

The Cutting Edge

Oakmont's tree-removal program, initiated in secrecy, has become a beacon for courses everywhere

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While members of Oakmont Country Club were asleep, a small squadron of workers regularly convened at the course before daybreak, armed with high-beamed floodlights and a brigade of 20-inch chainsaws. Starting in the months prior to Oakmont's last U.S. Open in 1994, former superintendent Mark Kuhns led a clandestine tree-removal operation, hauling along chip-pers and stump grinders to carefully discard evidence of their work. His crew laid topsoil and fresh sod over the leftover hole, while high-powered vacuums and large tarps hid any traces of sawdust or debris.

Between 1993 and 1995, Oakmont's moonlight operation thrived under the darkness of secrecy. In the morning, members would not notice that a handful of trees had disappeared. But as his crew sliced deeper through the overgrown vegetation, Kuhns gradually exposed distant site lines and hidden ground features of Henry (H.C.) Fownes' masterpiece long before the membership detected any changes.

"It was our tree work between holes 12 and 13 that gave us away," recalls Kuhns. "As we reduced a single-file row of pin oaks from 10 down to about three, members started asking questions."

The program, authorized by ex-golf chairman Mark Studer and his green committee, caused an uproar at the club. Some senior members signed petitions and wrote letters of protest. Tree preservers took inventory of all remaining trees with panoramic photography. There were threats of lawsuits, alleging that tree removal would jeopardize Oakmont's status as a National Historic Landmark. Members held town hall meetings and even prayers for the trees at local churches.

After a while, popular opinion started to turn and the cutting continued. "Members gradually stopped grumbling and learned to appreciate our original look," Studer says. "Some even started taking credit for it."

When the U.S. Open returns to Oakmont this June, golf enthusiasts will hardly recognize the place. But it looks much as it did when the elder Fownes built it more than 100 years ago. In fact, that was the idea. "We simply acted as custodians and caretakers of our architectural heritage, an agenda our membership would never have supported," says Studer. "The issue was never about the virtues or liabilities of trees. Our sole motivation was to reclaim Fownes' legacy and protect his vision for the golf course."

Like many early American courses, Oakmont originated as a fallow, fast-running track. After visiting the primordial courses of the British Isles,

Fownes developed an affection for open, links-style terrain, commissioning a crew of 150 men and 25 donkeys to clear-cut the club's original 191 acres on the outskirts of Pittsburgh.

Fownes' son, William (W.C.), safeguarded Oakmont's open, windswept character until his death in 1950. A 1949 aerial photo shows that the property was virtually treeless. "We quickly converted the 1949 aerial into our restoration master plan because it best represented the culmination of the Fownes family vision," says Studer.

The restoration was necessary because the post-Fownes era was marked by a nationwide tree-planting barrage, a movement of which Oakmont was at the fore. In the name of beautification, the club, led by influential member Fred Brand Jr., planted heaps of ornamental saplings in virtually every open space of the course. By the 1973 U.S. Open, Oakmont had planted more than 3,200 trees.

By 1993 those trees had grown and Oakmont bore little resemblance to its original identity. A dense framework of vegetation choked the holes and the shade promoted soft fairways and soggy greens. The vistas, once sweeping from the Tudor-style clubhouse, felt claustrophobic.

Now most of the trees are gone, the views restored and Oakmont once again plays fast and firm. In addition, Oakmont has set an example for other courses. Countless green committees, USGA agronomists and course architects have made visits to study Oakmont's renaissance. And clubs like Winged Foot, Baltusrol, Shinnecock Hills, Olympic and National Golf Links of America continue to remove trees and underbrush that threaten turf quality, hole strategy and aesthetics.

Restoration specialist Ron Prichard says Oakmont inspired him to be more proactive with tree removal in his work. Says Prichard: "Oakmont's prestige and standing in the world of golf serves as a real validation for tree management everywhere."

Since 1995 Oakmont's restoration has continued in open daylight. Thanks to a high-speed logging saw, current superintendent John Zimmers has made quick work of Oakmont's remaining interior hardwoods. At last count, just two majestic elms are still standing—one near the 3rd tee and the other between the 4th and 5th fairways.

Says Studer: "If Fownes returned today, his comment might be 'What's all the fuss? It looks like it did when I was last here.'" —*W. Dunlop White III*