

Liberty National Golf Club impresses PGA golfers who arrive at the Jersey City course

by **Brendan Prunty**/The Star-Ledger

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John Munson/The Star-LedgerThe 14th green at Liberty National Golf Course in Jersey City, the site of The Barclays tournament, offers a beautiful view of New York City.

One by one, they filed into the spacious locker room underneath the sleek and shiny clubhouse. Like kids on the first day of junior high, some of the PGA's best players walked in, took a look around, and then asked someone to find their lockers.

Then they asked how to open it.

"Whoa," Kenny Perry said as he walked in and took a look around the posh locker room at Liberty National Golf Club. "Not too bad."

Day One at the million-dollar Jersey City course was all about getting the lay of the land. After all, Liberty National is a first-time tour host, so Monday the select players who showed up took the day to get their bearings before The Barclays and, with it, the FedEx Cup playoffs, actually begin.

Mission No.1: Getting a leg up on the players who didn't show up Monday.

"It's tight," said PGA Tour veteran Bob Estes. "It's a nice mix of long holes and short holes. The greens have a lot of tiers, so they're tricky to read. It's going to be tough out there."

The small sampling of players who tested the course for the first time Monday gave it overwhelmingly positive reviews.

Three-time major champion Padraig Harrington played four holes of his first practice round Monday with course co-designer Tom Kite. Harrington raved to Kite about the areas around the greens and how navigating them will be a tough challenge throughout the week.

In the hot sun, the players who ventured out to play a practice round got to feel Liberty National at full throttle, with its fast greens and firm fairways.

And for the first time, players got a chance to figure out how to hit balls in the direction of legendary landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty and Verrazano-Narrows Bridge .

But can such a unique backdrop be a distraction?

"I think it's nice to have that distraction every once in a while," Estes said, laughing. "I don't think it'll affect as much as people think. It's nice to have that take off the pressure. You can only benefit, really."

All in all, it seems that Liberty National's first day under the PGA Tour spotlight seems to have gone smoothly. Practice rounds continue Tuesday and are open to the public.

"If you don't like this event, you don't like any event," Harrington said. "And you're in a great city as well, which adds to it, I think."

Casey withdraws: Well, that was fun while it lasted.

For the first time since the FedEx Cup playoffs system was initiated in 2007, the Barclays had anticipated a full field. All 125 players in the points standings were scheduled to be at Liberty National.

Until Monday afternoon.

Englishman Paul Casey -- the third-ranked player in the world behind Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson -- withdrew, citing an injury to a muscle near his rib cage. Casey, who was 18th in the standings, had to withdraw from the PGA Championship in Minnesota two weeks ago with the same injury.

Back to New York: The Barclays will finally venture out of New Jersey for the first time since 2007.

While it looked somewhat iffy at times whether the PGA Tour would return to its original home -- Westchester Country Club in Rye, N.Y. -- it will do just that in 2012. The club had been a PGA Tour stop for more than 40 years before last year, when the tour pulled out of its agreement.

The Barclays returns to Ridgewood Country Club in Paramus next year, before moving over to Plainfield Country Club in Edison in 2011.