

Where real New Yorkers play

Who says you can't play the game in the city? From Brooklyn to the Bronx, a dozen courses have a unique urban appeal

TWO DOZEN WILD TURKEYS WERE loitering in front of the 14th tee. We hit our drives over their heads, then walked through the flock, causing a tom the size of a small ostrich to puff up its chest in a threatening manner. In a pub in Scotland many years ago, my eight-ball partner, an inebriated local, gave me some advice I've never needed but always remembered: If you get into a fight in a poolroom, don't reach for a cue; reach for a ball. I fingered a ProV1 in my pocket, then thought better of it, and unsheathed my 9-iron.

Birds don't usually make me nervous, but we were playing in a tough neighborhood: the Bronx. In late autumn, when my home course closes for the winter, my friends and

By David Owen • Photographs by James Rexroad





Van Cortlandt
Park in the
Bronx was the
first municipal
golf course
in the United
States.





On Sundays at La Tourette in Staten Island, the 11th fairway doubles as a football field.

I transfer our golf allegiance from ex-urban Connecticut to New York City, which owns a dozen 18-hole public courses and makes every effort (including removing light snow from tees and greens) to keep them open all year. Our route from the country to the city takes us past six or seven hibernating Westchester County courses, several of which are so exclusive that even when they're open they might as well be closed—including Winged Foot's next-door neighbor, Quaker Ridge, which we study longingly from the Hutchinson River Parkway.

Our most frequent golf destination in the city is Pelham Bay Park, in the northeastern corner of the Bronx. The park contains two highly acceptable courses: Pelham, which opened in 1901, and Split Rock, which opened in 1935. The courses have undergone several million dollars' worth of thoughtful renovations in recent years, but they retain their quintessential urbanity. To get from one to the other you have to walk under a rusting railroad trestle, and for a long time the skeleton of a burned-up car filled two prime spaces in the parking lot. My friends and I also play in Brooklyn and Queens.

Golf is not the first thing that most people think of when they think of New York City, and for good reason: On a per-capita basis the city has only a third as many courses as the rest of the country, and only 2 percent as many as the most golf-friendly state, which (remarkably) is Michigan. But New York's courses are more than novelties or anachronisms. Marine Park Golf Course, just down the Belt Parkway from JFK Airport, was designed by Robert Trent Jones, in 1964. La Tourette, on Staten Island, was laid out on what was once the farm of a man who fought in the War of 1812, and the clubhouse is his old mansion. Mosholu, a nine-hole course in the Bronx, is an official site of The First Tee program and is one of the

few First Tee courses in the country that kids can travel to by subway.

All of New York City's courses are packed on nice summer weekends, but the crowds aren't too bad during the winter, on weekdays and in the rain. You can reserve tee times online, and the green fees are more than reasonable. Last fall and winter, after 11 a.m. every day but Saturday, you could have played Silver Lake Golf Course—which is on Staten Island and was designed in 1929 by John Van Kleeck, who also laid out Split Rock and redesigned Pelham—for a special rate of \$18, including cart.

When my friends and I go to New York City to play golf, we sometimes travel in Gene's Gulfstream. That is to say, we take his 1988 Dodge Ram van,



which he bought, many years ago, from the guy he works for. The van has an extra-high roof and a built-in "Who's the Boss?"-era TV and VCR, and much of the interior trim is made of what appears to be real wood. Hardly any of the seatbelts still work perfectly, but there's an awesome metal ladder attached to the outside of one of the rear doors. The ladder leads to a rooftop cargo area. If we get lost

Denny Doyle, a retired New York City police officer, takes the tee at Dyker Beach in Brooklyn.



on the road, or if somebody wanders off while we're trying to get everyone organized, one of us climbs up and has a look.

THE PLACES AND THE PEOPLE

One of the first times we played at Pelham, there was a lengthy frost delay. Impatient golfers filled the main room of the clubhouse, which serves both courses, and there were clusters of Irish guys, Asian guys, black guys and other guys, including us. The Pelham clubhouse was built in the '30s and is no longer heated, if it ever was, so there was lots of frosty breathing going on. Most of the building has been left to look after itself since the Depression; there are some high windows in the main room from which glass has been missing for as long as my friends and I have been playing there. Despite the neglect, though, the clubhouse remains remarkably un-vandalized—except by the Parks & Recreation Department, which used to do things like paint original Art Deco details dark blue. A multimillion-dollar clubhouse renovation is in the works. It's being planned and paid for by American Golf Corp., which has op-

Dominick Gabriele gets a kiss from Lorraine Morris while Buddy Maio counts points at Dyker Beach (top); Mike Tuohy (below) counts strokes.



erated Pelham and six of the city's other golf properties since 1983.

The guys who run the golf shop at Pelham employ an effective form of passive-aggressive crowd control: They don't take your money until a few minutes before your tee time, and they don't let you hang around their desk, asking them what the deal is, while you wait for them to take it. After you check in, they tell you to get lost for a while. You can pass the time by putting (on two huge practice greens in back, just beyond an enormous patio), or by chipping at tree

trunks or your golf bag, or by hitting shag balls at passing trains. When your turn finally comes, they call your name over the public-address system, which, like the public-address system on the subway, converts New Yawkese into Klingon. Then they give you a receipt, which you present to the starter.

If the number of golfers in our group isn't evenly divisible by four, the guys at the desk add players from the singles list. Once, my friend Hacker (real name) and I played with two Colombians who had been living in this country for 40 years and hadn't picked up much English yet. One of them owned a vending pushcart, and the other one either worked in an apartment building or was an attorney—we couldn't make out what he said. We had a great time despite our communication difficulties, though, because spoken language isn't indispensable, or even all that useful, for most of the conversing that men do on a golf course. Another time—at Clearview, in Queens—Hacker and I played with two older Korean men. I said something about the growing number of talented young Korean players on the LPGA Tour, and one of the men said, "Koreans do not ski, do not play tennis, do not play hockey. Golf is their only form of pleasure."

Our third most frequent New York City golf destination, after Pelham and Split Rock, is Dyker Beach Golf Course, in the southwestern corner of Brooklyn, in what looks like Archie Bunker's old neighborhood. The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge looms over the west side of the course, dwarfing the steeple-like clock tower of Poly Prep Country Day School, which is directly across Seventh Avenue from the eighth green. My brother and I played at Dyker earlier this year and found that, on certain holes, both the bridge and the tower make convenient aiming points. We were joined that day by an Asian guy, who didn't speak much English, and by a guy of indeterminate national origin, who had a vaguely Eastern European accent and worked in the corporate-travel industry.

The clubhouse at Dyker was built



in 1936. Like the clubhouse at Pelham, it has been benignly neglected for many decades, with the result that, although the roof slates look pretty suspect, many original interior details remain, among them a three-dimensional course map hanging on a high wall in the main room. (There's a similar map at Pelham.) Near the door to the men's room is an unmarked door, which leads to an old storage room that serves as the unofficial headquarters of the Shore View Golf Club—a sort of club-within-a-club. Shore View was founded in 1930, has roughly 140 members, and is chartered by the city. My friends and I met a couple of members a little more than a year ago. They showed us their hideout, where they sometimes sit around playing cards, and we discussed the possibility of someday organizing a home-and-home golf trip.

After playing at Dyker, my friends and I usually have lunch in the grill-room. One Sunday afternoon not long ago, an old "Honeymooners" episode was playing on the TV above the bar when we sat down. Two Dyker regulars were right in front of the set, and they were laughing so hard that they had tears in their eyes, even though they

When there's no snow, Vinny Dooley gets in some winter golf at Dyker Beach.



seemed to know most of the lines already. "This is the greatest story ever told," one of them said. It was the episode in which Ralph tries to cure Ed of sleepwalking.

A GOLF COURSE BUILT FOR \$642.80
A few years ago, I found (on eBay) an 1895 magazine article called "Society Plays Golf." Its author wrote that fashionable people in the metropolitan area had recently gone "golf-mad," and that "from the present outlook the geographer of the future will be justified in

stating that New York, a city at the mouth of the Hudson River, is bounded on all sides by golf links." Later the same year, a group of golf-mad New Yorkers persuaded the city to spend \$642.80 to build nine holes in Van Cortlandt Park, in the Bronx. It was the first municipal golf course in the United States.

Van Cortlandt's original layout consisted of eight very short holes (none longer than 200 yards) and one extraordinarily long one (which must have been more than 1,000 yards,

New York City golf (18-hole public courses; see nyctetimes.com)

- 1 ★★★ **VAN CORTLANDT PARK G.C.** (1895), Van Cortlandt Park South and Bailey Avenue, the Bronx, par 70, \$26-\$45, 718-543-4595.
- 2 ★★★½ **PELHAM BAY PARK: PELHAM G. CSE.** (1901), par 71; 3 ★★★ **SPLIT ROCK G. CSE.** (1935), par 71, 870 Shore Road, north of Bartow Circle, the Bronx, \$26-\$45, 718-885-1258.
- 4 ★★★½ **CLEARVIEW G. CSE.** (opened in 1925), 202-12 Willets Point Blvd., Queens, par 70, \$26-\$45, 718-229-2570.
- 5 ★★★½ **DOUGLSTON G. CSE.** (1926), 6320 Marathon Parkway, Queens, par 67, \$26-\$45, 718-224-6566.
- 6 ★★★½ **KISSENA PARK G. CSE.** (1934) 164-15 Booth Memorial Ave., Queens, par 64, \$26-\$45, 718-939-4594.
- 7 ★★★ **FOREST PARK G. CSE.** (1910), 101 Forest Park Drive, Queens, par 70, \$26-\$45, 718-296-0999.
- 8 ★★★ **MARINE PARK G. CSE.** (1964), 2880 Flatbush Ave., Brooklyn, par 72, \$26-\$45, 718-338-7149.
- 9 ★★★½ **DYKER BEACH G. CSE.** (1897), 86th Street and Seventh Avenue, Brooklyn, par 72, \$26-\$45, 718-836-9722.
- 10 ★★★½ **SILVER LAKE G. CSE.** (1929), 915 Victory Blvd. near Forest Avenue, Staten Island, par 69, \$26-\$45, 718-447-5686.
- 11 ★★★ **LA TOURETTE G. CSE.** (1920), 1001 Richmond Hill Road, Staten Island, par 72, \$26-\$45, 718-351-1889.
- 12 ★★★½ **SOUTH SHORE G. CSE.** (1927), 200 Huguenot Ave., Staten Island, par 72, \$26-\$45, 718-984-0101.

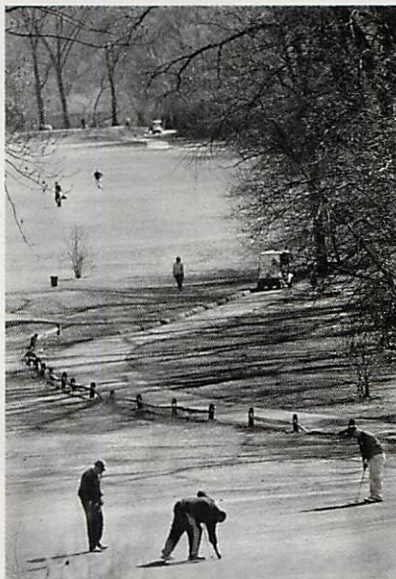
★★★ "Very good" in Golf Digest's *Best Places to Play*





because the entire course measured a bit less than 2,600). The course was known originally as The Meadows, and it was extremely popular, even though at that point hardly anybody in America owned golf clubs or knew almost anything about how to hit a golf ball. In 1899, Tom Bendelow—a 30-year-old Scotsman and former typesetter, who would eventually design 650 golf courses in North America—expanded Van Cortlandt to 18 holes. By 1920, according to the Parks Department, the course was handling as many as 5,000 golfers a week.

Bendelow's design survived until the 1940s, when Robert Moses began building highways on top of it. Today, the course is divided into four roughly equal-size lobes, by the Mosholu Parkway, the Major Deegan Expressway and a fence-enclosed swamp called Tibbetts Brook, which resembles the Dead Marshes in "The Lord of the Rings," except murkier. To get to the last four holes you have to take a long, unnerving walk under an Interstate overpass, along a narrow concrete walkway with tall fences on either side. Yet the course has lots of terrific holes, and parts of it feel almost secluded. During a recent round there, I saw several deer (on the second hole) and a fox (on the fifth). Later, as I walked down a steep hill to-



The 12th hole at Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx.

ward the 18th green (which sits in front of a trash-strewn embankment below an Interstate highway), I heard an owl.

with wire cutters and various digging implements, then play the third, fourth and fifth holes over and over, with two or three mismatched wooden-shafted clubs, until a ranger in a pickup truck spotted them and gave chase.

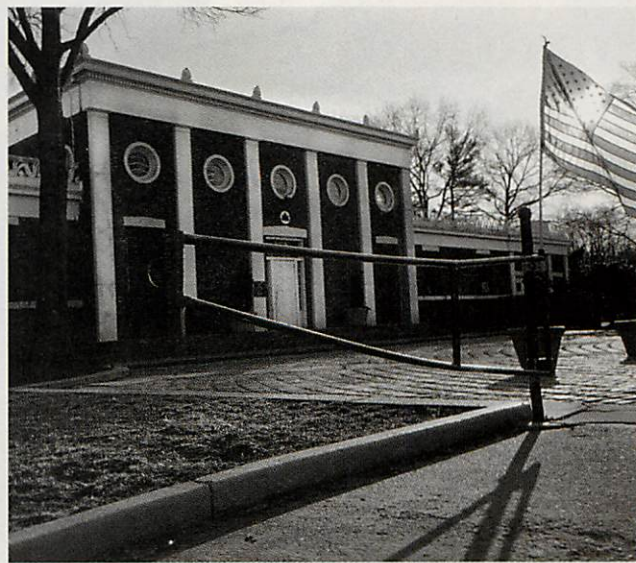
"They would always close up the holes we made in the fence, but it was like trying to keep woodchucks out of your garden," Ferris told me recently. "We never damaged the golf course, but we did steal the flags sometimes, and we liked to have sword fights in the bunkers with the long bamboo poles they whipped the greens with. My father was a member of a private club, in Tuckahoe, but they wouldn't let you on the course until you were 12, so those three holes were where I learned to play golf."

Because Ferris' golf adventures were confined to three of the five holes in the northernmost lobe of the course, between his back yard and the Mosholu Parkway, he never set foot in one of Van Cortlandt's best features: its clubhouse, which was built in 1902. The men's and women's locker rooms, which are on the second floor, still contain their original wooden lockers. To get from the clubhouse to the first tee, you take one of the great warm-up walks in golf,

ward the 18th green (which sits in front of a trash-strewn embankment below an Interstate highway), I heard an owl.

My regular golf buddy Ferris, who is in his early 60s, grew up just a few hundred yards from the northern end of Van Cortlandt, on Tibbetts Road, in Yonkers. He and his childhood pals used to breach the golf-course fence

"Lady" (below left) rules at Dyker Beach; Pelham Park (right) has some striking architecture on and off the course.





along the eastern shore of Van Cortlandt Lake, the largest freshwater lake in the Bronx.

When gasoline was rationed during the Second World War, Manhattanites who wanted to play golf at Bayside Links, in Queens, would usually take the Long Island Railroad to the Bayside station, then finish the trip in a horse-drawn wagon dispatched by the club. The horses that drew the wagon were named Hook and Slice. The course, which was semiprivate, was the work of Alister Mackenzie. It opened in 1932, a few months before Mackenzie's other big project that year, Augusta National, and it disappeared in the 1950s, as the postwar home-construction boom consumed western Long Island.

Recently, I spoke to Kevin McGarry, who was born nearby in 1929 and now

It wouldn't be golf in the city without a little traffic here and there: A player walks along the Mosholu Parkway while making his way around Van Cortlandt Park.

lives in Kentucky. He and his two older brothers caddied at Bayside Links, he told me, and he once met Babe Ruth there. "Ruth came into the caddie yard, and we all gathered around," he said. "I was a Giants fan, not a Yankees fan, and I mentioned that Mel Ott had broken one of his records, and he said, 'That ain't nothin', kid.' My father once told me that there were more golf courses in the seven square miles around Bayside than in any other seven square miles in the world, and he might have been right. There were two public courses, Clearview and Kissena, and there were

many private country clubs: Oakland, North Hills, Hillcrest, Belleclaire, Pomonok, Malba, Sound View, Plandome, Fresh Meadow and several others whose names I don't recall."

McGarry went to a high school dance at Pomonok, which had female caddies and was the site of the 1939 PGA Championship, in which Henry Picard defeated Byron Nelson, 1 up. (The World's Fair was taking place virtually next door, at the same time.) Fresh Meadow—which was situated just south of what is now the Long Island Expressway and just west of what is now Cunningham Park—was designed by A.W. Tillinghast at the zenith of his career. It opened in 1922, within a year of Winged Foot and the redesigned Baltusrol, and it had many memorable features in common with both of those master-

- 1 denial
- 4 anger
- 7 bargaining
- 11 depression
- 13 acceptance

16 love



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pieces, including miles-long par 4s and monumental greenside bunkers. Fresh Meadow's head pro between 1925 and 1931 was Gene Sarazen, and the club hosted both the 1930 PGA (which Sarazen lost in the final, 1 down, to Tommy Armour) and the 1932 U.S. Open (which Sarazen won). Nevertheless, in 1946 the property was sold to real estate developers, who bulldozed Tillinghast's greens to make way for suburban houses and garden apartments. In fact, of all the old courses that McGarry mentioned to me, only Clearview, Kissena and North Hills (which is now called Douglaston Golf Course) are still around, and all three are owned by New York City—as is Forest Park, another old Queens course, which opened in 1910.

The only one of the New York's five boroughs that doesn't contain a golf course is Manhattan—although it used to have one, sort of. Governors Island (in New York Harbor, a half-mile south of the Battery) is officially part of Manhattan, and for more than 50 years it had a crude nine-hole course, which was laid out in the '30s on a featureless piece of ground that had previously served as a polo field. The course was used by military personnel stationed on the island, and it was maintained by the inmates of a military prison there, possibly including the boxer Rocky Graziano, who did time during the Second World War for being absent without leave. The course was abandoned in 1996, when the Coast Guard moved away, but traces of greens and bunkers are still visible and old balls turn up occasionally. In 2003, Congress declared most of the northern part of the island a national monument and turned over control of the rest, including part of the old golf

course, to New York State and New York City. Last year, I asked Yvette Debow, who is the director of marketing for the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation, whether plans for the island included restoring the golf course. She said, "It's too early in the process to give you a yes or no answer about anything." In other words: no.



Ben Sands calls it a day after another round at Pelham Park in the Bronx.

Rather than feeling sad about what New York has lost, though, we should be grateful for what remains. Playing golf at all inside the city limits still seems almost miraculous to me. (I've flown in or out of New York airports at least a couple of hundred times in the past 30 years, and I don't recall ever looking down on the city and noticing a golf course: We see what we expect

to see.) No one teeing off in Brooklyn or the Bronx or Staten Island or Queens is in any danger of taking the game for granted.

Not long ago, I drove to Pelham by myself, on a day when I was looking for an excuse not to work. The guys behind the desk grouped me with two guys from Westchester, whose names were Sandy and Andy. Both were in their 60s, and both had retired recently: Sandy, from the advertising sales department at a television network; Andy, from a stock brokerage. They met years ago, through their wives, who play cards and mah-jongg together, but they didn't really become friends until retirement had re-channeled their life force into golf, which they now play three or four times a week. During the season, they said, they usually play at two public courses in Westchester—Saxon Woods and Maple Moor—which my friends and I also pass as we cruise down the Hutch.

Andy's old office was at One Liberty Plaza, across from the World Trade Center. On September 11, he got stuck in traffic north of the city and was creeping down the West Side Highway when the first plane hit. If he had gotten to work on time that morning, he told me, his car would have been entombed in the lot in the American Express Tower, although he would have been OK. A couple of weeks went by before he could get back into his office, to remove his records and some other things, and from then until his retirement he worked in a branch office in White Plains. His spookiest memory from the terrible day, he says, was "the intense expressions on the faces of the firefighters." On the 15th tee, he took out a Ziploc bag containing two apples, and gave one of them to Sandy. ♣