



# NATIONAL GOLF LINK

*Charles Blair Macdonald was a central figure  
in the early development of American golf*

BY JEFF WILLIAMS

**N**O MAN WAS MORE IMPORTANT to the growth of golf in America at the start of the 20th Century than Charles Blair Macdonald. If you could speak to him today, he would tell you so.

No one knew more about the game, was more responsible for its proliferation on these shores, more active in its organization than C.B. Macdonald. He would tell you that, too.

Upon news that Macdonald would be inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2007, United States Golf Association Executive Director David Fay had this to say about him: "Charles Blair Macdonald is recognized today as the father of organized golf in America. Without Macdonald the USGA would not have been created. And without his leadership and strong character, the game in this country could have easily gone astray. As a player, administrator, architect, rule maker and chronicler of the game's history, he was one of the true giants."

Macdonald would have told you all of this. He would have told you not only was he present at the creation, but that he created it.

This is a man who designed the first 18-hole golf course in the United States, the Chicago Golf Club, which was completed in 1893. He was the first to describe himself, and those who succeeded him, as a golf course architect. In December of 1894, at his urging, five influential golf clubs formed the United States Golf Association. In 1895, he won the first official U.S. Amateur Championship. In 1911, he opened the

National Golf Links of America in Southampton, N.Y., a course he designed to the standards of championship courses in the United Kingdom. The course, unlike any other in the U.S. at the time, hosted the first Walker Cup Match in 1922.

Born in Niagara Falls, Ontario, in 1855 to a wealthy family, Charles Blair Macdonald grew up in Chicago. Supremely intelligent and extraordinarily confident, Macdonald was sent to college at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland in 1872, which was a supreme stroke of luck for American golf, because it was there at the game's birthplace where Macdonald discovered





Above: C.B. Macdonald won the first U.S. Amateur Championship in 1895.

Below: Participants in the 1899 U.S. Amateur included, from left, Walter J. Travis, C.B. Macdonald, Findlay S. Douglas

his lifelong passion. So lucky was he that his paternal grandfather was a member of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club. So lucky was he to have taken up playing the game on the Old Course at St. Andrews. So lucky was he to have been schooled by playing with St. Andrews' legendary professionals Old and Young Tom Morris.

When Macdonald left St. Andrews in 1874, he made a point of visiting other notable courses in the United Kingdom before returning to the United States. When he did return, it was to a Chicago that had been devastated by the great fire of 1871 and a depression in 1873. Such a ruinous atmosphere soon suppressed Macdonald's ardor for the game, and for the next 17 years he contented himself with being a businessman, a period he described as "the dark ages." The clubs he brought back with him from St. Andrews were used only once, on a rudimentary course he and a friend concocted over a Civil War battlefield.

The first roots of the game in America began to take hold in the New York area in the early 1890s with the formation of the St. Andrews and Shinnecock Hills Golf Clubs. But in 1892, Chicago was decidedly more prosperous, and a friend of Macdonald's, Horace Chatfield-Taylor, invited him to design a nine-hole course on the grounds of Senator Charles B. Farwell's estate. Though not impressed with the land, Macdonald built the course, procured golf equipment, and went about corralling a membership to pay for it. Immediately in search of better land for golf, Macdonald found a plot in Belmont, Ill., built nine holes there, then expanded it to 18 holes in 1893, again rounding up the membership. The Chicago Golf Club, as it was chartered, was the first 18-hole course in America. A year later Macdonald found a more substantial property in Wheaton, Ill., and built a more formidable course, the site of the present Chicago Golf Club. It was the beginning of the Macdonald legend.



C.B. Macdonald had an ego so massive it required its own caddie. He was a physically robust man who towered over others. A large mustache, sometimes done up in handlebar fashion, gave him a powerful, almost ominous visage. He was articulate and expressive and never at a loss for words or the willingness (some might say gall) to speak them. Until his death in 1939, Macdonald was at the epicenter of the game and in the cauldron of its controversies. He was someone you loved or hated—without middle ground—though even friends would often question why they were so loyal to him.

Macdonald was a formidable player. In 1894 he competed in two tournaments, one at the Newport Country Club, the second at the St. Andrews Golf Club in Westchester County, N.Y., each tournament attempting to proclaim a champion of golf in America among amateur players. Macdonald did not win either of them, but his vehement, and, frankly, self-serving protests over

He was adamant that the courses of the Old Country should be the foundation for the courses of the New World. To that end, Macdonald became determined to build his ideal course, an idea that was enhanced considerably by his move to New York City in 1900. In 1904, Macdonald returned to Scotland and Britain to find the holes and strategies that would make up such an ideal course. Bunkering was of great interest to him. He believed that at least some sand bunkers should exact a heavy toll on those who challenged them. The holes that captured his attention were the par-3 Redan Hole at North Berwick, the par-4 Road Hole at St. Andrews (then a par 5), the par-3 Eden Hole at St. Andrews and the par-4 Alps Hole at Prestwick, all with distinct and penal bunkering. He noted the massive Hell Bunker on the 14th at St. Andrews and the Sahara Hole at St. George's with its massive carry bunker as well.

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Charles Blair Macdonald in 1932 at his Mid-Ocean Club in Bermuda.

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the way the tournaments were conducted was part of the reason that the United States Golf Association was formed in December of that year.

In October of 1895 the first United States Amateur Championship was held at Newport. Macdonald was clearly the best player in the field and swept to victory by routing Charles Sands of the St. Andrews Club, 12-11, in the 36-hole final. Macdonald played out of the Chicago Golf Club and enlisted the club's pro, James Foulis, as his caddie. Foulis would go on to win the second U.S. Open Championship at Shinnecock Hills the following year.

Macdonald was an absolute stickler for the rules, preaching divinely on the subject. The game, he maintained, was to be played the way it was in the Old Country, by the 13 basic rules adopted by the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers. Of course, he wasn't above taking advantage of situations that presented themselves. The Chicago Golf Club was the first to adopt an out-of-bounds rule. Out of bounds at Chicago punished hookers. Old C.B. was a fader. He endorsed the new rubber-cored Haskell ball over the traditional gutta percha because it gave him extra length in his later years.





DONALD SCHWARTZ

C.B. Macdonald built the first 18-hole course in the U.S., the Chicago Golf Club. Not satisfied with the original layout, Macdonald rebuilt the course on nearby land where the famed clubhouse now sits.

He would bring all of these strategies into play when he returned to the U.S. and began his search for land. Having played Shinnecock Hills Golf Club (then a rudimentary course south of the railroad tracks, not the current championship layout), Macdonald found nearby a delightful piece of land with frontage on Peconic Bay (after first trying to buy Shinnecock itself). It was there he built his iconic National Links of America, imperiously named but absolutely fitting to the course and the man who designed it.

Having rounded up enough wealthy people to form a club and fund the project, Macdonald set about the task of building it with the aid of local land surveyor Seth Raynor. They formed a partnership that designed and built other significant courses, among them Piping Rock, the defunct Lido Golf Club, Shoreacres, Blind Brook, Yale University and a redesign of Shinnecock in 1916.

It wasn't Macdonald's vision to exactly duplicate the holes of the great courses. Rather, he wanted to adapt them into his own landscape, creating new designs with classic features. His Alps Hole, Redan Hole, Sahara Hole and Road Hole at the National didn't look much like their progenitors, but the strategy and the menace were there all the same. And he created a hole that became known as the Cape Hole, a dogleg par 4 with a green jutting out into a body of water.

Though one of the best players in the country, Macdonald was able to subdue his ego when it came to accommodating the average players that formed his membership and the bulk of the playing populace. He provided sufficient room to maneuver a ball around hazards. He felt that holes should have three set of tees to accommodate

players of disparate strength and varying weather conditions. He didn't want an endless procession of lumpy greens, and not all of his bunkering was thoroughly penal. He liked variety of length, but decried very long par-3 holes. Short holes, he maintained, should be short.

When the course opened, it received rave reviews, including from influential British journalist Bernard Darwin and America's most well-known sportswriter, Grantland Rice. Quite some time after the National opened, Macdonald communicated his philosophy to Rice for a story in *The American Golfer* magazine. Here are a few excerpts:

"I don't believe in pampering any class of golfer, nor yet in forcing average players to attempt impossible strokes with no other outlet. For example, the National is hard to score consistently in low figures, yet it is extremely fair and an extremely popular spot for golfers who play between 90 and 105 or 110. For here each player can name his own medicine and take only as much risk or attempt only as long a carry as he thinks he can handle."

His bunker philosophy was devilish, especially so considering his own immense ego. "The object of a bunker or trap is not only to punish a physical mistake, to punish lack of control, but to punish the pride and egotism. I believe in leaving a way open for the player who can only drive one hundred yards, if he keep that drive straight. But the one I am after is the golfer who thinks he can carry one hundred and eighty yards when one hundred sixty is his limit. So I believe one of the best systems of trapping or arranging bunkers is to let the player make his own choice, from either

the shorter or longer route, and go for that.

“This helps to make a man know and study his limitations, and, if he is inclined to conceit, he will find his niblick has drawn a hard day’s work.”

At National, Macdonald put together holes of great variety, strategy and esthetic interest. What he did not want was a course made up of holes that were merely good but could be considered bland. He was the first to move massive amounts of earth, filling in marshland, building up green sites, digging bunkers and leveling sloping terrain. His was building history, and he knew it. And for the National and all the courses he designed, he never took a fee.

In his own book, *Scotland’s Gift—Golf*, he had this to say about the comments he received on the holes he designed:

“I became convinced that any hole warranting warm or acrimonious discussion over a term of years must be worthwhile, otherwise it would have been consigned to oblivion with far less comment.”

Macdonald’s work did not stop at design and construction. The National project was set back by 18 months because of a disaster on the greens. He purchased a seed mixture for the greens that proved to be completely unfit for tight mowing and the smooth rolling of a ball. He embarked on a search for the proper grasses and the proper way to build a green’s substructure to accommodate them. He could be said to be golf’s first agronomist.

He determined that the green base had to be properly prepared and introduced meadow sod turned into the ground as a way to preserve moisture below the green’s sandy surface. He mixed limestone and sandy loam into the soil to sweeten

it. He established a turf nursery at his baronial estate, Ballyshear, which overlooked the course. There he developed a mixture of fine grasses, of bent and fescue, which proved to be perfect for conditions on Long Island. When it opened, the National had the best greens in the United States, though a far cry from today’s felt surfaces.

The hot summers of Long Island baked out the greens, though. So Macdonald designed and built America’s first golf course irrigation system, fed by gravity from a tower between the second and 16th greens, where the National’s classic and defining windmill sits. That windmill is also a classically defining symbol of Macdonald’s character. National’s lore holds that Daniel Pomeroy, president of Condé Nast, suggested to Macdonald that a windmill, designed to cover the water tower, would be more pleasing to the eye. Macdonald agreed, had one built, and sent Pomeroy the bill.

At every crucial point of golf’s early development in America, C.B. Macdonald was at the forefront. As a player, a membership organizer, a course designer, a builder, an administrator and an agronomist, Macdonald took the lead. More than a century later, American golf stands tall in the world because of him. MT

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*Jeff Williams is the golf writer for Cigar Aficionado magazine and a contributor to several other publications. He was the golf writer for Newsday for 22 years and has covered championship golf for three decades. When he plays golf, he is often asked about his handicap. Unfortunately, it’s his swing.*

National Golf Links, in Southampton, N.Y., was the site of the first Walker Cup in 1922. It was at the National where Macdonald created the Cape Hole, a dogleg par 4 with a green that protruded into water.



JAMES KRAUCEK

# CHARLES BLAIR MACDONALD'S CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

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## NOTABLE ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- Spearheaded formation of the United States Golf Association
- Winner of first U.S. Amateur, 1895; victory over Charles Sands by 12-and-11 score is still the record for largest winning margin in the final
- Considered America's first golf course architect
- Author of the acclaimed book, *Scotland's Gift—Golf*

## SIGNIFICANT COURSE DESIGNS:

- 1895 Chicago Golf Club, Wheaton, Ill., the first 18-hole golf course in America
- 1911 National Golf Links, Southampton, N.Y., site of the inaugural Walker Cup in 1922
- 1913 Piping Rock, Locust Valley, N.Y.
- 1924 Mid-Ocean Club, Bermuda
- 1926 Yale University Golf Course, New Haven, Conn.

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