

The New York Times



August 27, 2009

ON PAR

In Shadow of Statue, a Place to Shine

By [BILL PENNINGTON](#)

JERSEY CITY — A statue had never tended the flagstick for me before, let alone a statue some 300 feet tall and recognized around the world.

But I was playing the second hole at [Liberty National golf club](#), and there, seemingly close enough to be on the green — with hand raised as if grasping the flag — was the Statue of Liberty.

It was more than an aiming point. It was the point.

Liberty National, the host of the 2009 Barclays tournament, the first stage of the PGA Tour's FedEx Cup playoffs, is a new and distinctive course in a region blessed with elite golf offerings. But from the beginning — it was first envisioned in 1992 — Liberty National was laid out along the New Jersey waterfront to take advantage of an unmatched vista: the Statue of Liberty, less than 1,000 yards away, the Manhattan skyline beyond, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and the harbor all around.

A good golf course makes a beautiful backdrop. At Liberty National, the backdrop makes the golf course beautiful.

“In this site, it was always about the landmarks, even if they are off-site,” said [Tom Kite](#), a former PGA Tour star and a co-designer of Liberty National with the veteran golf architect Bob Cupp. “How many holes can we position in a direction so you can see the Statue of Liberty, the skyline or the harbor? You went there and just let your imagination run wild.”

It took plenty of imagination when Kite, Cupp and Liberty National’s co-founders, [Paul and Dan Fireman](#), visited the location.

“As a piece of property, it was an awful blight on the landscape — a swath of mistreated land,” Kite said last month. The 160 acres that would become Liberty National — 4,000 feet of it waterfront — were a condemned collection of toxic waste, petroleum and garbage.

“But we did stand there and wonder, What if this were a lush green golf course? Imagine the setting,” Dan Fireman said.

He and his father, Paul, the founder of Reebok, financed the building of Liberty National at a cost of \$250 million.

It wasn’t long before someone wondered: Imagine the views on television if the course hosted a PGA Tour event. Or a major championship. Imagine everything a TV blimp would be able to focus on from the sky above New York.

The TV networks would love that panorama.

Not surprisingly, two years ago, when Liberty National was announced as the site of [the 2009 Barclays](#), Commissioner Tim Finchem of the PGA Tour was on the same page.

“Liberty National will look like New York to the rest of the country on television,” Finchem said.

So, just like that, Liberty National had found its place among prominent golf courses, right?

Not so fast.

“We did a lot of early dreaming, but frankly, we were naïve,” Dan Fireman said. “We had no idea how hard it was going to be.”

Kite now looks back on the 14 years that passed from his first visit to the site until the golf course opened in 2006 and laughs.

“The project brought out every emotion, from devotion to love to hatred,” he said.

First, the land had to be acquired, assembled in parcels from different owners. Negotiations over who was going to take responsibility for various stages of the cleanup were thorny. Vast stretches of the property were contaminated, and a host of regulatory agencies weighed in on what needed to be done. Construction plans had to be devised and designs filed. Governmental approvals and permits had to be obtained.

Finally, when work was allowed to begin, nothing related to the golf course could commence until the polluted earth was capped by a thick layer of sand, clay and silicate. That took three years. After that, Kite and Cupp had to import the materials to create a new landscape.

“The land was dead flat, with an elevation of 8 to 10 feet above sea level,” Kite said. “If we wanted a hole to rise or fall from tee to green, or we wanted a fairway to fall off left to right, we had to bring in new dirt and build it high above the cap. We had to create the lakes and bring in the water that filled them. Every bunker had to be constructed — built up and then dug down.”

Drainage and irrigation systems were installed above the cap. About 2,000 trees were planted above it. More than 5,000 sprinkler heads were positioned — part of a subterranean pipe network that also collects fertilizer, then cleans and recycles it.

“We couldn’t dig into the ground for anything,” Fireman said. “So if you wanted to plant a 20-foot tree, you had to build up enough ground beneath it to do that. It was like building a huge sandbox and then building a sand castle over it.”

In Kite and Cupp’s vision, it is a sand castle with few gimmicks. Sure, there is some wild fescue and the fairways are narrow, but there are no eye-catching 100-yard-wide bunkers or immense water hazards. Because the area was last forested before Dutch

ships arrived 400 years ago, the layout has an open feel. The course, with some links-style elements, plays more than 7,400 yards from the championship tees.

So it is long, but its difficulty is in subtle fairway and green contours — and in a plethora of difficult tee placements.

When I played it last month, it seemed for a while as if I was never without a testing lie or a daunting putt from the wrong side of the green.

Take the deceptive par-4 fifth hole, at about 440 yards.

The tee shot must skirt water on the left. But as Liberty National's golf pro, Mark Diamond, pointed out, being on the right side of the fairway leaves you with a hook lie to a green sloping right to left. And there's a stream on the left of the green.

Care to guess where my shot ended up? It bounced just left of the green and into the stream. The pros will no doubt find the green more successfully, but can they hit a fade out of a hook lie to combat the slope of the green and still find the part near the hole?

“We won't know exactly how challenging it will play until those guys get here,” Diamond said. “It's still a very young golf course. But it has some teeth. I think the winning score will be about 9 or 10 under par.”

The real show at the Barclays this week — on the ground and on television — will begin at the 14th hole. A short par 3, it is the signature hole, with unobstructed views of all the noted landmarks, including the bridges and the boating commerce trolling by in the harbor. Stand on the tee and pick your aiming point: the Empire State Building, or some other skyscraper's spire?

The 16th hole is a drivable par 4 at 331 yards, but there is likely to be a breeze from the left. A daring tee shot will have to carry a creek and a waterfall that front the right side of the green. The 17th hole has a Scottish golfing ambience and appropriately plays into the wind from the harbor. You will never be completely convinced that you are in Scotland, however, since, once again, the Statue of Liberty rises just behind the green.

The 18th hole should be a sweeping closing hole, as it plays uphill with the waterfront just to the right of the fairway from tee to green. A par 4, it will play at least 487 yards, and maybe 31 yards longer, which could really test a tiring final group of leaders.

If there is a criticism of Liberty National, it is that it has a manufactured look. It does not look like a traditional premier Northeastern United States golf course, with a layout designed a century or more ago. And Liberty National is certainly not in vogue with the [current minimalist trend in course architecture](#), which eschews engineering tricks to shape holes. Alas, at this site, where the natural environment disappeared many decades ago, that wasn't an option.

Without question, Liberty National needs to mature. But it has other modern and evident attributes, and there's a good chance the PGA pros and their families will like being so close to Manhattan and all it has to offer when the golf is done for the day.

"Long ago, I quit trying to guess how my peers or competitors will like a golf course," Kite said. "It is a strong golf course built to eventually host a major championship. This tournament will show us how we can make it better, because a golf course has to evolve. I'm sure there will be changes and modifications. But I know three things about it won't change: location, location, location."

A version of this article appeared in print on August 27, 2009, on page F1 of the New York edition.