



A little history on the Links at Union Vale

"The Best Golf Courses You Can Play In New York: GOLFWEEK's Best" 2020

Phil O'Meara

Tom O'Farrell

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On the rolling hills around Union Vale, the Irish golf association has shown what the Irish can achieve and succeed when they work together.

The Links at Union Vale was the fulfillment of a dream of a group of Irish golfers.

They were all members of the Irish Golf Association and 16 Gaelic golfing societies in the New York City area. It was their vision and hard work, site selection, financing, and construction, that brought The Links into existence.

The history of The Links at Union Vale golf course starts with golf in the New York City area. Some New-York Irish golfers got tired of the long wait for tee times and decided to build their own course in nearby Dutchess County.

About 500 golfers from the Irish Golf Association – and 16 other golf societies in the New York area – formed a corporation, and traveled north to find their course. They looked at several properties before finding 200 acres of cattle farmland that presented the opportunity for the kind of course they wanted – links-style, with lots of grassland. The golfers purchased the land and hired Stephen Kay, the renowned New York designer, and his partner, Doug Smith, to build the course. It opened in 2000 as a semi-private course, open to the public.

The idea for this golf course was born of an Irish-American passion for golf.

Story By Pierce O'Reilly from the Irish Echo Feb 16th, 2011

A warm late spring breeze whipped across the 18th fairway at Union Vale Golf Course last Friday afternoon as Tipperary native and the president of the Links at Union Vale, Phil O'Meara, took to the dais.

"Our dream has definitely become a reality," he said. "I want to thank everyone that has worked so diligently on this project. This is a historic day for the Irish, and we welcome you all here for the grand opening of our clubhouse."

Five years ago, frustrated by perennial troubles such as unsuitable tee-off times, long pre-dawn drives to courses, infuriatingly long waits, and the high initiation charges and annual fees of private clubs, several Irish and Irish-American golfers got together and decided to take it upon themselves to change that unacceptable state of affairs.

After forming a non-profit corporation called the Irish Golf Association Corp., they went in search of a suitable site. They arrived at Union Vale, in Dutchess County, N.Y., and have never looked back. The 200-acre site, which is off the Taconic State Parkway, about an hour and a half north of Yonkers Raceway, located between Beekman Country Club and James Baird State Park, cost \$600,000. Last Friday, the final piece of the jigsaw was finally put in place when the 18,000-square-foot clubhouse was officially opened.

Golf Course Architects Stephen Kay and associates designed the course on what was originally cattle and farmland. The championship course is designed with distinct and memorable features of water, pot bunkers, and natural hazards, complemented by bent and fescue grasses. The two-story clubhouse, which was opened officially last weekend, is for many the icing on the cake. Designed by architects Kenneth Irving and Donald Swetz, it comprises a reception area, restaurant, bar, a private member's bar, catering hall, pro shop, and storage space. A grand exterior staircase offers a dramatic, almost ceremonial, entrance for members and their guests, who are then ushered into the clubhouse under a barrel-vaulted ceiling decorated with Tipperary crystal chandeliers.

O'Meara, standing at the entrance of the clubhouse and surveying the panoramic view and rolling Hudson Valley that stretches all the way to the distant Catskills, could barely contain his pride.

Indeed, while numerous efforts in the past by Irish groups to obtain a place of their own proved fruitless and sometimes controversial, members of the Irish Golf Association, of which O'Meara is president, quietly but diligently went about turning their dream into reality.

"Five years ago, a group of Irish golfers came together with the shared dream of building a golf course, which we would own and operate," O'Meara said. "Today is the culmination of that dream. The board of directors and those members who labored so long and unselfishly to complete the task are to be commended. There was a labor of love, and it shows."



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The new course is 7,000 yards long. The course superintendent, Chris Strehl, hasn't taken a day off in two years and is adamant that the golfing stars will arrive soon to test their mettle.

"The course has all of the challenging terrain and beauty that easily identifies an Irish links-style course," he said, flanked by the directors, who included Westmeath's John Dunleavy, chairman of the New York City St. Patrick's Day Parade committee, and Galway's Brendan Hynes, a retired state highway supervisor.

Deputy Consul General Cait Moran, Msgr. James O'Connor, New York State Senator Vincent Liebell, Dutchess County Executive William Steinhaus, Lisette Hitsman, supervisor for the town of Union Vale, and many more all spoke in glowing terms about the venture.

Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern even got in on the action. His letter of congratulations was read out to the assembly. "I would like to take this opportunity to express my warmest wishes to all Irish people and all the descendants of Irish emigrants now living in New York," the Taoiseach wrote. "Irish Americans are not just an important part of New York's history; they are a vibrant and living part of New York's present. This is a historic day for the Irish, and the opening of these superb new facilities makes a clear, positive statement about your well-placed optimism and confidence moving forward."

The idea for this golf course was born of an Irish-American passion for golf. In the New York area alone, there are about 20 Irish golf clubs. For many players, however, the increasing popularity of the sport has made it ever more difficult to find suitable places to play. Most private clubs now have high initiation charges and annual fees. Playing on most public courses may mean having to accept unsuitable tee-off times and long waits.

"We always wanted our own golf course, so we just went after it," Tom O'Farrell, a retired PaineWebber executive who's on the IGA's finance committee, said. Lifetime membership in the new club is priced at \$10,000 and is limited to 500 members. Membership may be bought and sold or transferred to others. Some claim they have sold their shares for up to \$25,000.

In addition, the original IGA members turned over the mammoth task of preparing the necessary reports and documents to get the course up and running. The permit application included preparation of engineering surveys, traffic tests, a storm-management plan, obtaining an earth-moving permit, and an array of reports covering such areas as archeology, wildlife, and wetland.

Although virtually all links courses are near the coast, the inland course at Union Vale will have many links features. There are few trees, about 100 sand traps, and a few ponds and brooks. The wind will also be a constant factor.

The two most challenging holes are the 14th and the 16th. The 14th is a 605-yard par 5 into prevailing wind with a pond to contend with. The 16th has three fairway traps, with the second shot going to a well-bunkered green that slopes off to the left.

For many golfers, an important aspect of a course is the type of grass used. The course at Union Vale has creeping bentgrass on the greens and perennial ryegrass on the tees and fairways. There is Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue in the roughs.

According to some of those involved with the course, every hole has a distinctive feature, with some based on designs from well-known golf courses in Ireland. Beneath the course lies an extensive computer-controlled irrigation system.

The club's resident professional, Ciaran Carr, a native of Drogheda, Co. Louth, described the opening of all 18 holes as "a wonderful opportunity; we are all very excited."

Thank You