

GOLF WEEK

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▶ Hole-by-hole: Liberty National starts FedEx Cup



Photo by Associated Press

The Statue of Liberty is visible at Liberty National.



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JERSEY CITY, N.J. — It's not often that PGA Tour players get to take a ferry to work. But that's part of the thrill of golf at Liberty National, home of The Barclays Championship, the inaugural event in the 2013 FedEx Cup playoff series. The leading 125 players on the FedEx Cup points list are eligible to play in the first of four playoff events, and this time they're returning to a golf course that was not met with glowing kindness when it first (and last) held the event in 2009. This time around, the reception should be better.

This is a complicated site – a reclaimed industrial landfill, degraded and abandoned as worthless for decades. Then came a \$250 million investment by Paul Fireman of Reebok fame. He turned the site into an upscale private golf club and adorned it with a hyper-modernist steel-and-glass clubhouse that looks like a spaceship. It stands in stark contrast to the reclaimed wildlife habitat and Hudson River Waterfront Walk that also now share the site.

Co-designers Bob Cupp and Tom Kite did wonders with the 160 acres of petroleum waste and industrial debris that constituted the site when they first saw it in the early 1990s. They covered it all with impervious fabric and clay – then built the golf course on top of it, largely with material dredged from the bottom of Lower New York Bay, and capped it with sand. The land plan includes a massive range, unfortunately with 70-foot-high netting for the tournament, and barriers that isolate the golf course from an exit of (what else?) the New Jersey Turnpike Extension. And there's some high-rise condo development at the far end. But then there are those stunning views of Upper New York Bay, downtown Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty.

The course has bounced back from a renovation after the 2009 Barclays. Cart paths have been pushed back from the line of play, landing areas widened, fairway bunkering simplified and drainage shifted from unsightly catch basins that were in play to more reliance upon surface flow, which also makes for more interesting ground contours. From the air, Liberty National still looks like a spaghetti junction of squiggly fairways, cart paths and pond edges. But from the ground, it has started to acquire some much-needed maturity and sense of place. Four years of tree growth has helped. And there's a consistency to the turf quality, with flawless L-93 bentgrass fairways and A-4 bentgrass greens. Fairway definition has been enhanced by abandoning any intermediate-step cut; the fairways are 26-30 yards wide in most landing zones, and from there out it's all low-mow bluegrass cut to a uniform 2 inches – enough to take off some spin but not enough to prevent advancing the ball confidently with a middle iron.

Even at 7,353 yards and par 71 (with a 77.7 rating and 155 slope), the pros will find this a very easy course – unless the wind howls. Fans should have a great look at the action on the most spectator-accessible tournament course in the Met area.

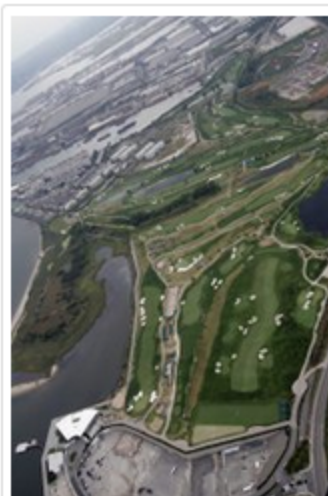


Photo by Associated Press

An aerial of Liberty National, site of the Barclays.

No. 1: Par 4, 398 yards



An odd opening hole, one with no option but to lay up off the tee. The fairway is lined on the right by a creek that crosses the landing area diagonally starting at 285 yards out. The risky 310-yard carry to the far fairway – over water and sand – brings no reward worth the danger. So it's a long-iron or fairway metal off the tee and then a short-iron/wedge to a three-tiered green. Unlike many modern tournament courses, this one occasionally allows players to work the ball into the center of the green from outside the surface by using the peripheral contours to feed the ball in.

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No. 2: Par 3, 219 yards

Uphill and into the prevailing southeasterly wind off the harbor, this hole features one of the larger greens at Liberty National, and one that's very receptive to a right-to-left approach. The back-left hole location is especially tough because of its proximity to sand on three sides.

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No. 3: Par 4, 395 yards



You read it here; someone will drive this green. The hole plays straight downwind to a main landing area 280 yards off the tee and 30 yards wide, from which the fairway necks down on the downslope. If someone can carry it 330 on just the right line, the ball will catch the last of the downslope and amble up onto the green. Otherwise, it's a lay-up to the wide part of the fairway and a short approach from 100-120 yards through a small defile to the only unbunkered green on the course – a putting surface that spills the ball outward at every point.

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No. 4: Par 3, 193 yards

A great view of lower Manhattan looms behind the green; or it would, except for the diaphanous effect of that driving-range net. The shot here is to a green 20 feet above the tee and calling for another right-to-left approach shaped over a yawning pond and two front bunkers.

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No. 5: Par 4, 427 yards

Still no driver; a long iron or fairway metal is in order to reach a narrow fairway that slopes towards a pond, which flanks the entire left side of the landing area. The fairway's constricted shape and slope is reproduced in the green, this time with a creek cutting in tight along the left side and gobbling up virtually anything that lands on the left side of the putting surface. Meanwhile, the front right is protected by sand. This hole will yield some ugly, high scores.

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No. 6: Par 5, 538 yards

Finally, it's time to unsheathe the driver, thanks to a short par 5 that would be even easier for the field to reach in two if it did not play into the prevailing wind (out of the southeast). With the fairway 30 yards wide in the main landing area and that 2-inch rough (without a step cut) inducing no worries whatsoever for anyone in the field all week, there's no reason to hold back on this hole (or any other where the driver is the choice club off the tee). The only issue here is in a green that hooks around yet another one of those massive ponds at Liberty National. It's enough to make you think you're in Florida, were it not for that vision of the Statue of Liberty in the background on the approach. Still, there's not much to worry about on a lay-up second shot here (or at any of the three par-5s), especially because there's a front-left bunker that will see a lot of play as a safety option for those who don't want to challenge the green on the fly.

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No. 7: Par 4, 467 yards

It'll be bombs away off the tee here on a downwind hole with plenty of landing room and set up for a modest left-to-right fade that easily carries a bunker complex on the right and that skirts up to or past another one intruding on the left. The bunkers would scare off your average golfer, but Tour pros won't be deterred by bunkers that, by their standards, are not all that deep and punitive. When you can play with impunity off the tee and have little rough to worry about, it simply makes for confident, worry-free driving and very low scores – especially here, headed toward one of the largest, most receptive greens on the course. The right side is defended by the largest bunker at Liberty National, but the left side is wide open and presents very easy recovery from low-cut chipping ground.

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No. 8: Par 5, 611 yards

Long, solid par-5 played through a crosswind, with offset bunkers in the first landing area that require accuracy with a driver. The right side is the bad miss off the tee, forcing an awkward angle for a second shot that steers away from trees short right of the green. While the ideal line in for a third shot is from the left, near a phalanx of bunkers, there's actually little resistance or worries on a second shot, even one hit from the (light) rough. Few will reach this green in two, but many will still be able to bomb their second shot, with a front right greenside bunker a very safe haven for those who come up short.

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No. 9: Par 4, 474 yards

Here starts the strongest, most compelling and demanding stretch of the golf course, and interestingly it comes far from the clubhouse, in and among a separate real estate development

of upscale apartment blocks. The tee shot here is intimidating, thanks to a dramatic tee shot over a sunken road, across a pond and to an island of a fairway that spills left into a pond. From there, you walk around across a Venetian-style bridge that links up to the last segment or pod of the golf course. The fairway runs out 330 yards, leaving an uphill second shot to a green that actually offers far more open ground around it than appears to be the case, thanks to a deception bunker that's 30 yards short.

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No. 10: Par 4, 496 yards

This start to the inward nine appears to offer room off the tee, but the right side is cut close to out-of-bounds and constitutes a useless inside line on this dramatic dogleg right. The ideal line is as close as possible to a fairway bunker on the left, 272 to reach and 294 to get past. One of the real strengths of this golf course is the way the fairway edge has been cut into the flanking bunkers; instead of a protective collar of rough to keep the ball out, here the ball bleeds into the sand. The second shot is a middle iron into a prevailing cross breeze from the right – uphill, to the deepest green on the course at 48 yards long, one that peels off in all directions and makes it very hard to hold.

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No. 11: Par 3, 250 yards

It's good to see real length occasionally in a par 3, but it would better if there were something else to deal with than just distance. This will be a very easy approach shot – downwind, wide open up front and on the right. And as firmly kept as these bunkers are, with the ball rolling to the bottom and leaving a very clean lie, there's little at which FedExCup players can flinch because of the sand guarding the entire left side of the green.

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No. 12: Par 4, 431 yards

Decision time! And on a tee shot played from across the road on an elegant platform tee that requires crossing that Venetian bridge again. A true split fairway par-4, the more advantageous line is to the left and a narrower, more tightly bunkered fairway that probably calls for a fairway metal off the tee. The more inviting fairway to the right leaves enough room for a driver but leaves an awkward, semi-obsured view of the green below on the second shot. And the green here, among five completely rebuilt in the latest renovation, has more movement and interest than any putting surface at Liberty National. The front is heavily bunkered and the back rolls out into a large, embracing chipping area that leaves a delicate little up-and-over recovery shot.

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No. 13: Par 5, 563 yards



Bombs away on what will prove to be a very exciting hole. The left side off the tee, away from the right-side fairway bunkers that are 276-312 yards out, is actually the ideal line. If players find the light rough, no problem; they'll just lay up right. For those going for it in two, good luck into the prevailing wind, across the length of a(nother) large pond to a relatively shallow green tipped from back to front.

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No. 14: Par 3, 150 yards



Over a little bridge, past the wildlife trail, suddenly you're transported to a waterfront hole that is among half a dozen of the most exhilarating par-3s in the entire Met area – Long Island included. The shortest hole to the smallest green, with tall, wispy fescue waving everywhere, finds the wind howling in from the right. If you take a moment to pause and look at the Statute

of Liberty only 1,000 yards away, you'll know you're at a very special place. You can bet the cameras will register that iconic image from this tee all week long. The sad thing about playing this hole is that there aren't a few more like it on the rest of the course. But enjoy it while you can, visually at home and carefully from the tee. The GIR numbers here will be surprisingly slim and my bet is that there will be twice as many bogeys as birdies.

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No. 15: Par 4, 481 yards

Another very tough drive, from out of a chute formed by trees on the left and a wildlife nature preserve on the right. The bunkering here is very demanding off the tee. It's just too bad that here and on most of the par-4s and par-5s there's not more uneven contour underfoot to make the world's best players feel uncomfortable. You can't beat these guys with distance, but a little unease underfoot when they're standing there with a middle or short iron in hand goes a long way to making them work to achieve a good swing.

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No. 16: Par 4, 325 yards

Great fun here on a hole that's classic risk/reward from the tee. There's water down the entire right side that comes into play for anything hit a bit too much left-to-right. The layup is also tight, with a deep bunker on the left 230 yards out and a long, lateral bunker on the right that ends 260 yards off the tee. So the layup must have some precision to it. For those bold enough to have a whack all the way, the green has been rebuilt because the old putting surface, heavily criticized, was so hyperactive that it was almost a liability to hit it off the tee; it certainly was a liability to have to putt more than 30 feet on it. The new green is subtler, more receptive and enticing – and with just enough segmentation that if the hole is located in certain areas (top right, bottom left) it might be smarter to try hitting it with a wedge rather than with a driver. This hole will prove successful if there are just as many 2s made as 7s.

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No. 17: Par 4, 445 yards

Two very strong par 4s to end. The ideal drive here is right-to-left, past a pair of bunkers on the left (267-295 yard out) and across from a smaller one on the right that's 304 yards away. From the left side the elevated green opens up somewhat, though the only way to get to the third of the putting surface perched behind the two front bunkers is to hit a bold, well-elevated approach that comes down with a lot of spin and can settle into the little punchbowl there. A little buried mound in the middle of the green creates a lot of hard-to-read, up-and-over putts on a green that's very exposed to the wind.

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No. 18: Par 4, 490 yards



There aren't many finishing holes with as much going on around it as this one: a landmine of sand flanking both sides of the fairway; waterfront down the right side; stadium seating behind and to the left, and off to the right is that spaceship clubhouse with the Manhattan skyline looming over it. These fairway bunkers are among the deeper ones at Liberty National. The approach shot – for these guys, a middle or short iron – is uphill to a green with a false front that promotes a little extra effort on the way in. The tendency is to hit it long here, into a low-lying chipping area that wraps around the back of the green. It's sure to be the scene of some dramatic recoveries as players try to qualify among the top 100 in FedEx points to move on the next week to the Deutsche Bank Championship.