

A golfing adventure in Gotham

Burt Tremont pays homage to Van Cortlandt Park, where ardent golfers battle trash, smog and bad zoning to play the game they love.

When a golf course reaches 100 years of age it’s something that should be noted. (Trust me...I’ve got jokes older than that.) But, when that same course happens to be the very first PUBLIC golf course built in America — then it’s a special occasion indeed. Therefore, let’s all say an honored HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO VAN CORTLANDT PARK...the great grandaddy of all municipal golfing facilities in this country.

Located between the Harlem and Hudson rivers in the Bronx, this elderly tract is surely the TOUGHEST of survivors. Golf courses have to be tough to survive in the Bronx, for it’s a totally different environment than the one we enjoy here in the mid-Hudson Valley. Unfortunately, Van Cortlandt Park is not alone. All of New York City’s golf courses suffer a similar form of degradation.

It’s a shame, too, because this Big Apple happens to have a pretty decent assortment of places to play. BUT, much like the city itself, they seem to fester with the same problems that plague the seedier side of our society.

Down at the Dyker Beach Golf Course in Brooklyn, a homeless man recently pitched a tent and took up residence on the back nine. (Rumor has it that next year the tent turns condo.) Over in Queens, animal gizzards from ritual sacrifices can be found in the rough at Kissena Park.

If that doesn’t cure your slice...nothing will.) And! Out at Ca Tourette in Staten Island, burnt-out cars adorn the first fairway, creating a unique but typical New York City type of hazard. (Two-point penalty for hitting the Honda with your third shot.) In spite of all of the urban ill...Van Cortlandt Park continues.

The place started back in 1888 when Olof Stev enzen Van Cortlandt donated his 1,070-acre estate to the city of New York. Seven years later, the city’s founding fathers decided to use a small section thereof to create the first golf course in America, which would be open to the general public.

The premiere Van Cortlandt was a Dutchman who arrived here in the 17th century. His son Stephanus became the first native-born mayor of New York City. Both the Van Cortlandt family and the Van Cortlandt land are heavily steeped in tradition. There were even Van Cortlands who fought in the Revolutionary War. ‘Twas from Valley High, high above the park, that in 1781, OL’ GEORGE WASHINGTON doped the British forces, by keeping a few campfires ablaze while he took it on the lam and hooked up with a dude named Lafayette. The rest as they say...was history.

Originally the tract was only a nine-hole, which at one time contained a 700 YARD PAR — God only knows what, featuring stone walls crossing the fairway. Sheep were brought in for the purpose of keeping the grass low, which also kept maintenance costs down. Thusly, they were able to set their greens fees at absolutely zip (as in NADA). In 1899 the tract was expanded to 18 holes, and a weekend round could take six hours...after a five-hour wait!

DISGRACEFULLY, in the 1930s, the Major Deegan Expressway and the Mosholu Parkway were cut directly through the course with total disregard. But! Van Cortlandt survived by building four new holes on the opposite side of the railroad tracks. It even survived the fiscal crunch of the 1970s when flagsticks were reduced to broken bamboo poles stuck into the ground, and yardage markers were spray painted on trees. (Ain’t city golf great?) The worst hit came when 500 truckloads of construction garbage were dumped on the 17th hole. The resulting leaching of wallboards and seep from discarded toilets killed 96 of those trees. FORTUNATELY today, as Van Cortlandt Park embarks upon its second century, it’s doing a mite better under the new management of the American Golf Corp. So, once again I’d like to say happy birthday Van Cortlandt Park, you sure are one tough old coot.

As a former NYC resident for more than 25 years, Burt Tremont has found that a sense of humor is an essential ingredient for golfing around Gotham.