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Up From the Dumps: Liberty National Golf Course

Hosting the Barclays tournament this week, it was once just a landfill with a view.

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT



Getty Images

Liberty National, built on a former landfill, is hosting the first event of the FedEx Cup Playoffs. Above, Tiger Woods putts on the 13th.

Paul Fireman, then the chairman of Reebok International, describes his 1998 decision to buy the stinking, toxic landfill that is now Liberty National Golf Course as a "moment of insanity."

"There were broken down buildings and dumpsters, abandoned trucks and cars. It was an eyesore," he said Thursday at a table in the clubhouse during a rain delay at the PGA Tour's Barclays tournament at Liberty. "But it had a major attitude about it. The location was iconic. How could you not want to do something with this property?"

The chief selling point, of course, was the Statue of Liberty rising from New York Harbor scarcely 2,000 yards away. And behind Lady Liberty, the fairy-tale Manhattan skyline. Could there be a more dramatic setting for the kickoff event of the FedEx Cup Playoffs?

Fireman said he bit on the project as a kind of escape from the corporate "warfare" of running his global shoe and apparel giant. (He sold Reebok to Adidas in 2006.) "Some people read books, some people buy a boat, some people go on vacations. To me the escape was looking at design plans for a course and bringing people together to make it happen," he said.

In an earlier conversation, Fireman had told me he spent 80% to 90% of his time at Reebok in the design studios and on marketing, rather on the numbers side of the business. Golf courses similarly appeal to his artistic side, he said, though he has never claimed to be anything but an amateur when it comes to course architecture.

As a hobby, starting in the early 1990s, Fireman acquired, built or rebuilt eight other courses, one on Cape Cod and five in Puerto Rico. Keeping the crew he had assembled for those projects busy was one reason he succumbed to the temptation to buy the landfill in New Jersey. Another was imagining his grandparents, one from Russia and one from Australia, sailing past the land when they immigrated to America through Ellis Island roughly a century ago.

What he didn't know, but probably should have, was how expensive it would be to make Liberty National work. That was the "insanity." Remediating the land, which took half a decade, required capping the waste, trucking in 2 million cubic feet of fill and clearing endless regulatory and environmental hurdles. By the time the course opened in 2006, it had cost \$250 million, likely making it the world's most expensive golf course.

And then, after the Barclays was played at Liberty National in 2009, he had to remediate the land, in a sense, a second time. Some of the pros at that event were unkind to the course. "They took a perfectly good landfill and ruined it," was the most famous (anonymous) remark.

The PGA Tour advised Liberty that if it wanted to continue as one of the four rotating sites for the Barclays beyond 2013, when its contract ends, it needed to make some changes. The other courses in the rotation are Ridgewood Country Club in Paramus, N.J., where the Barclays returns in 2014; Plainfield Country Club in Edison, N.J. (2015); and Bethpage Black in Farmingdale, N.Y. (2016).

So Fireman pulled out his checkbook again. He rehired the original architects, Tom Kite, the 1992 U.S. Open champion, and Robert Cupp, to make extensive alterations, including completely rebuilding five of the greens and altering 13 fairways.

The pros' reception this year has been much better. "They made some really nice improvements," said Tiger Woods, one of the headline complainers in 2009. "I think it's one of the best venues we play on Tour," said Rory McIlroy.

The owner said he is pleased. "It was never about making money, not that I wanted to lose money," he said. The club itself, after stalling during the recession, now has 175 members, with a current full initiation fee of \$250,000, and could top out at 250 members or so next year, Fireman said. The average member age is a surprisingly young 42. He said he expects a residential tower near the clubhouse, a delayed part of the original plan, to break ground within a year. "If that plays out like we hope it will and I break even on the whole thing, I'd be thrilled."

Fireman, 69, fell in love with the game as a boy in Brockton, Mass., a small, blue-collar city 25 miles south of Boston. The club where he caddied, Thorny Lea, had an unusual charter requiring a third of the members to be Catholic, a third Protestant and a third Jewish, he said. He was taken under the wing of a Massachusetts state amateur champion named Ed "Smiley" Connell, who showed him respect even as a kid caddie.

"My experience there at Thorny Lea was the strongest, most fundamental thing in my life, even more than parental," he said. "I thought that golf had integrity, so I wanted my life to have integrity. And it showed me the value of respect and mutuality among people, that no one should be treated differently." He said he abhors cliques and snobbish behavior in golf—even at clubs with \$250,000 initiation fees—and that he tried in his business life to embrace and empower people from all walks of life.

His persistence at Liberty National, he allowed, might have had something to do with giving back to the game for what the game gave him as a youngster. "I'm going to put my money back somewhere, and this is something I love," he said. "It's a lot better than a tombstone."

Would he do it again, given the wild cost and time overruns? "No," he said without hesitation. "But that's true of a lot of people about a lot of things."

In 1992, Fireman assembled a crew to run in the 635-mile Newport, R.I., to Bermuda yacht race, without knowing much about sailing. "It was miserable. The wind, the rain, 12-foot seas coming over the bow, no sleep, we were sick," he said. He would never do that race again, either, he said, despite his boat having won its division. But you could tell by the way he told the story that he was glad he did it once.