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## Golf: Liberty National is A-OK

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JERSEY CITY — The willingness of Liberty National Golf Club to make significant changes to its course has strengthened New Jersey's reputation and standing as a host of The Barclays.

Phil Mickelson and his fellow PGA Tour players praised the alterations, four years after criticizing this former industrial waste site for its oh-so-tight fairways, severely sloped greens and exceedingly high rough.

"You can be more aggressive because you're not getting gobbled up by 4- or 5-inch rough," Mickelson said Sunday after shooting 6-under 65 to tie for sixth at 9-under. "I thought that made the world of difference."

"The course changes were really well received by the players," said Peter Mele, The Barclays' tournament director. "And a lot of the changes they made helped move spectators around, and build the golf-course hospitality, and it went really well."

Mele is happy the first leg of the four-event FedEx Cup Playoffs will return to the Garden State the next two years. Next summer, [Ridgewood CC in Paramus](#) will host for the third time in seven years, and Mele said, "We're excited to go back to [Ridgewood](#)."

[Ridgewood](#) officials are excited to host for the first time since 2010. Alex Khowaylo, [Ridgewood's](#) event chairman for The Barclays, said Sunday that the club "sent notice" a few days ago that it also is willing to host in 2018.

"I think our membership is looking forward to it, our staff is looking forward to it," Khowaylo said. "We think it's going to be a great event, and we would like to make it even better than it was in 2010, and we want to give spectators a great experience."

Liberty National's primary task was to provide a good experience for tour players, who care more about the fairways and greens than the spectacular views of the New York City skyline and Statue of Liberty.

Paul Fireman and his son, Dan, co-founders of the course built in 2006, responded. Several greens have been rebuilt, including the 18th, which allows for fairer play as well as better flow of spectators. Fairways were widened, rough was shortened.

"Liberty National, I equate to Augusta National in that it's a second-shot golf course," Mickelson said, referring to the home of The Masters. "The greens are the nuances, the greens are the challenge of the golf course, the subtleties, the breaks. You have to have a chance to go into the green, into the approach.

"If Augusta had rough like we had rough at Liberty in '09, it's no fun to play. We have to play defensive off the tee, and it's so penalizing for your second shot.

"When they got rid of the rough, I thought it changed this course entirely and the whole dynamic of how you perceive this course, because now the corridors and the fairways are wider and you have more shots into the green, and you don't have to play defensive off the tee."

Ridgewood, an old, traditional course with its tree-lined fairways, has drawn rave reviews from players. So its goal will be to accommodate larger crowds. Khowaylo estimates the 2010 Barclays drew 80,000 spectators, and he anticipates next year's number exceeding 100,000. With ample parking nearby at Bergen Community College, the event can handle the larger crowds next year (Aug. 21-24).

"We've started looking at it, we've started planning for it," Khowaylo said. "And all we need is the Lord to give us good weather and we'll really have a special experience."

This is the seventh year of the FedEx Cup Playoffs and New Jersey has hosted this first event five times. Edison CC in Plainfield is also in the rotation and hosting again in 2015. The Garden State has been good to The Barclays, and The Barclays has been good to the Garden State.

"The attendance has grown," Mele said. "Our corporate support has grown measurably. Donations have grown, so everything is building. The tournament continues to be on an upswing, even through what has been a rocky economy the past few years."