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## Liberty National ready to open doors for second chance for first impression at The Barclays



Liberty National Golf Club in Jersey City will host The Barclays for the second time, but first since making changes after hosting for the first time in 2009. *(Andrew Mills/The Star-Ledger)*



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It was sometime in May 2010 when the lunch date was arranged. The tournament officials for the PGA Tour had asked for a meeting with the brass of Liberty National Golf Club to go over The Barclays.

Nine months earlier, the shiny new club along the Hudson River in Jersey City had played host to the world's best in making its public debut before the golf community.

There was some trepidation from Liberty National as to what the meeting might be about. Hosting The Barclays in 2009 was a one-time contract, and there had been some very public comments made — mainly criticism by Tiger Woods — about the course's design.

The club wanted to have the event back. But would the PGA Tour want to return? The answer, it found, was yes. With a caveat: Changes would have to be made to the course.

What the tour officials found was that Liberty National was already ahead of them.

"Golf courses are very much like a painting," club co-founder Paul Fireman said. "They change as time changes. Like oil on canvas. A golf course is growing. The ground changes, the grass grows, conditions change. There's always subtle things. The main thing that most of the great golf courses in the world? They change on a regular basis."

This week, Fireman and Liberty National will get a second chance to make a first impression.

Four years after first hosting a PGA Tour stop, the first leg of the FedEx Cup Playoffs will return to Jersey City, and what those who were at the course in 2009 will find out is that their voices were heard. Fifteen of the course's 18 holes have undergone some form of work — ranging from the moving of greens to relocating creeks. Trees have been taken out, the rough has been changed and Liberty National is hoping to get the reception it was looking for when it first played host.

"I expected this," Fireman said. "We found all the things we could find and the PGA wanted to work with us and we wanted to take advantage of that opportunity."

## **GATHERING THE INFO**

Even though Liberty National already had made the decision to redo parts of its golf course, one person had to be consulted if the PGA Tour was going to bring The Barclays back: Steve Wenzloff.

As the PGA Tour's vice president of design services and player liaison, he's the middleman between the golfers' impressions of the course and that of the tour officials. He already had begun mining opinions from players the week following the 2009 Barclays, and what he found was that the course was fairly well-received. But like any first-time venue, it had spots to smooth out.

"It wasn't broke," Wenzloff said recently. "It took a lot to take what used to be a dump and turn it into what it is. With all that going on, it gets easy to get lost in certain details."

Together with the course's original architects — Bob Cupp and Tom Kite — Wenzloff, Fireman and his son, Dan, went about mapping out what changes needed to be made in order for The Barclays to return this year. Some holes (Nos. 3 and 18) had to have entire greens redone. Some (Nos. 13 and 17) needed fairway re-contouring. Others (Nos. 2, 4 and 14) were left untouched.

In addition to using player reaction, Wenzloff went back and pored through the data provided by the PGA Tour's ShotLink system, which collects statistical analysis of every shot hit on tour. What he found was the course had played how they expected it to, but not in the way they expected. Some holes that were supposed to be birdie holes were par holes. Others that were supposedly harder played easier. And in the case of the 331-yard, par-4 16th hole — a hole touted by tournament officials as a "drivable par 4" — it was never played that way. (Players felt there wasn't enough reward to take the risk of trying to drive the green, the way the hole originally was designed.)

"Now, when you're on this hole, there's an incentive to go for it," Dan Fireman said recently, standing on the tee box of the 16th hole. "It has a whole different feel to it."

Overall, 74 changes occurred through 15 of the 18 holes on the course, according to a new yardage book distributed by the club and the tour. Some of them were made for the playability of the golf course, but others were done to allow the PGA Tour to set up hospitality and concession tents differently and move the flow of pedestrian traffic.

"We never used this back tee box in '09," said Peter Mele, executive director of The Barclays tournament, while standing on the 18th tee. "So we moved the green forward about 20 yards. But that also allowed for us to not have to put the television towers and grandstands behind the green and block the view of the skyline. Because no one else in the world has this, so why not use it?"

## **A MASTER-FUL IDEA**

"Dan, I've got a suggestion."

Phil Mickelson, major winner and an honorary member at Liberty National since its opening, pulled Dan Fireman aside after a round last year with Rickie Fowler because he had an idea. The changed golf course was much improved, but there was a problem: It was still too penal. It was a brawny layout with water and hazards everywhere, including mounds of knee-high fescue. So, why, Mickelson prodded, is there a need for traditional country club rough?

Dan Fireman, a co-founder with his father, understood what he meant. So he asked Mickelson what he had in mind.

"Do it like they have at The Masters," Fireman recalled Mickelson telling him. "Augusta National has that short cut of rough that, if the ball rolls in, you're not penalized. It makes playing so much more fun.' We thought it was a great idea."

So much for a guy being just an honorary member. Mickelson's suggestion to the Firemans was taken up and is considered by a number of the club's regular members to be the missing piece to the reconstruction puzzle. A number of players have come through this season since the club switched over to the intermediate rough and have raved about the changes. After the U.S. Open in June, Graeme McDowell, Rory McIlroy and Ian Poulter came through and loved the new concept.

"You're always living on the edge, with the risk of falling off," Wenzloff said of making changes.

Even Woods has spoken to Paul Fireman about the changes and his comments from 2009. He told Fireman nearly a year ago that he's eager to test out the new course. That chance will come this week.

"It was our rookie year, and we got beat on a little bit," Fireman said. "Maybe there were some things that were out of line and it was too tough. But this isn't our rookie year. We're seasoned."