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FOR PGA TITLE AND MAJOR MOMENT

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RICOH WOMEN'S BRITISH OPEN

GREATHORSE HITS ITS STRIDE  
WITH BRIAN SILVA'S REWORK



AUGUST 8, 2016



# SADDLE UP

By Bradley S. Klein // Hampden, Mass.

GOLF LIFE

**A**mong the most impressive skills of a premier course architect is the ability to envision what's not yet there in the land.


It's difficult enough to puzzle out a new routing from raw terrain. But in many ways, the greater achievement is taking what has been in place for decades as mundane golf ground and reimagining it into something exhilarating.

At GreatHorse, veteran New England-based architect Brian Silva finally has found a project in his home region where he could deploy his considerable tool kit. What started as a bunker-renovation plan for a typically lifeless Al Zikorus design called Hampden Country Club steadily morphed into a total remake of nearly every feature and blade of grass within the existing routing corridor. The result, part of a \$50 million reinvention of

the entire club, is a stunning reversal of fortune.

Newly rebranded, GreatHorse is a full-service private club with up-tempo amenities and styling. (The club retains the Hampden CC name, though it commonly is known as GreatHorse.) Its 232-acre site, 11 miles east of Springfield, looks out across a vast expanse of the Connecticut River Valley. Seven holes occupy high ground; another 11 sit down on virtually flat floodplain. Top to bottom, the place clocks in at an impressive 225 feet of elevation change.

Silva's unlikely achievement has been to make the lower and upper holes mesh and flow without making it feel as if there were two separate courses. The key is offset diagonal bunkering, interesting greens, lots of short-grass rollout around them and opened ground through tree management that eliminated the previous



An aerial view (from left) of GreatHorse's second fairway and third hole.



## Architect Brian Silva cracks the whip to turn GreatHorse into a champion



Golfweek regularly profiles courses that are on Golfweek's Best lists or are candidates for inclusion.

isolation of each hole and created a single composition.

Credit the Antonacci family with the forbearance to commit to an evolving redesign program that ultimately addressed every aspect of what had been a financially moribund private club. The Antonaccis' background in hauling and recycling, family entertainment and horse breeding would not have prepared them for the private-club market. Nor are they the type to undertake feasibility studies. They just know quality and what young professionals and their families want. The cellphone policy reflects that; members can use their phones, and even charge them in the carts or lockers and blast music during golf.

GreatHorse isn't just about a stirring par-72 layout. The amenities, perched to overlook the golf course and the entire valley, include a 25,000-square-foot clubhouse

that's a rustic mountain lodge in the shingle style. There's also a 9,000-square-foot banquet hall called "The Starting Gate" (for marriages – get it?).

The members at this private club also have the run of an outdoor swimming pool, eight-acre practice range and short-game area with indoor training facilities that include fitting bays, swing analysis/ball-flight monitor and putting lab, four paddle-tennis courts and four Har-Tru tennis courts, plus basketball, pickleball, volleyball, bocce and outdoor ice hockey.

That's a long way from a bunker-renovation plan. At each step of the way, Silva was challenged to create a new golf course befitting the sparkle and class required to enable GreatHorse to enter the market in a blockbuster way. Thirty years into his career, the former agronomist has created something thoroughly transformative. ▶▶



COURTESY GREATHORSE



# RATER'S NOTEBOOK

## EASE AND INTIMACY OF ROUTING: 7

Returning nines, each starting on a launch-pad downhill par 4, crossing over road onto a flatlands stretch, then returning onto pronounced uplands.

## QUALITY OF FEATURE SHAPING: 9

A bit of period-piece heavy-handedness is evident, both in the features as well as in the wavy-gravy contour fairway mowing lines.

## NATURAL SETTING AND OVERALL LAND PLAN: 8

A lot going on, but the amenity core on top of the property compartmentalizes matters and gives golf the necessary room to breathe. Among the welcome touches are the native rock walls and native fescue transition areas between holes.

## INTEREST OF GREENS AND SURROUNDING CHIPPING CONTOURS: 9

Ground game is ever-present thanks to large greens (7,000 square feet on average) with moderate contours and vast low-mow surrounds, all of it kept tight and firm.

## VARIETY AND MEMORABILITY OF PAR 3s: 7

From the 6,493-yard gold tees, I hit sand wedge, 9-iron, 6-iron and 4-hybrid. Sweet mid-length Redan ninth hole at 182 yards. Highlight is long 12th, 222 yards from the back to the only semi-blind green on course: a long, fall-away putting surface that's ideal for a run-up.

## VARIETY AND MEMORABILITY OF PAR 4s: 8

Angles created by diagonal fairway bunkering help define

alternative paths. Ground-game access always is possible, usually around some sort of front or offset bunker and through use of lateral banks that feed balls onto greens if approach is properly played.

## VARIETY AND MEMORABILITY OF PAR 5s: 6

All four are down in low valley floor, with intriguing second shots. Wide, long eighth hole, stretching to 615 yards but 542 yards from middle tees, offers staggered bunker complexes combined with lots of open pockets and a false front to the elevated green.

## TREE AND LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT: 8

The old course offered each hole in its own envelope. The new course has opened things up to let in wind and sun while giving thematic and visual unity to the entire layout. A few strategic copses rightly remain.

## BASIC CONDITIONING: 9

Flawless bentgrass greens (007/Tyee); 30 acres of tightly mown bentgrass fairways and bluegrass/fescue roughs that enable one to find and play the ball. Superintendent David Rafferty used to have a budget of \$275,000 at the old layout; his new budget is more than five times that, which he needs (among other things) to hand rake the club's 204 bunkers.

## "WALK IN THE PARK" TEST: 8

That rarity in golf design: a layout that works vertically and horizontally. Long views of valleys and clubhouse are inspiring. Constant tacking of holes makes subtle demands on shotmaking and keeps golfers' interest high without the slightest lag. Only drawback is walkability, due to pronounced elevation changes between upland and lowland holes.

## OVERALL: 7.7

Very impressive. Would not have thought this part of west-central Massachusetts could support such an upscale club, but the membership numbers thus far belie that assumption. Should be a serious contender for top-100 Modern status and certainly the strongest contemporary full-service club in central New England.

### GREATHORSE

128 Wilbraham Road,  
Hampden, Mass. 01036  
413-566-8010  
Greathorse.com

Par 72; five sets of tees (4,953 yards to 7,522);  
Rating/slope: 77.8/140 from 7,522-yard tees

Private club; membership inquiries welcome



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