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GOLF ARCHITECTURE

The Secret Sauce: Cutten Fields

By Andrew Harvie 8 months ago

Reading Time: 8 minutes

Classic golf courses in Canada are, at least compared to our US counterparts south of the 49th parallel/Great Lakes, work in progresses. For whatever reason, be it education or money or just a lack of appreciation for the product and its related history, they generally are less-than their opening iteration. Years of watering down the architecture, from green shrinkage to mowing lines, loss of bunkers to new holes all together, have plagued this country. Most golf courses worldwide didn't survive the post-World War Two push for modernism, but in Canada and unlike the United States, they never really returned to form.

That's not to say there isn't a handful that have been wonderfully preserved, or even dare I say it, improved on layouts. Victoria, for example, way out west on Vancouver Island, is a masterfully preserved A.V. Macan golf course from Mr. Jeff Mingay, who has evolved into the Macan expert in the country. Ian Andrew's work at Cherry Hill is also worth a special mention, given how well the Walter Travis golf course is preserved. A handful of other golf courses exist in good fashion, but the list is less than the number of fingers on two hands. Canada's history in golf is an important chapter given how old it is and the importance architects like H.S. Colt, Willie Park Jr., Donald Ross, and A.W. Tillinghast played in the evolution of architecture here, yet their footprint has been reduced to a token golf course here and there.





The beautiful uphill approach to the 14th green into the hillside, under construction from June 2023

However, COVID-19 is changing clubs ability to evolve, however. Given the increased attention to golf and the additional surge in participation, clubs suddenly are in a good position to explore renovating or improving their golf courses with a surplus of cash, waiting lists, and demand for a better product. While not quite the same as the true Golden Age, this mini-boom in exciting projects—both from new builds or might-as-well-be new builds and renovations/restoration—is worthy of its own special mention.

Numerous clubs have taken steps to improve their golf course, with a majority of the proposed or completed projects being of quality or some sort of progress over what has been done in the past. One of such is Cutten Fields, located in Guelph.

The club's location is the perfect storm for being perfectly under-the-radar against the big city clubs in Toronto, while still being able to access some of the trappings of big-city life. That includes notable architects touching the golf course, beginning with Chick Evans, the famed golfer who won the 1916 US Open and the 1916 & 1920 US Amateur. Evans joined Stanley Thompson to design and build the golf course, which opened in 1931. Thompson purchased the golf course in 1939, and in the late 1940s, Thompson began to sell off part of the golf course to cover his debts (he was notoriously bad with money).

Tom Doak, the famed American architect who might die as the greatest to ever do it (at the very least, inserted into the thick of the debate), once said only 10% of classic golf courses deserve to be restored, and in truth, Cutten was not one of those given its murky history.

After that, the club sunk into the shadows of the behemoth city 90

kilometres to the east. It was always thought of as a good golf course—[SCOREGolf ranked it 139th in Canada in 2020](#)—but rarely ever did it garner attention other than a passing mention as a good local spot to be a member at (which it was and is to this day). That is, until 2023.

Toronto-based architect Jeff Mingay, who might just be at the pinnacle of his career (up until I write this in October 2023 that is), comes into the picture, inserting himself alongside Evans and Thompson; not a bad group to be included in! But rather than a “restoration,” which would be murky given Thompson himself, the co-designer of the original golf course sold off part of his own golf course, and Chick Evans, whose body of work isn’t deep enough to develop a “style” or have a real understanding of his work like a Colt or Mackenzie, Mingay renovated with the golden age in mind, adapting some influences from what Chick Evans liked, some of what Thompson did, and his own style. Tom Doak, the famed American architect who might die as the greatest to ever do it (at the very least, inserted into the thick of the debate), once said only 10% of classic golf courses deserve to be restored, and in truth, Cutten was not one of those given its murky history.



The dramatic uphill nature of the 18th, from the 10th fairway

So, Cutten Fields is essentially reborn as new. There are golden age

homages spread throughout, like the par 3, 3rd over a creek to a green that has squared off edges, or the closing par 4 featuring a squared off green that is in fact a restored version of what Evans designed. The routing is mostly the same: some greens have moved, and the middle of the back nine changed slightly to address some safety issues, but other than that, the old Cutten is gone, an improved, more savvy version exists.

This becomes apparent with the addition of a centreline bunker and a massive green complex on the par 5, 4th, a stunning three-shot hole in the midst of a fantastic opening stretch. The idea is to keep the ball right—closer to the couplet of bunkers and a harder tee shot—to open up the mouth of the green. From the left, a big greenside bunker lurks short left. The green, massive and wavy as if someone picked up a bucket of dirt and threw it down into a bowl, is artistry, allowing for numerous fun ways to get to pins, deflect from pins, and have unique putts from everywhere. We are getting to the climax slightly earlier than others in the [“Secret Sauce” series](#), but Cutten’s secret sauce is the improved and expanded green complexes, which are now massive. They roll, ebb and flow, crash like waves, and ripple as if someone threw a penny into a wishing well. Truthfully, to my eye, they feel somewhat randomized, as if Mingay just decided to create unique, never-seen-before green complexes. This is not true, of course: Mingay, a product of the Rod Whitman camp having started his career at 2003’s Blackhawk, 2007’s Sagebrush, and 2012’s Cabot Links, wouldn’t be so wreckless. Nonetheless, the fact that they feel random and they’re not so easily digestible or identified on a single play warrants a repeat play, and a repeat play after that and so forth until you figure it out. Isn’t that exactly what you want in a member club? To me, it is!

The brilliant par 5, 4th

Other than the excellent 4th, the standout holes balance nicely throughout the routing, but rarely tie into the ridge line running from atop near the clubhouse, down into the valley. The front nine, and in particular, the opening stretch is, as mentioned, strong: from the second shot into the second back into the ridge the front nine dances up into and off of, to the one-shot hole and the aforementioned 4th, but the 8th, heaving up and over the ridge back up to the high portion of the property the 1st threw the golfer down, is unique and a nice dash of something of the old country. In generations past, having the freedom to renovate how Mingay has here would likely mean the attempt to remove such a weird, unique tee shot in the name of “fairness” or “safety.” After all, quite literally hitting the tee shot back up the ridge to a blind landing area might not fly in the eyes of American architects or even Canadian golfers, but the fact that it exists, nay, remains from the original layout, shows the intention to keep, maintain, and improve the “Golden Age” charm.

On the back nine, the stupendous par 5, 15th is the centrepiece of the back nine, doglegging down and off the ridge to a green tucked close to Dormie Lane. A central bunker short of the green protects the running shot from the right, which asks the golfer to stay on the high side, left... easier written than done! The approach to the par 4, 14th back into the hillside is an obvious Thompson homage in my eye, while the finishing hole, quite literally thrusting into the hillside to the squared off green, is a mighty finish for a worthy golf course. The 12th is slightly disjointed from the rest of the golf course, and while the pond between the par 3's at the 11th and 17th is a bit unfortunate, the improved sight lines and edges to the hole make them both pop more. Alas, the golf course heroically finishes dramatically up the ridge in a similar manner to the 8th. Rather than the blind tee shot up and over the ridge, the finishing hole has the green perched high above the fairway in a way that reminded me of the famed 9th at Shinnecock Hills. The squared off green to close is a fitting emphatic period on the end of a golf course. There's a sense of closure walking off the 18th green, like the routing achieved everything you'd want it to.

Looking at the green on the par 5, 13th, against Dormie Lane with its centreline bunker short right

Guelph, Kitchener, and Cambridge are Westmount territory, and rightfully so: it is a fantastic Stanley Thompson golf course, and a deserving top 20 selection in Canada. With that being said, Cutten Fields has quickly vaulted itself into the 2nd slot from its own secret sauce that most courses in Canada do not have: the expansive green complexes, meant to be digested upon multiple plays, and perfect for member play and home field advantage in matches. To me, having seen numerous Jeff Mingay renovation, this is his *magnum opus*, and one I hope people seek out, grovel to play, and properly study. With 2024 being a Top 100 year for Canada, expect to see this breakthrough... and if it's too young for such lists, any list in 2026 and beyond without the inclusion of the new Cutten Fields will be a miss.





Author



Andrew Harvie

Based in Toronto, but having lived in Alberta, British Columbia, Montana, Arizona, and Texas, I have been lucky enough to see over 400 golf courses and counting!