

TRUIST TOURNAMENT IN PHILLY IS A SIGNATURE EVENT

By Mike Kern,

A little over a decade ago, Philadelphia Cricket Club opted to do an Oakmont to its Wissachickon Course, which was already considered to be among the best in the area if not all of Pennsylvania. Oakmont, on the opposite side of the state, had of course removed many if not most of its trees between the time it hosted the 1994 U.S. Open and the 2007 championship. And most agreed that it had only made one of the best layouts in the country even better. And they said much



the same about Philly Cricket, which also has the newer Militia track that's also highly ranked.

By the way, Aronimink has done something similar, and it's going to host the PGA Championship next year. But we digress.

Since its transformation, Cricket has hosted a number of prominent events, including the 2015 PGA Professional National Championship, the 2016 Senior Players Championship (won by Bernhard Langer) and the USGA Four-Ball Championship last year. And now, it will take it up even another notch. On May 8-11 it will be the venue for the PGA Truist Championship, the first time the PGA Tour has been to Philly since the BMW Championship that was part of the FedEx Cup playoffs was played at Aronimink in 2018.

So, it's quite a big deal. And this is one of the handful of the Tour's designated signature events, which means only the best players on the planet will be showing up. That includes Rory McIlroy, who finally completed his career grand slam by winning the Masters last month. And if Philly has shown anything in the past, it's that it appreciates and will support sporting events that it deems to be first-class. It's looking like this will be no exception.

The Truist, by the way, is being played the week before the PGA Championship. It used to be sponsored by Wells Fargo, and was held at Quail Hollow in North Carolina. But Wells Fargo decided not to

renew its contract, and Quail Hollow is the site of the PGA, so they needed a new destination, if only for this one year. And it all came together for Cricket rather quickly. But all indications are it will be very much up to the task. And then some. Everyone on both sides of the equation seems extremely satisfied and excited about how it's all been able to come together. McIlroy, it should be duly noted, won this tournament four times at Quail Hollow. For whatever that will be worth here. But it probably can't hurt.

Jim Smith, the longtime Director of Golf and COO, has been there for the entire evolution. And he couldn't be prouder. About what's already happened, and this next chapter. In short, it's all good. Maybe even great. And don't forget that at the beginning of the 20th century, Cricket's original Chestnut Hill location was the site for the U.S. Open in 1907 and 1910. So there's been no shortage of history.

"We've obviously had our share of significant events before," Smith said. "But it's the highest profile event we've ever done (in this present era). I think our membership, I don't know if validate is the right word, but certainly for us to be a place where the Tour and Truist would want to bring here for an event of this magnitude, that says a lot.

"So in many ways this proves that all the investment and effort that's been made to just make it better and better and better over the last 20 years has gotten us to this point. And it's a great place to be. It kind of says, 'Hey, you made some really good decisions.'

"This is a level above. And you have to have a great course to be considered. But for the Tour and Truist to show this much faith in what can be done here, in looking for that special partnership, it has to go way beyond just the golf course. And that's what's happening ...

"You have to have a volunteer base, which we're getting not just from here but all over the greater Philadelphia golf community," he continued. "And our membership has helped drive the hospitality purchases, which are such a big and essential part of it. So far, if we asked them what they expected in terms of sales we're blowing them out of the water."

Indeed, there doesn't seem to be any downside, especially for a region that hasn't had a regular Tour stop since the old IVB Classic at Whitemarsh Valley ended its nearly two-decade run in 1980, in part because the Open was coming to Merion the following summer. It's a question that a lot of folks in this area have had trouble understanding, since we have as many big-time courses as anywhere. Not to mention a pretty solid fan base. But for whatever reasons, there's been a void. And even though this is a one-time thing, you never know what maybe it could do to change some thinking.

Cont. from page 3

"I'm lucky," Smith acknowledged, with a knowing smile. "I come here and they give me money to do what I do. Which is crazy. But I know how the membership feels about the fact that the whole world of golf is going to be looking at Cricket Club for a week. That's something you can't put a price on.

"I was born and raised here, right. I think for many, many years, there has been a little bit of an inferiority complex. You know, that we were kind of stuck between Boston and New York and (Washington) D.C. And maybe we did get overlooked. What you're seeing now is we can hold our own, especially as it relates to supporting events like this. This far exceeded what anything thought could happen. I hope it lays the groundwork for regular Tour events or large events to come to Philly. And you know as well as I do, it's not just Cricket and Aronimink, or Merion (which has done history as well as anyone and is hosting another U.S. Amateur next year) or Pine Valley (the almost-always No. 1 rated course in the world). There's 20 other phenomenal courses in our city. And all of them could probably host an event."

Sometimes, it's about circumstances, and situations. Cricket just happened to be positioned in the right spot when it mattered. Because it has to work, or else it's not worth doing. And if it's not done right, another opportunity might be come along.

"At the end of the day, this is about money," Smith explained, correctly. "You can't go to places if you can't drive the revenue. You have to show them that the money is here. And I think you also see that Aronimink is killing it with PGA sales. So we're saying to the world of golf, 'Hey, Philadelphia is really a market that deserves something.' And I don't think what we're doing and what Aronimink's doing are going to take anything away from each other. We're both going to succeed, I think in a big way."

And at least in Cricket's case, it had to come together quickly.

"If the sponsor was the state bank of Georgia, this probably wouldn't have come to Philadelphia," Smith duly noted. "It had to fall in place the right way, for us and Truist. In all honesty, it kind of got dropped in our laps. Basically you could call it dumb luck. I also think they called us because we had developed a good reputation. We got a call in January of '24, so it was a really short window. The phone rang and we had discussions. For an event in May of '25. Which is insane. I think the club originally was like, 'OK, we've had our tires kicked before.' So I'm not sure we really paid much attention to it. Maybe they were just making phone calls, you know.

"In February, they sent an advance team out. And it was like, 'Let's figure this out.' But we actually didn't sign anything until July. And here we are. But until you know, you really don't. I'm not aware whether they talked to anyone else. All I knew was we were dealing with a really compacted time frame. But it hasn't been an issue."

They really didn't have to do much in terms of the course setup. Although, like with the Senior, the layout will be reconfigured so that the 18th is now the 11th, and the normal seventh, fifth, sixth and fourth will provide the finishing stretch to provide better viewing areas for the spectators, which

will be limited to fewer than a usual PGA event (around 17,500 instead of 20-25) to make the overall experience even better. In '16, those closing holes actually graded out as the most difficult. So there. The winning score was 1-over par, which is 70. The course will play at about 7,100 yards, about 400 more than it did for the older guys.

"The greens should be rock hard (at that time of year)," Smith said. "It'll play firm and fast. The rough should be moderate, not crazy. Our team will be able to dial up the course to whatever the Tour says. I think people will be surprised at the type of test this is. It might depend on the (weather) conditions. If it's soft, all bets are off. Because these guys are the best in the world. Of the 12 par 4s, my guess is they could be hitting wedge or 9 irons into probably seven or eight of them.

"The Tour told us, 'Don't judge the quality of the course on what they shoot.' It's entirely possible there going to have the opportunity to make some birdies. All you want is the players to leave and say what a great city, what a great golf course, what great hospitality. That's the goal.

"I will say this: the course record is 65. That will get broke. Without a doubt. It might get broken every day. Again, we're talking about the best in the world."

And the best of those are headed here, to find out exactly what a proper restoration can do. We'll find out soon enough. Smith can't wait.

"I'm just trying to make sure everything's in the right place," he admitted. "I have nothing to do with any of the (daily) operations. I mean, we've done this before, where we've had an Army of people coming in. This is just different. I couldn't even tell you committees are doing what. So I'm not going to be the guy stressing out because some volunteer didn't show up. I'm just super excited to show what we have.

"It's a burden. But you give something up, you get something in return. I think we're doing something a lot of other clubs couldn't do, in terms of scope and timing. But we're seeing a lot of direct benefits. It's going to have a boutique feel to it. I think people will appreciate that. What's cool is it's an intimate golf course.

"If Mother Nature cooperates ... I think we're going to get a lot of positive comments."

Which is all anyone can really ask for, right? It just took some time to be given that chance. Hopefully they can make the most of it. For now, and possibly the future as well.

