

**Q&A with Hamilton Farm Golf Club's
Highlands Course & Hickory Course Designers,
Dr. Michael Hurdzan and Dana Fry**

What were your first impressions when you toured the Hamilton Farm property?

Our first impression was that Hamilton Farm was one of those incredibly special places. As soon as you drive through the gate, you have this stately sense of presence and the size of the property and its rich heritage just hit you. The property is a pristine piece of New Jersey countryside that had so many wonderful elements—huge trees, steep hills, lots of streams that bisected the terrain, horse trails throughout and historic barns. We knew that we would have some challenges in fitting the championship golf course on this large site but in the end those hurdles became the hallmark of many of the golf holes. For us to leave our imprint on this superb piece of land is indeed very special.

Did the estate's considerable history and reputation as a working farm with pastures, forests, horse trails, creeks, rolling hills and formal gardens influence the design direction you decided to take?

The Hamilton Farm property had been nurtured for a few hundred years by people who cared about the ground. It isn't often that you get to work on such a piece of land in such an idyllic setting. There is no question that what existed when we started did influence the design greatly. To lay two courses in there was a special challenge and a special privilege. We tried to orient the holes to take advantage of all that was there.

The plan for Hamilton Farm Golf Club was to create a championship 18-hole golf course, the Highlands, and a spirited 18-hole par-3 course, the Hickory. Did you route both courses at the same time and were there particular challenges in crafting the design of each layout?

The plan was always to have 36 holes at Hamilton Farm. The idea was to route the championship course, The Highlands, first and to give it precedence in the selection of the land. The exercise was to find the best 18 holes possible. We had no limit on quality with the course. When you sit down to route a course, the hardest holes to fit are the par-5s and the easiest are the par-3s. We definitely knew we wanted to include the historic barns as much as possible in the layout and that the 18th hole would take full advantage of the view of the mansion. We did build both The Highlands and The Hickory Courses concurrently but again precedence was given to The Highlands. The Hickory is built on more of a wooded area and The Highlands occupies more of the open, pasture land.

Are there any particular holes on The Highlands Course that you would like to comment about?

There are so many great holes at Hamilton Farm that it's truly difficult to choose. Certainly, the 1st hole is a wonderful opening hole that is slightly uphill. The 2nd hole is a very dramatic par-5 with fabulous bunkering. The 6th hole, with its green so close to the Bull Barn, is reminiscent of many holes on the old courses of Scotland. And the par-3 7th presents a tough tee shot to a green that is angled left to right. The downhill par-5 9th hole also is a beauty, and the 17th and 18th holes with their views of the mansion and formal gardens are incredible. The spectacular par-5 14th hole, "Long Look," we like to think of as the course's signature hole.

Your firm is known for its sensitive stewardship of the environment. Did you encounter any specific environmental situations that affected the design of the Highlands or Hickory Courses?

We were selected to design Hamilton Farm's courses because of our sensitive approach to the environment. It's said that all politics are local and certainly all environmental issues are local. We tried to route the two courses in the most sensitive way possible. We did have a few environmental issues at the site and there were habitat areas that needed protecting. For instance, there was a wood turtle that was on the endangered species list and was thought to inhabit a stream corridor. So we gave it wide buffers. Overall, the challenges were minimal. We wanted to keep the romantic feel of the property and that meant keeping all the old barns, stonewalls, ancient trees and other features.

Was the Highlands Course designed with any skill level of player in mind? The slope for all four tee areas ranges from 134 to 139 and the championship black tees are rated at a stiff 74.7.

Indeed, the championship course was intended to test the best players in the world. It was understood that a club of Hamilton Farm's stature was going to attract the game's very top players and that its comparison to, say, a Baltusrol, Pine Valley or Augusta National was inevitable. The club wanted a course that would do all of that and yet allow the double-digit handicap player to go out and enjoy himself. We are proud that we achieved those goals.

Creative bunkering is a distinctive design feature of many Hurdzan/Fry courses. Can you explain the inspiration that led to the particular bunkering plan for the Highlands Course? And why did you choose to pattern bunkers in the style of Alister MacKenzie?

The bunkering at Hamilton Farm is indeed truly unique and it looks like it's been there forever. Dana Fry worked hard to give the bunkers a MacKenzie look and feel because the courses MacKenzie designed are timeless and his bunkers are hallmark features. Just look at Cypress Point, for instance. We wanted to retain that same timeless look. The bunkers on The Highlands are very challenging. All the grassy fingers that come down into the bunkers give players all kinds of lies, which adds strategic values to the holes.

Is the magnificent par-5 14th hole the most dramatic example of bunkering on the Highlands Course?

We consider the 14th hole one of the best bunkered holes in the world! From a design standpoint, it may be the best hole that Dana Fry ever has worked on. We see the 14th as the course's signature hole, much like the 7th at Pebble Beach. When you step on the tee at 14, the "wow" meter is big. You know you've arrived at a hole that is beyond description.

Is the Highlands Course a challenging site for a professional tour tournament?

We think that what really challenges the good players of today are the shot values in and around the greens. Hamilton Farm's Highlands Course certainly was designed with that in mind. About 75% of the hole locations are relatively forgiving so that the average player can enjoy his round. But if you want to set the course up really tough then the other 25% of hole locations will make this course highly demanding. It will challenge the very best shot-makers. Its strength is its bunkering, competitive hole locations and stiff penalties for missing the greens. In fact, Tiger Woods once spent some time there to tune-up for a tournament. When you have a world-ranked player like Tiger staying on to play your course you know you've created something of high caliber.