried the loss of the hole behind his house at the original public meeting on the

project, the reworking of the land is a plus.

"He'll have a beautiful preserve instead," Martin said.

So far, the response has been positive. The course was crowded on a recent warm Friday – maybe the last warm Friday of the year – and that has been the norm since the August reopening. There have been plenty of repeat customers.

"What I've indicated to every client that I've had is that, with any specific project, the bottom line is my job is to get that golfer to come back," Martin said. "If he comes back, then we can do

these other things. That's ultimately what will pay for it."

The next step is a new clubhouse to replace the long-gone behemoth, a modern building set on the footprint of the original clubhouse.

Then, aside from continued work on tweaking the stormwater plan, and, said Martin, maybe small revisions to the grass lines around bunkers, the new Preserve will be complete, standing for decades as an example of how the need for containing flood water can co-exist with recreation on a spot that looks like it's always been there.