

# HOPSON HILLS

IN UPSTATE NEW YORK, A LANDSCAPER'S ART PROJECT

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THE RUSTIC ENTRANCE  
TO HOPSON HILLS.

DOLGEVILLE, NEW YORK IS A MILL TOWN in the rolling hills just north of the old Erie Canal. Rawlings makes wooden bats for major leaguers here, but not too much further north lies the wilderness of the Adirondacks. This is tough but productive country, where it's common to brake for Mennonite horse-and-buggies on one's way to Hopson Hills, a nine-hole course that opened in 2014 on a former dairy farm just outside the village.

"This is my art project," said Hopson's owner-architect, Bill Fox, in an interview. Fox lives six hours away, on the East End of Long Island, where he runs a landscaping business that serves an array of celebrity and high net worth Hamptons homeowners. Some ten years ago, Fox was hired to build an authentic putting green for a client. As he researched the subject, he began to seriously contemplate taking the plunge into what for most golfers is a pipe dream—building a course of his own.

Fox looked at several properties before settling on Dolgeville. "This one laid out the way I thought it should." He took his time. "I didn't have a big budget, so I decided to do it old school," he explained. In the first year, he cleared the site and took down an old, rotting farmhouse—the barn, for its part, has been repurposed into a pro shop/maintenance shed. In the second year he planted the driving range. As he worked, his mind churned through possible routings, but in the end he based his approach on a kind of Zen practicality: "I watched the snow melt for two springs. Then I set the greens in the driest places possible."

Compared to flashy modern courses, Hopson Hills is plain to look at and difficult to photograph. This is due in part to the absence of bunkers—at a course where an eighteen-hole round costs only \$17, their

maintenance cost is currently hard to justify. But that same absence arguably makes the course more difficult. Making one's way around, it becomes apparent how much the eye seeks out a sandy hazard as a reference point, or a target to play shots off. The first couple of holes at Hopson seem straightforward, but gradually one realizes—perhaps after putting out on one of its nicely contoured and surprisingly pure-running greens—that it is

much more than simple "farm golf." It's thoughtfully designed and solidly built. By the middle of the nine, when one crosses the road to play a three-hole triangle across dramatic rolling ground, the spell should be complete.

"The course drains with the topography," Fox said. "There's a basic overall green slope,

and I allow the water to go where it wants to." At first glance the greens appear to be at grade—simple extensions of the fairway—but then gentle slopes and fallaways reveal themselves. Catch basins and eight-inch plastic drainage grates are absent from the proceedings. Fox explained further that each green is segmented to produce many hole locations and approach-angle strategies, but the complexes themselves are subtle—a far cry from the "green-within-a-green" concept used by (among many others) Kyle Phillips at Kingsbarns.

Bill Fox had a couple of advantages in his background that allowed Hopson Hills to succeed. "I'm a grass guy. I've done that my whole life," he said. "When I looked at golf—the whole game, the way it sets up—I realized, 'I can do this, too.'" In the process of developing his course, he became a Class A member of the Golf Course Superintendents of America. And thanks to his day job, he already owned much of the necessary construction and maintenance equipment,

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LOOKING BACK  
DOWN THE  
5TH, A SHARP  
DOGLEG-RIGHT.



allowing him to build his greens for just \$12,000 each. (He did need to acquire a couple of pieces specific to the upstate topography, like a massive rock-picker capable of handling two-ton boulders.)

Though Hopson Hills offers a satisfying experience as a nine-holer, it's possible it may yet extend to eighteen. The land is there, and seven-and-a-half additional holes have been roughed out. These include a 175-yard uphill Redan—where Fox may one day build Hopson's first bunker—and twin short par-fours that play around a ravine, the latter of which he claims is inspired by Alister MacKenzie's barranca-leaping 11th hole at Pasatiempo.

Fox isn't in a hurry, though. For now, Hopson Hills offers good, affordable fun for the

everyday golfer, and an uncommon point of interest to the design aficionado. In modern golf, nearly all new courses arrive fully-formed (or at least pretend to, as their architects and developers make fixes when they think no one's looking). It's rare to see a course evolving in situ. Certain passages of Hopson's story may be a first draft, others may be final. It's not easy to tell which direction Fox will head next, but it's clear that his mission is to build something lasting.

"This isn't an ego trip," he said. "There's problems in the world, but during that half-second when I'm hitting a golf ball, I'm not thinking about anything else. I never dreamed I'd do anything like this. I just think golf is a good thing."

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