

December 2020 – Did You Know? The History of no.16 Green

Most of our greens are original from 1928, but over the years the club has redone a few (4, 5, 14 and 16). The first green to be renovated was no.16, in 1952. Both the green and the hill going up to the green were completely recontoured. For the 1952 Blythefield Invitational, a temporary green at the bottom of the hill was used. The new green opened for play in 1953. It took some digging (pun intended) in the Grand Rapids Press archives to find the story.

As originally built in 1928, the sixteenth hole going up the hill had a nasty ravine. The ravine was deep and located just short of the old green, which was not as far up the hill as our current green. Golfers had to negotiate a forced carry over it to get to the green. The original green was relatively narrow from front to back and was much wider than deep. The front of the green started just above the ravine, with the top side of this ravine like a cliff. Since the ravine area was not maintained, shots that did not clear the top edge were frequently unplayable.

Here is an old aerial photo showing the 16th hole before the 1952 renovation (in the photo, the number “16” is at the dogleg). The photo is grainy but gives an idea of the original shape of no. 16 green. The lighter shaded area is the old green. Note that it is wider than deep, and sort of kidney shaped. Now look down the hill a bit, just in front of the green. The lighter shaded area is the old ravine.



1938 aerial showing hole no. 16

A Grand Rapids Press article reveals some information about rebuilding #16 green. The Press used to have a column on golf called "Fairway Shots", written by long-time Press sportswriter Clank Stoppels. Here is his 1953 description of our new no. 16 green:

"Blythefield golfers, incidentally, have reason to cheer. The sixteenth hole, affectionately tabbed Cardiac Hill because of the long climb to the green, has been radically altered. The hole has been lengthened 20 yards, the green being moved toward the seventeenth fairway. Also, bulldozers have plowed down the bank and only a gradual decline remains. In all, it's a much fairer hole for both skilled and duffer."

(Some would say that the slope of the hill is still more than "a gradual decline". Players who walk the course know that it is still a steep hill. So do caddies carrying doubles, like I did back in the 1960's.)

Because the forced carry approach to no. 16 green was too difficult for short hitters, the club decided to fill in the ravine and create a new green. No architect was used. At that time Bob Sutherland was greenkeeper. He and his crew did the work. They placed the green further up the hill. Since this spot was quite high, it was excavated which lowered the green site. When finished, it was several feet lower than its surrounds. (This is certainly different than the rest of our greens, which are all "push-up" greens.) The earth removed from the new green site was plowed down the hill. The result was a green surrounded on three sides by slopes going *down* to the green, rather than slopes going *down* away from the green like most of our greens. The sides of no. 16 are what I'd call a sofa-like shape going down to the green level. The dirt plowed down from the new green completely eliminated the ravine; no more forced carry. The hill going up to the green was still steep but became smooth all the way up.

Here is an aerial of no. 16 a few years later. Note that the new green was built a little to the east of the original, making the dogleg on no. 16 a little less than a right angle compared to the original hole.



1960 aerial of no. 16

The 1952 redo made no. 16 green deeper than it is wide. Most importantly, the green was shaped with a rather severe slope from back to front and somewhat crowned in the middle. Even back in the 1950's when green speeds were much slower, downhill putts on no. 16 could be dicey.

With today's much faster green speeds, this green presents a very difficult challenge. That's undoubtedly why many of our members voted it as most challenging (no. 16 green finished second to no. 14 green in my informal poll). One of our members even called no. 16 green "unfair", especially when the hole location is on the right middle where the slope is most severe. The green we play now is still the same shape as it was after being rebuilt in 1952.

The 2020 renovation we are now completing will increase the size of the green a little, restoring it back to its 1953 area. The former bunkers short of the green on the left have been eliminated, with a new one added on the right. Our current renovation will also convert part of the downslope surrounds from bluegrass to fairway height. This will likely make for some interesting choices for chips. The slope of the green remains the same, still very severe. We know that a 30-foot uphill putt is easier than a three-footer downhill or side hill. Keep your approach below the hole!

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