

# Bright Lights, Big Promise

On the Hudson River and within earshot of Wall Street, two of the biggest golf course projects in American history are complete. What's so sensational about these long-awaited layouts?

BY SCOTT RESCH

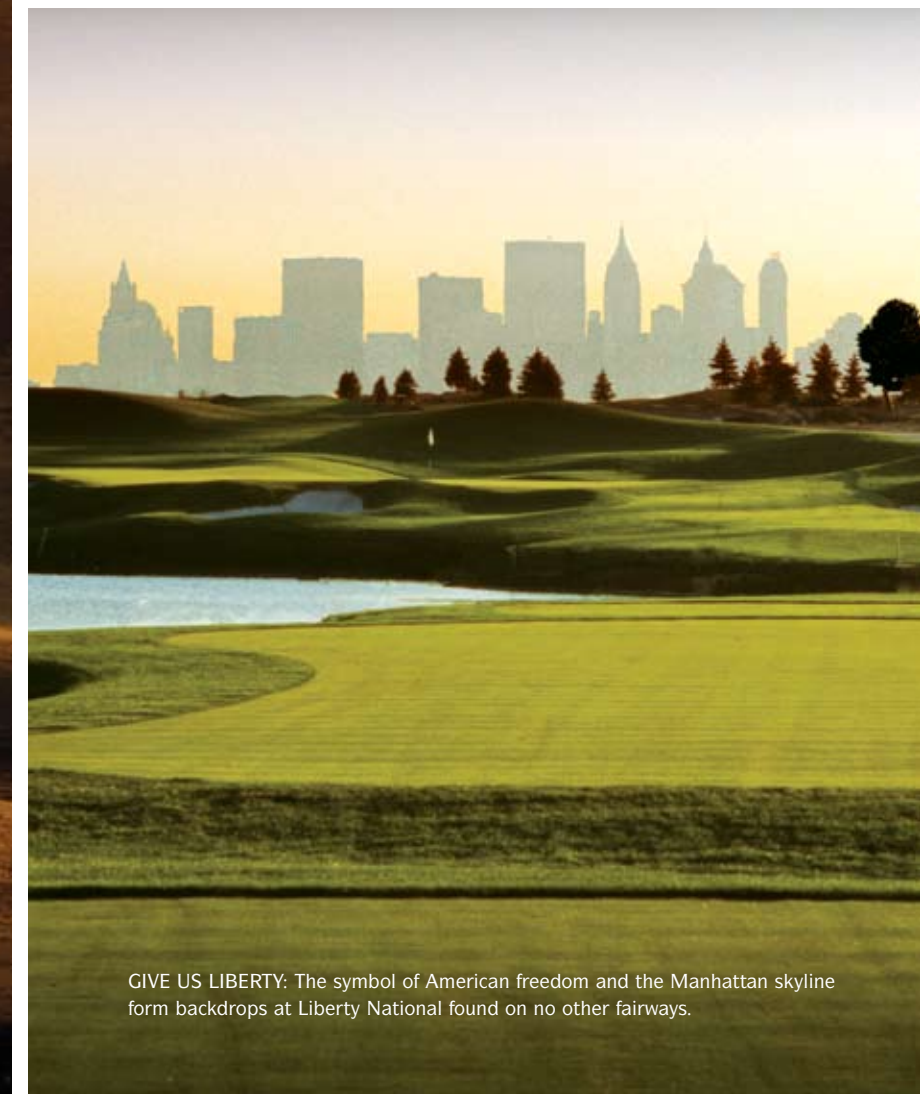
## LIBERTY NATIONAL GOLF CLUB

Standing on the first tee at Liberty National Golf Club in Jersey City, N.J., you might wonder what all the fuss is about.

Straight ahead, a narrow fairway is framed by a few trees, some so young they have to be held up by ropes. To the right, and not more than a couple hundred yards away, is an elevated highway, where cars zoom north and south at breakneck speeds and pollute the air with engine noise.

But glance left, and it's there in an instant: Lady Liberty, so close you feel as if you can reach out and touch her.

"From a lot of spots out there it literally looks like she's walking around in the rough," says Bob Cupp, who designed the course along with 19-time PGA Tour winner



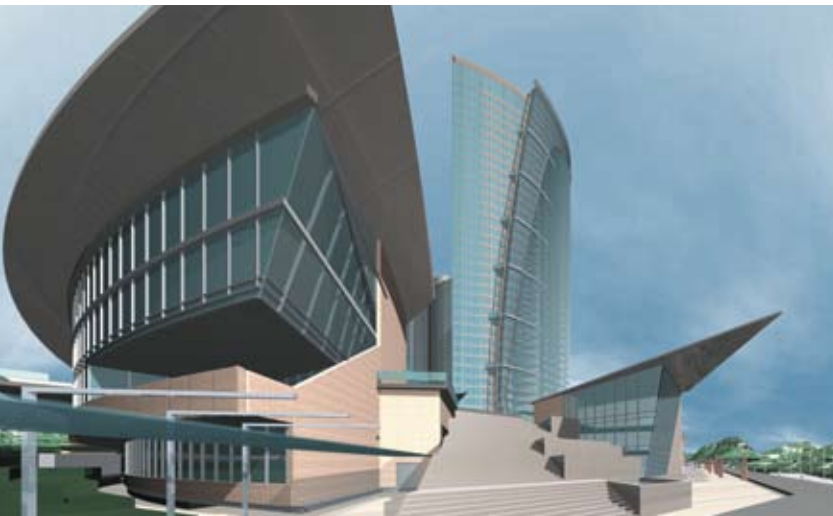
GIVE US LIBERTY: The symbol of American freedom and the Manhattan skyline form backdrops at Liberty National found on no other fairways.

Tom Kite. "It didn't take a masterful genius to get that effect. She's less than 1,000 yards from the 18th green."

The main attraction shouldn't take away from what owner Paul Fireman will unveil, fittingly, on Independence Day. While the project was the brainchild of English oil executive Rusty Bayless, it was Fireman, the former head of Reebok, who enabled it to reach fruition. He took control in the late 1990s, when Bayless ran out of patience, and allowed the Cupp/Kite team to resume its work.

The job was tougher than U.S. Open rough. Because of so many environmental factors — the land has served several industrial purposes over the years — the course needed to be built upward, on top of the contaminants, and required exacting thought. Tragedy even played a part.

"Nine-eleven was an issue, too," Cupp says. "In early photos, the [World Trade Center] towers are there, in the background. Great volumes of debris ended up coming in our direction."



Here now is a layout that is "an exercise in construction brilliance," Cupp says, and, in the near future, he believes, capable of hosting a major championship.

"Everyone wants to be part of the tradition of golf," says Cupp, whose unique co-design is a blend of linksland and parkland features. "To be able to say, 'They just played the U.S. Open at Liberty National — I'm a member there,' you just hit an ego home run."

While initiation is a gaudy \$400,000, there are a lot of perks that go with it. Among them: complimentary helicopter privileges for three Manhattan locations; a concierge service connecting members to the finest Big Apple restaurants and hotels; and the opportunity to rub shoulders with the likes of former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani and New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft.

The experience will be made even more extraordinary by what's on the way. Next spring, players walking off the 18th green will encounter a 50,000-square-foot clubhouse styled after the Sydney Opera House. And by 2009, three luxury towers will rise behind it in a matching statement.

"They will look like gigantic sailboats cruising along the north end of the course," Cupp says. "You could put double-wide [trailer] up there and this would still be a great club. But add those pieces of architecture and you have the most unique one as well."

Fireman's son Dan, the president of Liberty National, sees that potential, too. He also envisions the club becoming a place where members can be part of something even more special: the future.

"At other clubs it's about the past," Fireman says. "Here, it's about the tradition to come. When you join here, you'll be a part of creating that."

## BAYONNE GOLF CLUB

Dwight Segall is not right in the head. If he was, he'd be like me as we walk down the 16th fairway toward our tee shots at Bayonne Golf Club on this comfortable May day — eyes popping, jaw dropping, completely in awe of what has been created on this piece of New Jersey shoreline that less than a decade ago was a veritable wasteland.

But the head pro is as silent as snowfall. Not a word about the dramatic views of the Manhattan skyline. Not a peep about how the green we're approaching is situated precariously on a peninsula. Not a sound about how quiet the setting is almost 100 feet above New York Harbor.

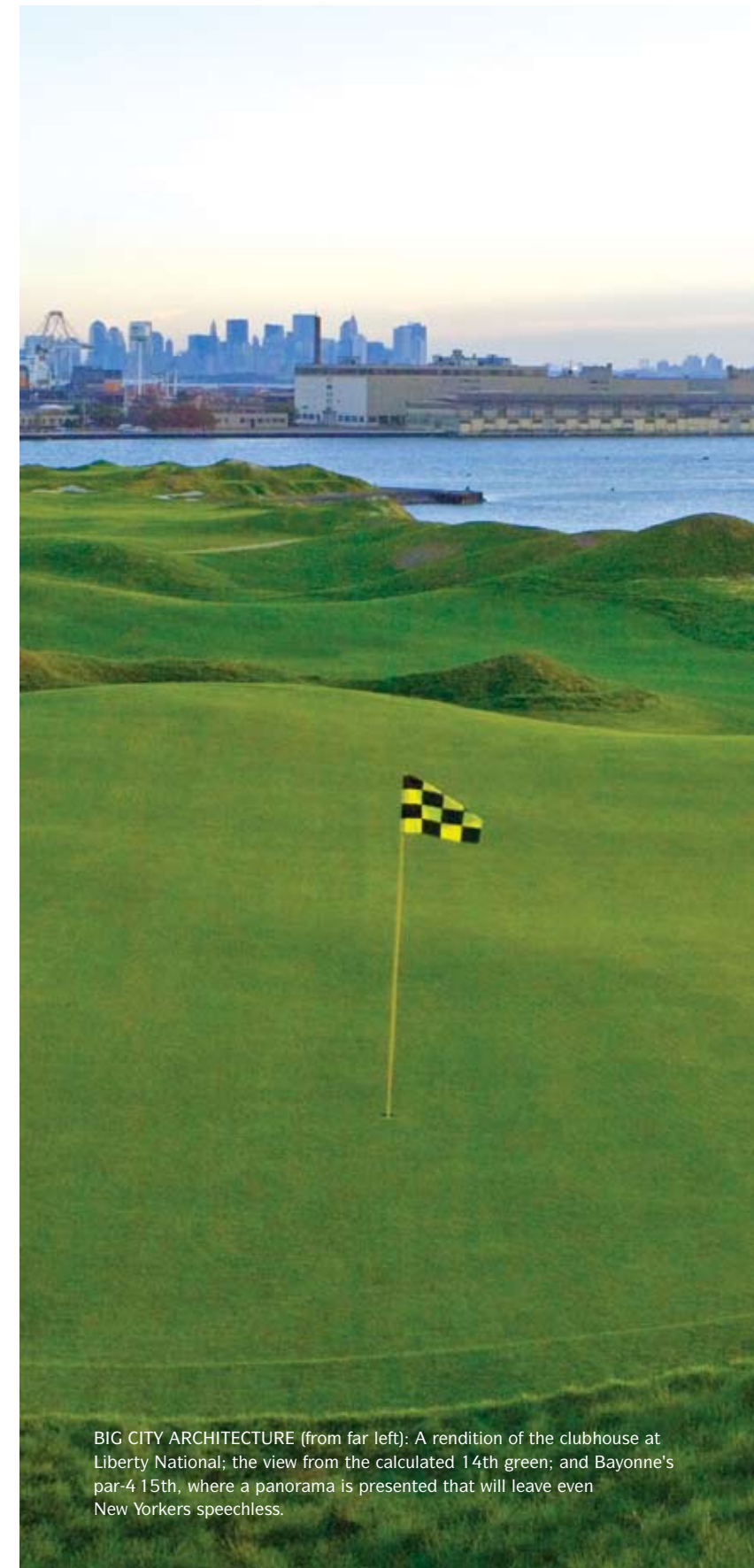
And he has a perfectly good reason why.

"It's like when a friend tells you he knows this girl that's the hottest thing ever," he explains. "I like to under-sell. I could tell everyone I know how great this place is. But they need to see for themselves. People like to discover."

After countless permitting headaches and several dips into the money jar (the cost of Bayonne will exceed \$100 million), owner and developer Eric Bergstol opened the private course for play on Memorial Day Weekend. What members receive for their \$150,000 initiation fee is one of the most distinctive golf experiences anywhere in the world.

"This is Ballybunion on the Hudson," Segall says, referring to the venerable links course in southwest Ireland.

Indeed. Despite the fact it is man-made, Bayonne feels as if it was shaped the way most layouts in the British Isles were: by Mother Nature. There's no better proof than in the strong winds that whip off the harbor most afternoons and onto fairways as undulating as deep-sea swells. Other hallowed features include plant varieties similar to



BIG CITY ARCHITECTURE (from far left): A rendition of the clubhouse at Liberty National; the view from the calculated 14th green; and Bayonne's par-4 15th, where a panorama is presented that will leave even New Yorkers speechless.

## BAYONNE FEELS AS IF IT WAS SHAPED THE WAY MOST COURSES IN THE BRITISH ISLES WERE: BY MOTHER NATURE



those across the Atlantic, sand traps that look as though they've been wrought by 100 years of ferocious storms, and quirky landscape elements, such as the mound in front of the green on No. 1 that completely blocks a player's view in the fairway of the pin, regardless of where it's placed.

"Isn't it wild?" Segall asks as he scurries up the side of a hill to see if he can get a look at the flag. "Most pros today are not fans of something like this — they like to see what's in front of them — but here tradition prevails."

What separates Bayonne from its counterparts in Ireland and Scotland is location. From the highest point, a panorama is presented that will leave even New Yorkers speechless. It stretches from Upper Manhattan to Staten Island, with the Empire State Building, Statue of Liberty, and several bridges in between. There's also a helicopter pad on site, a marina being constructed off the 16th green, and a "water range" that allows members to hit balls at floating pins in the harbor.

Calculating yardages isn't a guessing game here, either; caddies carry a high-tech device that can measure exactly the distance between a player's ball and the flag — even if the line is obstructed.

"Why not?" Segall says. "It's dummy-proof."

The biggest brain behind all this belongs to Bergstol, a one-handicap who got into golf-course design after making huge money in commercial real estate. In order to make his vision reality on this former landfill, he looked to the Hudson River and the sediment being dredged from it. In all, he acquired 7.5 million cubic yards of material, which he used to form the hilly course.

"He's called the process 'painting with a bulldozer,'" Segall says. "And he was willing to do it — to put in the time orchestrating it all — because he felt the market needed something special."

More extraordinary is what's found on the 18th hole, where my pushed tee shot somehow still finds the fairway. It's subtle to the naked eye, but most landing areas are funneled, giving the average golfer a better chance at recovery.

The greens are big too, and so even when I come up 20 yards short of the final pin, a manageable two-putt allows me to save par.

"We don't want to kill people," Segall says as we head off the green, which will soon be backed by a clubhouse featuring an 80-foot-tall lighthouse. "Golf should be fun."

At Bayonne, it is. ■