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Anyone who played George Wright Golf course in the 1980s or '90s would be blown away by its current condition.

Restoration has made George Wright and Franklin Park golfing jewels

By [Ben Volin](#), Globe Staff

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The memories of George Wright and Franklin Park golf courses aren't kind.

Len Curtin, superintendent at George Wright Golf Course for the last 14 years, remembers a course where grass wouldn't grow on the putting greens on holes 3, 4, 10, and 15. He says

nearly half of the course's 970 sprinkler heads were not working when he arrived in 2004, and a maintenance shed had only two working light bulbs.

Russ Heller, superintendent at Franklin Park since 2001, recalls an old manual irrigation system that didn't work well, tee boxes that were too small, and bunkers that hadn't been touched since the 1980s.

Mark Mungeam, a golf architect who was hired in 2003 to create a master plan for the restoration of both Boston courses, remembers greens in rough condition and cart paths that looked even worse.

Matt Parziale, the amateur golfer from Brockton who qualified to play in this year's Masters and US Open, hated George Wright as a kid.

"I'm not one to talk about how difficult or easy a course is; I rank courses by how much fun I have on them," Parziale said. "I don't really remember liking it too much when I was growing up."

But Boston's two public courses have experienced a renaissance over the last 15 years. Thanks to support from then-mayor Thomas M. Menino and current Mayor Martin J. Walsh, the city reclaimed control of the courses in 2003 and has invested significant resources into restoring the old classics.

Anyone who played Franklin Park or George Wright in the 1980s or '90s would be blown away by the current condition of the courses. They look immaculate this summer, with 3-inch rough, perfectly groomed bunkers, and barely a blade of grass out of place.

Both courses are now booked solid on the weekends, hosting upward of 37,000 rounds of golf each year — about 10,000 more than a decade ago, according to the city, though records are spotty. And both courses can be played for just \$45 (plus \$20 for a cart).



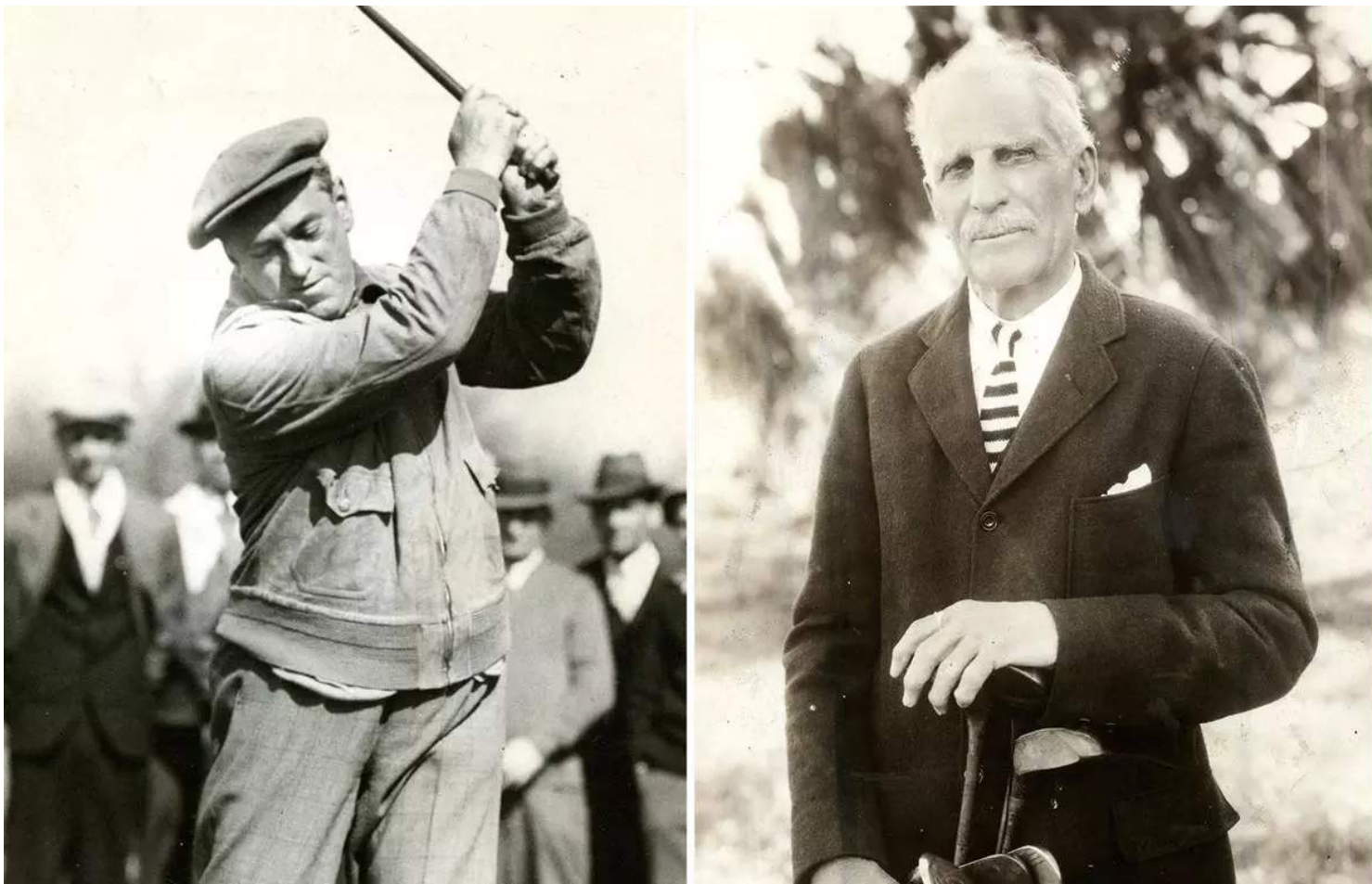
David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

Franklin Park is booked solid on weekends.

“Anybody who had ever played George Wright always said it had so much potential,” Mungeam said. “The bones of the golf course are phenomenal. It’s a great layout. The city is so fortunate to have such a great golf course.”

The Massachusetts Golf Association certainly has taken notice. The Massachusetts Amateur Championship is almost always held at an exclusive private club — i.e., The Country Club, Charles River Country Club, or The Kittansett Club — but this year’s tournament is one for the people. The 2018 Mass. Amateur will be held at Franklin Park and George Wright from July 9-13, marking the first time in the 110-year history of the event that it is played at a daily-fee, public-access facility.

It also represents a remarkable turnaround for two historic courses that had fallen into significant disrepair over several decades.



Boston Globe file and Sport Parade

Mayor James M. Curley (left) opened the season at Franklin Park Golf course on April 17, 1931, and George Wright (right), a big league baseball player and golf course designer, on Dec. 26 1934.

“They’ve put so much money into it,” said Parziale, 31, of George Wright. “It’s been in much better shape in recent years than it was when I was growing up.”

Franklin Park will host the first day of stroke play in the Mass. Amateur, and George Wright will host the second day of stroke play and all five rounds of match play.

The city will forgo about \$20,000 in revenue by shutting down George Wright for a week, but both courses will remain open through the day before the tournament.

The MGA’s Women’s Amateur Championship also will be played at George Wright July 30-Aug. 2.

“This is really a long time coming for our association,” said Jesse Menachem, executive director of the MGA. “We’ve held several qualifying events there, but we felt, what more can

we do to get these two courses exposed and bring them to the level that the city feels they should be?”

Teeming with history

The city didn't invest in the courses so they could host the Mass. Amateur. The Mass. Amateur just happens to be the reward of a decade-plus of hard work.

“It's not the impetus behind our work, but it's nice to kind of look forward to this Mass. Amateur,” said Mungeam, whose past work includes helping prepare Olympia Fields (Ill.) for the 2003 US Open.

“I feel that George Wright is right up there with some of the best courses I've worked on. With each passing year, spending a little bit more money and improving things, it gets better and better. I love George Wright.”

The MGA certainly chose two courses teeming with history.

Franklin Park is the second-oldest public golf course in the country, opening in 1896. The legendary Bobby Jones honed his game there in the 1920s while studying at Harvard, and famed golf architect Donald Ross redesigned the course late in that decade.



Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff/file

Men played on the 11th fairway in July 2010.

More of an open, country-meadow course, Franklin Park plays only at about 6,000 yards and has an unusual 34-36 par setup (no par 5s on the front). But a stiff wind can make it tough to keep the ball in the fairway, and the back nine has significant elevation changes and blind shots.

George Wright opened in 1936 amid great fanfare, a Ross design that required 60,000 pounds of dynamite, the US Army Corps of Engineers, and \$1 million in funding. Though it originally was intended as a private club, the city took over the land in 1929 after the stock market crash.



Arthur Griffin/Globe Staff/file

Golfers gathered at the first tee of Boston's newly opened \$1 million municipal George Wright Golf Course and country club circa June 1938.

George Wright's par-70 course can stretch to about 6,700 yards, shorter than most championship courses, but it makes up for a lack of length with a bevy of blind shots and a challenging terrain. The course was built into the side of a granite ledge, and golfers rarely have a flat lie on their second shots.

And while the current conditions at George Wright are excellent, golfers are reminded every time they hit from the rough that they're not playing at a fancy private club.



Lane Turner/Globe Staff

Golfers crossed a small creek on 18th hole at George Wright Golf Course.

“The rough is penalizing,” said Curtin. “It’s really not like private-club rough. It’s really gnarly. There’s depressions and deep spots and it’s really irregular.”

Both courses fell on hard times during World War II thanks to a manpower shortage, and never really recovered until now. The city leased the management of the courses to outside vendors, but the courses went neglected for decades.

At George Wright, terrible irrigation ruined several holes, and trees overgrew much of the property. The course was open through the winter, and golfers would trample all over the swampy terrain during a thaw in February or March. In the 1970s, then-mayor Kevin White wanted to sell George Wright to use for public housing.

“The city really didn’t do anything to the golf course for decades,” Curtin said. “Maintenance-wise, it’s a bad thing. But the good news is they didn’t do anything to it. Nobody disturbed the contouring and the lay of the land.”

Fortunately, the golf courses had a supporter in Menino, a lifelong Hyde Park resident who lived near George Wright. He encouraged the Parks and Recreation Department to take control of the courses from outside vendors and put the city of Boston back into the golf business.

Since taking over in 2003, the city began allocating about \$200,000 a year into each course, and the improvements have been gradual but noticeable.

Getting notice

Over time, the George Wright team did complete tee-to-green renovations on holes 1 and 13. They renovated 25 of the course's 34 bunkers, and expanded 10 of the tee boxes. They installed a new irrigation system. And they cut back some of forest that had overtaken much of the property, reopening angles for golf shots, and providing beautiful sightlines of the signature 3-mile stone wall that encircles the property.

"We brought the course back to the original size and shape and put bunkers back in where they belonged," Curtin said. "They didn't touch a tree on this course for 80 years, so we've had to prune and re-prune and remove some trees just to take back the course."

The city also invested in a multiphase renovation of George Wright's massive Norman-style clubhouse. About \$4 million has already been invested into structural improvements to the building and refurbishing a grand back patio that overlooks the course and hosts Hyde Park community events.



Lane Turner/Globe Staff

About \$4 million has already been invested into structural improvements to the clubhouse at George Wright.

“They’ve restored so much of what Donald Ross did — even the stone wall that runs the property,” Menachem said. “It’s a special place that is going to be put on a really neat pedestal.”

Franklin Park has also undergone an extensive bunker renovation and expansion of tee boxes.

“Some things just hadn’t been touched since the late ’80s when they refurbished the course,” Heller said. “There were a lot of things that we could do, and whatever we chose, you really couldn’t go wrong.”

The golf world has certainly taken notice of the work put into both courses. By 2009, George Wright was named the 14th-best municipal course in the country by Golfweek, and was hosting a qualifier for the Mass. Amateur. It now annually earns a spot on Golfweek’s “Best

Courses You Can Play” list, and this year was named the eighth-best course in Massachusetts, public or private.

“The golf course shouldn’t be this good with the budget we have,” said Scott Allen, head pro at George Wright. “The city has just been so behind it, putting money right back into the course. Every year we’ve done something.”

Franklin Park has started earning accolades, as well, and showing up on its own “top 10” lists. It earned a top-10 ranking in Golfweek’s 2018 list of best courses of Massachusetts, alongside George Wright.



David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

The clubhouse at Franklin Park.

“Just getting that course on the list is a fantastic achievement by all involved,” said Dennis Roache, director of administration for Boston Parks and Recreation, who oversees both courses. “George Wright gets a lot of the publicity, being a Donald Ross layout, but Franklin Park is as good of a golf course, and we wanted to make sure we were able to showcase it this year.”

In 2015, George Wright and Franklin Park hosted the Massachusetts Four-Ball Championship, and the event went so well that the MGA announced shortly thereafter that the courses were ready for the signature event, the Mass. Amateur.

“That was kind of that ‘aha moment,’ ” said Menachem. “A lot of players hadn’t played either course in several years, and we had some really high-level amateur golfers saying, ‘Wow, these two venues are tremendous.’ ”

“The city had done so much to get them where they are conditions-wise, and a lot of the feedback was, ‘I hadn’t played here in 20 years, what a difference. I can’t believe I’m in the city of Boston right now.’ ”

The courses look great, but the projects will never cease. Bunkers at public courses last only 8-10 years, and they will need to be redone soon.

The staff at George Wright wants to flip the tee to the other side on the 12th hole, clear out some rock for a new tee box on 17, and install a new irrigation system.

“The city’s been very good about letting us operate these places and just supporting us financially, not telling us what to do,” Curtin said.

For George Wright and Franklin Park to be in championship condition is a testament to the hard work and resources put into both courses over the last 15 years.

“It’s truly phenomenal,” said Menachem. “It’s just so impressive what the two superintendents have been able to accomplish.

“And I’m just so thrilled that we’re able to showcase what they’ve done, and have this be our first ever opportunity to do that.”

Ben Volin can be reached at ben.volin@globe.com

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