

'Lord intended this for a golf course'

By Chris McCooley
staff writer

Wonder what old Mr. Miller would think of his farm these days?

Back in the early 1900s, Miller decided to sell his farm land on Maple Road in Birmingham to a couple of businessmen. One of the first things the businessmen did with their new land was show it to Donald Ross.

"The lord intended this for a golf course," said Ross upon initial viewing.

Indeed, Ross, the most renowned golf course architect of his era, promptly transformed Miller's farm into Oakland Hills Country Club — the site of six major professional golf tournaments since 1924 including this year's U.S. Open June 13-16.

Having Ross design the course and choosing U.S. Open champ Walter Hagen as the first club pro — which Oakland Hills did in 1922 — certainly helped lend prestige to the fledgling country club.

But Oakland Hills grew with the times and has, through its 67-year history, remained one of nation's most challenging golf courses.

HOWEVER, HAVING a challenging golf course isn't the only criteria used to select a site for a major United States Golf Association (USGA) tournament.

According to Mike Butz, USGA's on-site representative at the 1985 U.S. Open, there are many variables — from geographic location to the number of hotel rooms available in the vicinity of the country club — that figure into the site selection process.

"The way the U.S. Open courses are selected," Butz said, "is we entertain invitations from clubs across the country. There are usually about 20 to 25 that we'd be interested in."

"Then the USGA Executive Committee, which meets three times a year, makes the final decision on the U.S. Open courses."

Factors involved in selecting championship courses, according to Butz, include:

- The golf course itself. "The longer courses are the ones we generally go for," Butz said. "Most championship courses range from 6,800 to 7,000 yards long. Length of the course and the fairness of

the course are key factors. When it's all over, you want the champion to feel like, 'Hey, I really won something.' You want to challenge the players."

- Room on course for television and galleries: The physical set up of the golf course is crucial, Butz said. The course must be able to facilitate ABC television network equipment on all 18 holes as well as up to 25,000 spectators. Parking facilities, transportation and access to the course are also important.

- Hospitality of region: When the pro golf tour comes to town, 1,200 to 1,400 hotel rooms must become available for the weekend.

- Geographic Location: "The USGA, as a national organization, likes to move the Open around the country," Butz said. In recent years, the Open has traveled from New Jersey, to Philadelphia, out to the West Coast, to Pittsburgh and this year in the Midwest.

USGA officials also take history into consideration when choosing the Open site. For example, in 1986 the Open will return to Shinnecock Hills Golf Course in Long

Island. The second U.S. Open was played there back in 1896.

The Open sites have been picked through 1990: Olympic Country Club of San Francisco in 1987, Boston Country Club in 1988, Rochester, N.Y., in 1989 and Medinah Country Club in Chicago in 1990.

SO, HOW does Oakland Hills rate in this comprehensive selection process? Considering the place will host its fifth U.S. Open this year, it rates rather well.

"Oakland Hills is probably one of the better places we go," Butz said. "The facility lends itself extremely well to all the production elements of the Open, and it has a tremendous golf course to go along with it."

The Oakland Hills South Course is 6,996 yards long. And probably the best testimony to its competitiveness was offered up by 1951 U.S. Open champ Ben Hogan: "I'm glad I brought this course, this monster, to its knees. This is the greatest test of golf I have ever played and the toughest course."

Mr. Miller should be right proud of his old farm.

A hole-by-hole look at 'The Monster'

The 85th U.S. Open Championship starts today on Oakland Hills' formidable 6,996-yard, par-70 South Course.

It's referred to by golfers who have played it as the "Monster," and it's a course that few have been able to master.

The shorter front nine is a 3,472-yard, par-35. The back nine measures 3,524, but also is a par-35. Following is a hole-by-hole description of the course and what the golfers can expect:

- No. 1 — 436 yards, par 4: An excellent starting hole for a championship course, the first hole can get a golfer into trouble right away. It's heavily bunkered on both the left and right sides of the fairway and the green. Most golfers will use a medium iron to reach the undulating green. The long drivers will have the advantage because the entrance to the green is tight.

- No. 2 — 527 yards, par 5: The easiest of the par 5s, this hole is a birdie haven. It yielded the most birdies in the 1979 PGA Championship. Because some of the longer hitters will reach the green in two, a few eagles also could be recorded. Fairway bunkers off the tee could pose a problem for the boomers, however. Shorter drivers may lay up on both the drive and second shot, relying on a good pitch to get close to the hole.

- No. 3 — 199 yards, par 3: A classic par 3, the third hole gives the golfers a good chance for birdie — if they hit the green. But if the green is missed, they'll be hard-pressed to salvage par. The main hazard is a large bunker in front left of the green. This hole decided the '79 PGA title as David Graham (a birdie) defeated Ben Crenshaw (a bogey) in a sudden-death playoff.

- No. 4 — 433 yards, par 4: A straight, long drive is the key to scoring well on this hole. With out-of-bounds markers on the left side of the narrow fairway and bunkers left and right of the driving zone, it's imperative that golfers line up straight. The best position to approach the well-bunkered green is from the right center of the fairway. Tall trees line the left side.

- No. 5 — 457 yards, par 4: An accurate tee shot is important on the long fifth hole. Bunkers are located on the right side of the fairway and trees line the left side. A small creek crosses the fairway about 300 yards from the tee. The ideal drive would land on the left side of the fairway. Because the green slopes from right to left, the worst thing to do would be to overshoot the green on the right, making it near impossible to get close to the pin on the shot back.

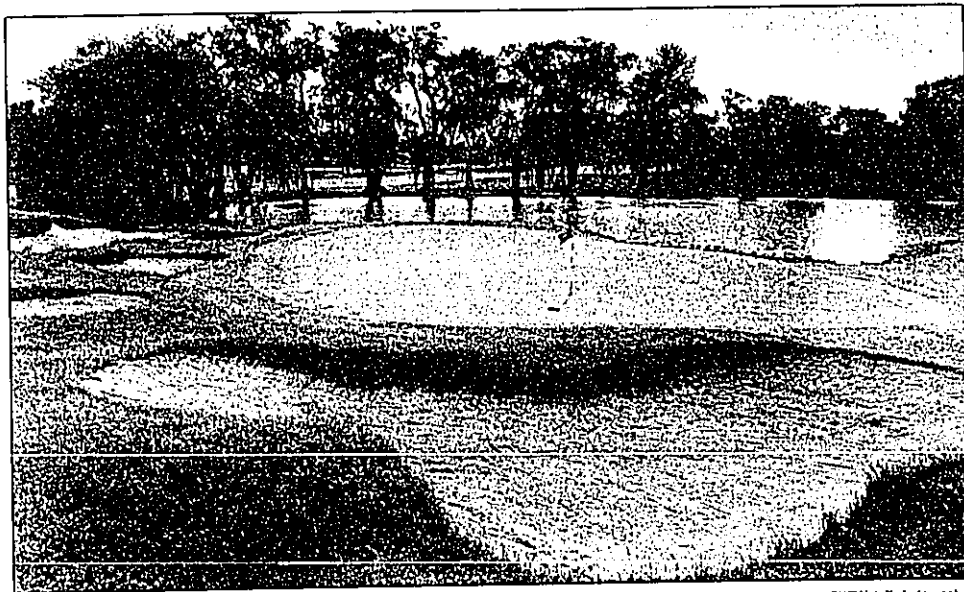
- No. 6 — 359 yards, par 4: The shortest par 4 on the course, this hole also has the distinction of having the longest green from front to back — about 45 yards. Heavily bunkered around the green, it's considered a "birdie" hole. But many golfers find themselves three-putting the long, sloping green.

- No. 7 — 405 yards, par 4: A pond and bunkers highlight this hole. The water hazard lies to the right of the driving area.

with bunkers on the left. The hole also has a new green for this year's championship, which is flat and bunkered, left to right.

- No. 8 — 439 yards, par 4: This hole is considered one of the toughest on the course and will test the golfers' skills. It runs uphill all the way to the green. Golfers with a big hook are asking for trouble.

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GARY CASKEY/staff photographer

The willow trees and water hazard around the 16th fairway and green may present the most picturesque

scenery, but the 18th also presents tough obstacles for golfers.