

Sebonack

By Doug Neumann

In the United States there are a vast number of single words, or short phrases that need no introduction or explanation. Mention the French Quarter and one thinks of New Orleans, Mardi Gras and non-stop fun 24/7. Jordan still equates to the National Basketball Association's all-time great Michael even though he has been retired, for a third time, since 2003. Say the names Leno or Letterman and one immediately thinks late night talk show host. Cape Cod means Boston and pastel coloured cottages along the Atlantic Ocean and the Hamptons conjures up images of expensive New York estates, Atlantic shoreline vistas and two of American's most famous golf courses - Shinnecock Hills Golf Club and the National Golf Links of America.

This golf course review article is also based on a single word - Sebonack. It is a word that currently does not have the power of any of the aforementioned locations, but it is sure to find a place in American golf that will elevate it to its deserved superstar status.

Sebonack Golf Club, which sits on 300-acres of landscape near the eastern tip of New York's Long Island in sleepy Southampton, is a neighbour to Shinnecock Hills and National. It is, also, the only Jack Nicklaus/Tom Doak designed golf course in the world. These two facts give it a leg up when it comes to being noticed.



Course architects Jack Nicklaus and Tom Doak open the 18-hole Sebonack layout with a gentle par-4 of 355 yards.

Malaysians who may have played the Nicklaus designed Sungai Long Golf & Country Club in Kajang, Johor's The Legends at Legends Golf & Country Resort, or Borneo Golf & Country Club in Sabah best not attempt to picture the year-old Sebonack as it has little in common with the named Malaysian layouts.

One of the reasons for this is the fescue grass that covers the American course. It is a type of grass that is at home in the New York climate, a harsh climate that will not support any of the Bermuda strains so common in Malaysia. The main reason, however, why there is no similarity to the US course and the Nicklaus designed Malaysia tracts is the influence of Doak on many of the layout's holes.

The younger and much less experienced of the two golf course architects is always spoken of as one of golf's best upcoming architects. His Pacific Dunes course at Oregon's Bandon Dunes Golf Resort appears on many golf publication's best lists, as does one of his Michigan courses, Lost Dunes Golf Club. For Doak a golf course should have many of the features that are found on Scottish courses. He favors greens that accept bump-and-run approaches. He loves to use fescue for the greens and fairways whenever he can. And, while forced carries crop up from time-to-time in his designs they are not seen often enough to overwhelm short hitters.

Nicklaus has during his impressive golf architecture career, especially in his earlier design days, built many a green site that favours players who are masters at hitting high, soft landing approach shots with well-controlled draws, a style of shot he used to garner 18 majors during his phenomenal professional playing career.

At Sebonack, Doak's love of Scottish courses seems to have won out. It is a course where the golfer must know how the golf ball is going to react for the last 25 yards into a green. At St. Andrews' Old Course you need a caddie to tell you the direction you should hit your tee shot to avoid the massive number of hidden sand bunkers on the ancient layout and to give you some idea as to the convoluted route your golf ball will roll when you do hit a green in regulation. At this Nicklaus/Doak course (with some added help by the club's owner Michael Pascucci) you need a caddie to enlighten

The dramatic 454-yard par-4 No. 2, is a golf hole that plays as tough as it looks.



The 8th, a testing par-3 of 189 yards is the only hole on the tract that requires an over-water-carry.

Photo Juliana Cheah



From the forward tee of No. 10, the bunker near the centre of the picture looks less intimidating than it does when the par-4 is played at 383 yards.

Photo Juliana Cheah



The 616-yard 15th hole is a prime example of the lovely green sites that dominate the course.

Photo Juliana Cheah

you to what a bump-and-run approach shot will do before it reaches the green and how it will react once it is on the putting surface.

The most glaring exception to the open, sand bunker-free front edge concept on display for many of Sebonack's putting surfaces is the 189-yard 8th hole. This par-3 features a large pond to the green's left, front and most of its back perimeter. With a deep, almost as big as the green sand bunker crowding the putting surface's right side, golfers have little option but to hit a high, soft landing tee ball. A draw is a safer shot here than a fade. Players can aim a draw tee shot at the bunker and bend it to the green's surface. If a fade is hit the ball must start over the water. Fail with the draw and the recovery shot is from sand. Fail with a fade and you are hitting three from the tee.

Before we get into some of the other holes of Sebonack, let me ramble a little about this special course's mystique.

In the 1945 MGM movie musical 'Anchors Aweigh,' Frank Sinatra, plays the part of a sailor who sings a dreamy rendition of "I Fall in Love Too Easily." As I walked the fairways of Sebonack this song came to mind, as I was definitely in love with this golf course after only a few holes.

The images it presents from its tee areas are remarkable. You see fairway's that hint where you should be hitting the ball, yet these fairway's also tend to hide both their safest and most dangerous landing areas. In the distance, greens that are obviously undulating sit on ridges, nestle at the base of hillsides and often appear married to treacherous looking sand bunkers. The subtle nature of the course's design had me saying to myself, "I want to hit this tee shot and I know I can par this hole."

Once on the fairway, to retain that feeling of being able to par the hole, it was time to consult the caddie, who would offer, "Be sure to stay left here," or "It is okay to be a little short here, as the ball will run forward," or "The pin is in the back right and that is a sucker position. Aim for the middle of the green and be content with par." It was great fun to hit a ball in the general direction the caddie recommended and watch it react just as he said.

Now it must be noted that just because I hit a few solid drives and a good number of quality approach shots it did not ensure par. For as lucky as I was at reaching the greens, I more than once hit a putt that rolled a little too far only to have the ball slide down a slope and come to rest beyond tap-in putt range. These Nicklaus/Doak designed greens have a special ability to play with a golfer's mind. Confidence and boldness are rewarded, but even a slight miscalculation tends to result in a tough comeback putt.

Playing Sebonack is like a first-time date with a beautiful woman. You think you are doing everything correctly and that you are in command, but as the evening draws to a close it is she who is and always was in total control.

The opening par-4, a reasonable 355 yards, tempts big hitters to look for the front edge of its tricky green that falls away. But it is best to not take its challenge and stay left to avoid dunes and bunkering as you establish a short approach to a putting surface that encourages bump-and-run shots.

The outstanding feature of the long 454-yard 2nd hole is its stunning green site. According to the architects it is modeled after Augusta National's 14th hole where the putting surface has a huge false front. Because of its length this par-4 was also the perfect spot to have a tree or two come into play, put a few undulations into the fairway and incorporate gapping sand bunkers.

The 3rd hole is nearly the same length as No. 2, at 442 yards, but it is an entirely different hole. It offers the layout's biggest green at about 8,250 square feet and the tract's deepest sand bunker. This mighty hazard sits in front of the green and measures 17 feet from bottom-to-top. Average players will lay up short to avoid the bunker or approach the green from the right side to be aided by a hill that will direct the ball onto the putting surface when a bump-and-run shot is used.

The first of this par-35 side's par-3 holes is the 235-yard 4th. Designed to play with the prevailing winds that sweep the area off the adjoining Great Peconic Bay the best play here is to somehow find the centre of the green.

The 5th hole presents players a break from length as it measures a mere 345 yards. It is Sebonack's shortest par-4 and it ends with its smallest green (3,000 square feet). Shots down the safe right side of its wide fairway mean a tough angle to the green. Go left on this hole and a line of sand bunkers will be in play.

After a 418-yard par-4 where trees guard a crowned green that is best missed to the same side as the cup, golfers face the course's longest par-4. At 475 yards this dogleg left has you hitting your second shot over dunes and sand bunkers to reach its green, as the dogleg occurs at over 300 yards from the tee.

You have already been introduced to the 8th hole, so lets move on to No. 9. It is the shortest par-5 of the layout's four long holes by one-yard. It snakes for 549 yards uphill. If you think you can reach it in two your drive should be down its right side over sandy dunes towards a distant bunker on the fairway's left side. From near that bunker, players have a good view of a green above them. Average golfers will aim left and then either lay up before bunkers fairly close to the green or challenge them to get a little closer to the green. The hole often yields par, but birdies are much tougher to secure.

Two par-4 holes open the par-37 closing nine. The high, elevated tee for the 383-yard No. 10 is a grand spot for a picnic. The view to the right is of the Bay, the 2nd hole

From the tee of the 10th hole, golfers have a grand view of the 2nd hole (foreground) and the 18th hole that runs along Great Peconic Bay.





Photo Doug Neumann

The wide fairway of the 11th hole, a 466-yard par-4, leads to the shore of Great Peconic Bay, with the green for the 12th hole in the background.

and the 18th hole. Behind the tee is the clubhouse, the green of No. 1 and the layout's 19th hole, or Bye hole. In front of the tee rests a valley and a very intimidating bunker. Clear the bunker with the drive and one finds a wide friendly fairway. Aiming a little left of the bunker also yields the same results. The hole's large, elevated green is designed to move the golf ball to its back and even over its back edge. You need enough club to reach it, but you also need to come in with a high, gentle approach shot to hold it.

The architects consider the 11th hole the most beautiful on the course. At 466 yards it has plenty of yardage to display its numerous charms. The sandy shoreline of the Bay is to the right, dunes tighten the left side of a generally wide fairway and a small town in the distance completes the picture. Most golfers will be reaching its green, which sits along the bluff that overlooks the Bay, in three shots.

The tract's shortest par-3 is the 165-yard No. 11. From an elevated tee, players see the Bay, sand, brush, a small appearing green and no place to bail out. What they do not see is a generous, hidden bail out area behind the dunes that guard the left front of the green. This hole is often buffeted by a crosswind.

The six closing holes at Sebonack, as a group are the tract's longest. The 550-yard 13th, while playing down wind, is a handful because of a pond that protects this par-5's putting surface. The next hole, a 432-yard par-4, also plays downwind and it presents the layout's widest fairway. So what are its defenses? A waste bunker runs for the hole's entire right side, the tee shot is partially blind and its green is hard to hold because golfers are hitting with the wind. Players see even more length on No. 15. This par-5, from which majestic views of the Bay are seen, ambles for 616 yards to end with a green set among dunes, with several tall trees behind. Find this green in two and you should be entering long drive contests for a living.

The 442-yard 16th hole takes players away from the water in an uphill journey. It is one of the tract's tightest tests and its green site is nearly surrounded by sand dunes and sand bunkers.

The shortest of the six finishing holes is the par-3 No. 17. A pair of large dunes are part of the landscape for this 210-yard gem. Golfers must thread their tee shot, slightly uphill through the two dunes to reach a green that displays obvious peaks and valleys from the tee. Playing for the middle of the putting surface and hoping your ball ends near the cup for a birdie putt is a smart play.

The 18th hole is a 560-yard strip that borders Great Peconic Bay from tee-to-green. Elevated tees invite golfers to swing away and clear a dramatic mass of dunes that are the first one-third of the hole. The architects reward players who challenge the Bay by favouring the left side of the fairway to gain extra roll on the drive. Crossing bunkers complicate lay up shots and approaches to its giant green that offers two distinct levels. The correct area must be found to have a reasonable birdie putt. Three-putt experiences on this green are as common as a rainstorm is on a Malaysian afternoon.

Still all square in your match after 18 holes? It presents no problem at Sebonack. Just continue to the tee of the Bye (or 19th) hole, an 182-yard par-3. This hole, which plays towards the Bay and ends with a large green, is perfect for settling unfinished matches, tied bets, or the opportunity to have one more extra bet.

Sebonack Golf Club, an exclusive private club in an exclusive part of America, is a true masterpiece. Play is once and it will move into the top ten on your best course list long before you challenge its Bye hole. And in my case I was in love and stayed in love with its fairways, greens and one-of-a-kind views even after making a triple-bogey on its 9th hole. Thank you Sebonack for a lovely day of golf.

The low light provided by the sun as it sets over Great Peconic Bay highlights the contours of the landscape surrounding the 18th green.

Sebonack Golf Club

Front nine	3,462 yards par-35
Back nine	3,758 yards par-37
18 holes	7,220 yards par-72



Photo Doug Neumann

The 165-yard par-3 No. 12 looks to be a no man's land, but a bail out area does exist to the greens left.



Photo Doug Neumann

The elevated tee of the par-5 finishing hole allows golfers to see all 560 yards of this outstanding test.