



# A. Passion for Play

By Jim Flynn

**U**nderneath every business is the particular personality of the people who run it. The character of any firm's products and services will usually directly describe the owner's and management team's collective character. What they think about their customers; how they view their industry; what they think about themselves; how creatively they pursue their goals; all tell you that team's understanding of the trade that is explicit in any business – I shall do this for you if you patronize my facility.

When I go to a course to write one of these reviews, I like to play the course with members of

that course's team. Sometimes, I get to play with the owner; other times, the general manager or the golf professional. I truly believe you can tell so much about the "culture" of a golf course by playing and talking with these representatives.

Worthington Manor, if you believe my theory, is in very good shape! The course, located off I-270 near Urbana, Maryland, is one of the better tests of golf in our area. That is directly due to the vision and dedication of an interesting group of folks. They are the real story of Worthington Manor and, in their individual and group behavior, they are a guide to golf excellence.

As I drive down various highways and roads in



*“Take a careful look at the slope ratings for the various tees.”*

Hole #14

my work and even during vacations, I constantly see little patches of acreage that I think would make a good golf hole. There's a super par 3 over that pond! What a par 5 that little valley would make! I make comments like that all the time and my significant other has learned to live with it. She thinks of me as “golf disabled.” She's not a golfer. She does not see the golf potential in rough land. Golfers do – it's just there, in front of us!

Bob Sturges, the owner of Worthington Manor, was driving from his Washington suburban home to Carroll Valley on a regular basis. An able golfer, himself, Sturges felt the call of the land he saw on his regular trip. It was a great spot. Rolling land with several strong elevation changes and an adequate water supply, the farm he noticed beckoned to him. It called out to be recognized for the golf course hidden in its contours! Sturges responded to that call. The land was purchased in March of 1997 and the course was opened in Spring of 1998. That following year, Worthington Manor hosted the first of its several US Open Qualifiers – a fitting tribute to the second person in our story – Brian Ault.

As a golf course architect, Brian Ault has built a strong reputation for his artistry. You will always be struck by several elements in a Brian Ault design. His courses are challenging but fair. He sometimes will walk you up to very, very challenging shots (the second

shot on hole #12 at Worthington Manor) but, if you're playing the right tees, the hole is fair. His courses have strong aesthetics. Ault seems to think of the land as something he needs to shape and polish, like a sculpture. His courses have muscles. They flex and stretch to give you variety and great playability. The holes have a certain memorability that few architects grasp the need for. #9 is just a fabulous risk-reward par 5. It sweeps over a hill and down to a wetlands protecting a large but challenging green to reach. Each hole seems to have a unique character and the flow of holes shows a sense of golf rhythm that continues to pique your interest during play. In fact, the first three holes







Hole # 8

here have strong shot values off the tee and in the fairway. There's no "warm-up" holes here! Warm up on the complimentary range before starting or you will not start well at Worthington. I love the green complexes that Brian Ault constructs. It's like he deliberately said to himself: "Let's see how I can make this hard to read." There are innumerable subtleties to a Brian Ault green. They have unseen breaks for the careless. Walk around your putts to get a true read.

Ault's son, Eric, assisted him in the finishing work at Worthington Manor. Together, this father-son team worked magic on the bunker placements and unobtrusive mounding that gives your eyes a sense of the hole routings.

Very few shots are hard to calculate for even the first time player. You know what you have to do, the challenge is to do it. That's the beauty of what the Aults created at Worthington Manor. It's a player's course but one that let's you play. Owner Sturges and designer Ault wanted a course that let the big dog bite – you can use that new driver you bought. While I think the yardage is too similar on the group of par 3s here (171, 169, 170 & 188 from the blues), there is no question that they are very good holes. This is a very good track to assess your personal game.

Course Superintendent Nathaniel Guldseth, former assistant at Robert Trent Jones, has a challenge to maintain the design and seems up to the task. The course has serious elevation changes on some holes. Some of them are right in front of the greens. This makes it difficult to uniformly cut the playing surface. You need a brave soul to take a hand mower and carefully cut these areas. Guldseth smiles and says he's got the people who know how to do it and, from what I could see, he's right. There's a flair to his course management that matches his golf swing – aggressive and unafraid.

Worthington Manor will host its third US Open Qualifier this year. This event is a great chance to walk



with local pros and top amateurs as they try to qualify for our country's biggest golf prize. It's free to watch and really is your best chance to see these players up close and appreciate the design qualities of this course.

Watch how the pros play these holes and you'll learn a lot about course design and pin placement elements in course management. That qualifier is May 24th.

But, don't wait for the Summer to visit Worthington Manor. This course, because of its design and conditioning, is playable early in the season as



Hole #12

well. To walk and play this course on weekdays is less than \$50 and less than \$40 after noon. Weekends have premium rates of \$79 in the morning and lower after noon. They have specials for seniors, ladies and Frederick County residents. They are enlarging the old structure that was the family manor house on the original property to include a large dining area and some outdoor areas. There's a nice country look and feel to the place. Pro shop staff are friendly and helpful without being officious. The parking lot and entrance are attractive as you drive up to the manor house clubhouse with a lovely stand of trees by it. After your round, a meal and some sightseeing in the historic district of nearby Frederick will complete your day.

But the real deal here is the course. Each hole offers you an opportunity to find your game because many of the shots require "game" to execute. Take a careful look at the slope ratings for the various tees. It's 143 from the championship tees! While basically a links design with bent-bent-bent grass on tees-fairways-greens, there are some holes that switch you to a parkland feel - #17 is a simply great downhill par 3 guarded by trees left and right. It's a stunning parkland contrast to the pre-

vious links holes.

As our weather begins to warm, Worthington Manor begins to show its full style. The long grasses in the rough take on rich colors, further defining land formations that whisper to you about what the shot requires. Many of the holes, because of their openness, are subject to wind influences that further deepen the challenge. And, as said earlier, the greens offer their own unique mysteries.

All of these things, parts of a much larger whole, confirm the vision of the people of Worthington Manor - to provide you with value as a golfer. This is a course that you will look forward to playing, no matter what your skill level. It's a testament to the people who developed and operate it. If you truly have a passion for the game, this is one to put on your must-play list.