A Riverdalian’s Guide To Golf

By MICHAEL CACECI

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s an avid golfer for the past 10 years, I’ve played golf courses from Bethpage, Long Island to El Paso, Texas, to the Bahamas. But every time I play Van Cortlandt Golf Course, it’s like seeing an old friend again. I can still remember taking the No. 20 bus from my house in Kingsbridge to play nine or ten holes after school. Vannie was my second home. It was where I learned to hit straight shots out of necessity. It’s a tight course with menacing fences lining each fairway. By no means is Van Cortlandt one of the premier links of America, though it is the oldest municipal layout in the nation. The course is 5702 yards, has only 14 sand traps and one water hole. Most of the par fours are of moderate distance, from 300 to 380 yards. There is one exception, however. The 10th hole is a 464-yard par 4 which offers quite a challenge. The fairway is lined on both sides by fences, which separate the fairway from a swamp on the left and Penn Central tracks on the right. When the fairway isn’t muddy, which it often is, a solid driver and long second shot are still needed to reach the postagrouping green. One must be a long, straight hitter to consistently score a par four on this hole.

According to a few of the old-timers I’ve met during some of my rounds, Vannie was, at one time, a nine-hole course. Later it was expanded to 18 holes. The Major Deegan Expressway and Mosholu Parkway extension further complicated the course’s design. Of all the restructuring, none of the two of the longest and most difficult par fours I’ve ever played.

The second hole is 590 yards long. The golfer must drive the ball onto a plateau, play the second shot without being able to see the green and hit an approach shot to a green that drops off in the back. Trees and rough line both sides of the fairway. The other part, the eighth hole, runs 602 yards. A stream cuts the fairway and can come into play on the second shot. Reaching that green in three — and staying on it — is one of the most satisfying experiences a golfer can have.

The last four holes on the course, “the hills,” as they are called by Vannie veterans, are not long but are more difficult than the scorecard yardages would indicate. One spends the last four holes walking up and down very steep inclines which can sap an already tired player, especially in mid-summer heat. In fact, many golfers don’t play the last two holes at all.

Van Cortlandt has its faults and some of the holes do not offer a good player much of a challenge. But the course has been well maintained despite the city’s fiscal problems and the holes I’ve described give the course an air of legitimacy. And with the gas shortage, the fairways look a lot greener knowing that they’re only a five minute drive from my house.

Van Cortlandt Golf Course: ‘Like Seeing An Old Friend’

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ORIGINAL LAYOUT OF THE VAN CORTLANDT PARK GOLF COURSE, 1ST PUBLIC LINKS IN THE UNITED STATES

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