

By ADAM BRADY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOANN DOST

A Subtle Challenge

The deceptive Del Monte Golf Course
— the oldest continuously operating course
in the West — earns its place in the sun.

IT IS AN IMMACULATELY CONDITIONED, CLASSIC LAYOUT WHOSE TRADITION OF CHAMPIONSHIP GOLF PREDATES NEARBY PEBBLE BEACH GOLF LINKS BY MORE THAN TWO DECADES; AND YET DEL MONTE GOLF COURSE — RICH IN LORE AND STEEPED IN HERITAGE — RECEIVES ONLY A FRACTION OF THE ATTENTION GIVEN ITS MORE CELEBRATED NEIGHBORS.

But that happens when you reside in the same neighborhood as some of the greatest seaside layouts in the country, in a locale commonly referred to as the Golf Capital of the World. Del Monte is inconspicuous even in its own family, which includes its younger sister courses at Pebble Beach Resorts — Pebble Beach, Spyglass Hill, and Spanish Bay — all within the guarded gates of Del Monte Forest, each a quick turn off the famous 17-Mile Drive. Del Monte sits alone a few miles away, hidden to those zooming by on Highway 1 a few hundred yards from the opening hole.

Still, a close look at Del Monte reveals a timeless design that more than holds its own. Stands of tall Monterey pine and oak trees line the 6,357 yards of rolling fairways and smooth greens. And although it has nary a drop of water and only one forced carry on the course, well-placed bunkers (both fairway and greenside) and small, undulating putting surfaces make the layout more vexing than it looks on paper.

Fairways — many of which dramatically dogleg — are often wide enough to let loose from the tee, but several holes require players to leave the head cover on the driver. The trick is knowing which is which. PGA champ and TV commentator Johnny Miller describes it as “sneaky hard.”

“People don’t easily go low here because they think they can overpower it, and you just can’t do that,” says Neil Allen, head professional at Del Monte for the past six years. “There are so many subtleties that make it hard to score.”

Monterey Harbor lies in the distance from the tree-lined fairways of Del Monte Golf Course. The red-tile roof of Hotel Del Monte, for which the course was built in 1897, is visible through trees to the right between the course and the ocean. More modern classrooms of the Naval Postgraduate School appear to its left.





While the course gives way to its more famous Monterey Peninsula cohorts, it stood alone as the best in California when it opened in 1897 as a nine-hole course, designed by an Englishman named Charles Maud, who is thought to be behind its expansion to 18 holes in 1903 as well.

The golf course at San Francisco Presidio opened nearly 15 months prior to Del Monte; but because that course closed to become a drill field during the Spanish-American War, Del Monte holds the distinction as the oldest continuously operating golf course in the West. It was also one of the first courses in the country to have grass greens, rather than sand or barren soil. It was originally constructed as an amenity for the popular Hotel Del Monte, which has been a Naval base since World War II and since 1951 has served as the Naval Postgraduate School's headquarters. Today the golf course neighbors the Hyatt Regency Monterey.

Age alone is only part of its nobility. Soon after opening, the course became the top venue for West Coast competition — in the early part of the 20th century hosting many events, including the Del Monte Cup, an event held several times per year, and the Pacific Coast Open, which was won at Del Monte in 1901 by Willie Smith, the 1899 U.S. Open Champion. In 1909, the Del Monte Championships were founded; today the trophies for that tournament's men and women champions can be found in The Tap Room at The Lodge at Pebble Beach. In 1912, the California Golf Association was formed while the state's top golfers gathered for the Del Monte Championships. The first California Amateur Championship was held the following week and, as Jack Neville won them both, the two championships became one event for the men. The Del Monte women's championship continued into the 1940s and claimed among its winners Marion Hollins and Babe Didrikson.

Hit your tee shot straight and long on the 16th hole and you are left with a tricky approach shot into the well-bunkered green.

1880

Hotel Del Monte opens



1901

Willie Smith, the 1899 U.S. Open champion, wins Pacific Coast Open

1909

Alice Hager and Frank Newton win the first Del Monte Championships

1916

Heinrich Schmidt defeats Douglas Grant in Western Amateur Championship



1920

British golf architect W. Herbert Fowler redesigns Del Monte Golf Course

1926

First Monterey Open Championship tees off

1897

Charles Maud-designed Del Monte Golf Course opens with nine holes

1903

Del Monte Golf Course expands to 18 holes



1912

Del Monte Golf and Country Club established; Jack Neville wins the first California Amateur Championship

1919

Del Monte's second course, designed by Neville and Grant, opens at Pebble Beach

1922

Walter Hagen and Joe Kirkwood defeat local pros in exhibition



1935

Three-time British champ Joyce Wethered plays exhibition

Tree-lined fairways, well-manicured bunkers, and small greens exemplify the character of Del Monte Golf Course, which has been challenging golfers for more than 100 years. The tower of Hotel Del Monte and Monterey Bay are seen in the distance.



The Western Amateur Championship (of the Chicago-based Western Golf Association) made its first sojourn west of the Continental Divide and was held at Del Monte in 1916, when Heinrich Schmidt defeated Douglas Grant in the final match. Soon after, Grant and Neville joined forces to design Pebble Beach Golf Links. “We’re a modern golf course, but we do have a lot of history,” says Allen, looking around a golf shop adorned with photos of players such as Walter Hagen, Bobby Jones, and Miller. “You look at the names that have been here, and you’re humbled by it.”

Even after other courses were built in the area — Pebble Beach (1919), Monterey Peninsula (1927), and Cypress Point (1928) — golf architect Alister Mackenzie noted in 1932 that there was “a greater amount of play on [Del Monte] than all the other courses put together.”

W. Herbert Fowler reworked the course in 1920, and his redesign comprises most of the current course, other than the shift of a few holes in the 1960s caused by construction of Highway 1 and Hyatt Regency Monterey. “It’s one of the neatest little golf courses anybody will ever play,” Allen says. “I played here 20 times before I really could appreciate the intricacies of it. Just the subtleties obtained over 109 years make it what it is.”

Del Monte continues to annually host championship golf, including the Monterey City Amateur, the Monterey Open, and the Callaway Golf Pebble Beach Invitational, the latter of which began at Del Monte in 1972. Last year, it joined Pebble Beach Golf Links as a host course of the Wal-Mart First Tee Open, an official Champions Tour event.

Like any great design, Del Monte has a thrilling finish. The long-hitters can reach par-5 No. 17, while shorter knockers can still find a tempting scoring opportunity. The green is so close to the Hyatt that those dining on the restaurant’s patio could help with a read on a birdie putt.



The approach shot into the 17th green flirts with bringing the patio area of the Hyatt Regency into play.



1943

The City of Monterey runs Del Monte Golf Course “for the duration” of WWII, while Navy leases Hotel Del Monte

1955

New clubhouse and grill open

1967

Clubhouse and grill move to current location, making room for Hyatt Regency



1972

Del Monte and Laguna Seca host first Hyatt-Laguna Seca Classic, which evolved to today’s Callaway Golf Pebble Beach Invitational

1978

20th Century Fox buys Del Monte Golf Course in a deal that includes Pebble Beach Company holdings

1986

The Invitational replaces Del Monte with the new Carmel Valley Ranch course

1948

Navy buys former hotel and company resumes operation of Del Monte Golf Course



1965

Nick Lombardo leases golf course operation

1971

Company resumes operation of course and opens new holes to replace ones displaced by Highway 1 expansion and Hyatt Regency construction

1973

Renowned cartoonist Eldon Dedin creates a series of ads from which emerges a new logo titled “The Duke of Del Monte”

1979

The Invitational returns to Del Monte Golf Course after a four-year hiatus; local favorite Bobby Clampett wins in his first year as a pro



Negotiating through and around tall oaks is part of the challenge of the beautifully designed finishing hole.

The par-4 No. 18 is one of several classic risk-reward holes. One might be tempted to blow the drive over the tall oak that guards the left half of the fairway, but anything less than a solid drive will be blocked on the next shot. Crafty players may try to push the drive far to the right into the 17th fairway; but the approach, while shorter, is difficult to manage. “It’s only 395 yards, but it’s so darn difficult,” Allen says. “It’s just a beautifully designed golf hole, and it has evolved.”

The par-4 No. 7 is notable for a tall oak in the middle of the fairway: a bushy obstacle that must be carried to have a decent shot at the uphill green. Even the perfect drive and approach are left, with a three-tiered putting surface, where the back-left hole location is probably the toughest. Miss the green and you can probably kiss par goodbye.

Del Monte has lower green fees and more accessible tee times than at the other Pebble Beach Resorts courses — one of the reasons it remains a favorite among the locals, who make up about half of the daily tee sheet.

Golf enthusiasts on the Monterey Peninsula have always known of the course’s rich history and beautiful challenges that make it such a special place to play; for the traveling golfer, a Pebble Beach experience would be incomplete without a round at the Del Monte. ■

1990

Minoru Isutani buys Pebble Beach Company, including Del Monte Golf Course

1993

After a seven-year hiatus, Del Monte Golf Course replaces Poppy Hills, joining Pebble Beach and Spyglass Hill as the new host courses of the Invitational

1997

Del Monte Golf Course celebrates its centennial by hosting an interclub championship of centennial courses from around the world and opening its new pavilion

1991

Del Monte greens turf replanted at Pebble Beach for 1992 U.S. Open; several greens rebuilt to meet USGA standards begins several course enhancements

1995

The Duke’s Club is born, offering special rates and opportunities for frequent golfers



2005

Del Monte Golf Course replaces Bayonet to join Pebble Beach as a host course of the annual Wal-Mart First Tee Open