

Bethpage Black vs. Liberty National: Which is better?

By Alan Shipnuck, Senior Writer, Sports Illustrated Published: Monday, June 08, 2009 | 03:20:00 PM

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Michael J. LeBrecht II/1Deuce3 Photography
Hills, hand carts and huge bunkers define a day
on the Black course at Bethpage.

To get from his home in Laurel Springs, N.J., to the parking lot at [Bethpage Black](#), Ed Cybulski drives north on the New Jersey Turnpike, crosses the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge into Brooklyn and then cuts through the heart of Long Island. The trip takes 2 1/2 hours each way, and when Cybulski twice made the journey during the last week of May, he was careful to stay near the speed limit, trying to squeeze a little better mileage out of his 1996 Ford Thunderbird, which has just under 100,000 miles on the odometer and a noisy front-end rattle that registers every pothole.

Soft-spoken and slight of build, Cybulski, 49, has a personal aesthetic so simple that he doesn't own a cellphone. Golf is his only bad habit, which only partially explains why he awoke in the Bethpage parking lot four mornings in a row hoping to snag one of

the six tee times that are famously set aside every day on a first-come-first-served basis. His doggedness paid off when at 8:09 on Sunday, May 31 — the last day the public could play the Black before it was shut down for its [U.S. Open](#) priming — Cybulski teed off with a couple of buddies on a glorious, sun-kissed morning.

"It's pretty special [that] we get to walk where Tiger is going to walk in a couple of weeks," said Cybulski, a 6.4 handicap. He was striding down the Black's 5th fairway, chasing after one of his sweeping draws. "That's what this place is all about. We are public golf course players, always have been. We're never going to get invited to a fancy club like Winged Foot or Shinnecock. But when you play the Black for one day, you can pretend you're playing the [U.S. Open](#)."

On Cybulski's third morning in the Bethpage parking lot, at about the time he was peeling off his blankets and corkscrewing out of the backseat of his Thunderbird, another golfer was readying for a round in altogether different circumstances. Jim Clark was reclined on a yacht belonging to [Liberty National Golf Club](#), a very private facility that will make its public debut in August when it hosts the Barclays, the first of the four FedEx Cup playoff events. Clark had been picked up at Manhattan's 79th Street Boat Basin — a quick ride in a chauffeured car from his expansive apartment on Fifth Avenue — and was to be ferried to Liberty National, which is perched on the edge of New York Harbor in Jersey City, N.J. The club is accessible via the Turnpike, but the more elegant manner of arrival is the 10-minute boat ride down the Hudson River, past the gleaming towers of Wall Street and right under the nose of the Statue of Liberty, with views of the Verrazano and beyond.

With his golden tan and blond hair swept back rakishly, Clark radiated bonhomie, and he wore his wealth as comfortably as a vintage Patek Philippe. He is habitually referred to on Page Six of the *New York Post* as a techno-billionaire, and Clark's adventures in Silicon Valley, including the cofounding of Netscape, turned him into the antihero of Michael Lewis's best seller *The New New Thing*. Clark dropped out of high school to join the Navy and now owns a private fleet that includes one of the largest yachts in the world — the 292-foot, three-masted schooner *Athena*, which came with a price tag of \$100 million. Clearly Liberty National's \$500,000 initiation fee is not a big deal for a man of Clark's means.

On the ferry ride to the club he told the story of why he hadn't taken up golf until three years ago, at age 62. "I grew up poor in Plainview, Texas," Clark began, reminiscing about how he never had the required 75 cents for admission to the community pool. One day he was offered three quarters to caddie at Plainview's nine-hole golf course. After one loop Clark was eager to collect and head to the pool when he was informed that a game meant 18 holes and he was expected to go around again. Clark refused, and his player begrudgingly tossed him 25 cents. Said Clark, "I concluded that all golfers were arrogant a-----, and from that day on I had no use for the game. Then three years ago I met a woman and she got me into it." You can't blame Clark for his change of heart; the woman who reintroduced him to golf is Kristy Hinze, 28, the SI swimsuit model who a few months ago became Clark's fourth wife, in a lavish four-day celebration in the Caribbean.

Bethpage and Liberty National are very different worlds, obviously, but a deep love of golf defines both. The 2002 [U.S. Open](#), the first one held at the Black, was a smash hit because diehards such as Cybulski provided its soul (and noisy sound track), as the gallery collectively felt an unprecedented bond with the course. Liberty National may not inspire the same fevered devotion among the lucky few who get to play it, but the course's very creation makes it one of golf's grandest passion projects, an audacious vision of how an otherwise unusable piece of earth can be transformed into something beautiful.

The land on which Liberty National sits has a long history of neglect and abuse, dating to at least World War I, when it was used as an ammo dump. In the ensuing decades it served variously as a junkyard, a petroleum-tank farm and the site of massive storage warehouses, one of which was a base of operations for the Gambino crime family. In the early 1990s a movement arose to rehabilitate the New Jersey waterfront, and a golf course was deemed one of the few appropriate uses for the Liberty National land. In '92 Tom Kite, fresh off his [U.S. Open](#) victory, and his course-design mentor, Bob Cupp, were asked to scout the site, which had become an environmental disaster oozing toxic waste and littered with rusted-out cars, abandoned couches and a vast array of other detritus. "It was the junkiest piece of land I had ever seen," Kite says. "But if you could ignore the smell and all the garbage, it was an unbelievably exciting opportunity because of the location. To build a course framed by the New York skyline, with the Statue of Liberty just offshore — we knew it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Kite and Cupp spent years designing and redesigning and tweaking and fine-tuning the proposed course through every step of a mind-numbing permitting process. By 1998, a new course with a residential component had been more or less approved, but no one seemed to have the will or the money to see the project through. Enter Paul Fireman.

Twenty years earlier, not long after his sporting goods distribution business had faltered, Fireman mortgaged his house to borrow \$35,000 to secure the North American rights to sell an obscure brand of British sneakers named Reebok. Fireman ultimately bought the company and took it public, landing him on the *Forbes* billionaire list.

When he was a kid, Fireman had caddied at Thorny Lea Golf Club in his hometown of Brockton, Mass., sparking a lifetime love for the game. In the late 1980s Fireman bought a house on Cape Cod and he applied for membership at the Oyster Harbors Club, an old-money enclave that dates to the 1920s and boasts a Donald Ross course. Fireman was never welcomed into the club and later told *The Boston Globe* that he felt he had been blackballed because he is Jewish. So Fireman bought a course a few miles down the road from Oyster Harbors, upgraded it and sought out a diverse group of would-be members. The

Willowbend Country Club opened in 1992 and was the first in a portfolio that would swell to a dozen courses in the U.S. and Caribbean. Fireman was thunderstruck when he first laid eyes on the Liberty National site. "Within five minutes," he says, he resolved to build a world-class course there. "I knew it would be my legacy."