

U.S. SENIOR WOMEN'S AMATEUR

The Last Frontier: Alaska Hosting First USGA Championship

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By Tom Mackin



Mountains, pine trees and undulating terrain set the scene on the challenging par-5 9th hole at Anchorage Golf Course. (Kirk H. Owens/USGA)

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When the Golf Club of New England in Stratham, New Hampshire, held the 2012 U.S. Junior Amateur, it meant that every state in the country except one had enjoyed the honor of hosting a USGA championship. The missing piece of the geographical puzzle? Alaska. That changes this summer when the 60th U.S. Senior Women's Amateur Championship heads north to a setting unlike any found in the Lower 48.

Although USGA championship qualifying has been held at various courses in Alaska – including U.S. Open local qualifying since 2009 – the 2022 U.S. Senior Women's Amateur represents the fulfillment of former USGA CEO Mike Davis' long-held vision.

“Before Mike retired, he wanted to take a USGA championship to Alaska,” said John Bodenhamer, USGA chief championships officer. “I had more experience in the state than he did (Bodenhamer played in three Alaska State Opens, winning in 1987 and 1988), and he used to ask me all the time, ‘Where can we conduct a championship up there?’ Now that we have one, we really want to make the people up there feel like a part of the USGA, because they are and have been great supporters. It's a long way to go, but we are the United States Golf Association, and that means all 50 states and Puerto Rico.”

The municipally-owned Anchorage Golf Course, designed by Ben Newcomb on a wooded hillside overlooking the city, will be the venue. Opened in 1987, the course started out life as a very raw layout, according to general manager Rich Sayers, who has worked there for 34 years.

“You literally could hit the ball a yard off the fairway and not be able to find it,” said Sayers, who purchased the course lease with three Anchorage-based partners in 2008. “We have constantly thinned areas out over the past three decades, and a tree maintenance program has helped.” But to convince the USGA it was a worthy championship venue, Sayers and company knew the layout needed a little more pizzazz. Enter Forrest Richardson.

The Scottsdale, Ariz.-based architect began working on the course more than a decade ago, and recent time spent there with design firm partner Jeff Danner has elevated both playability and aesthetics. “It's a forest that just happens to have a golf course winding through it,” said Richardson. “To me, that's the best description – and it drove all of our design in remodeling and making improvements.”

Making bunkers appear more rugged and natural is the most notable recent change. “The new looks fit better, and the bunkers now speak the same language as the setting itself,” said Richardson. “The bunkering now reinforces the angle of each green, providing players with more thought-provoking decisions,” added Danner. “This is never more apparent than on the par-3 16th and par-4 18th, which are important holes for a combination stroke-play and match-play format.”

According to Danner, the ongoing project also includes reducing the acreage of maintained turf in favor of native vegetation and transitioning hole corridors from wild and wooly edges to firm and fast turf. “This is similar to how the city of Anchorage transitions from the coastal lowlands up into the lower alpine slopes,”

he said. The work earned an Environmental Excellence Award from the American Society of Golf Course Architects for 2021.

Earthmoving during the construction of a short-game practice area in 2020 opened up long-range views from the 18th hole of Denali – at 20,310 feet, the tallest mountain in North America. “In the evening, when the sun starts coming up around that way, what’s spectacular is that mountain looks pink,” said Sayers. “Playing golf with those kinds of views is extraordinary.”



Precision play is crucial in the middle of the front nine, where water guards both the par-4 4th and par-5 6th holes. (Kirk H. Owens/USGA)

A lack of flat lies throughout the course will test competitors. They will also have to be accurate with their short- and mid-irons. “There are tricky areas around the greens that leave some interesting pitch shots,” said Sayers. “Because it’s built on a hillside, there are subtle breaks that players will not see right away.”

What will be visible immediately, in addition to likely moose, bears and foxes, is strong support from the vibrant local golf community. They flock to the course during a season that typically runs from May to mid-October. The facility, which hosts 34,000 rounds annually with summer tee times extending from 5:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., is home to a robust junior program, senior clinics, 9-hole leagues, city and state championships, and plenty of weddings, too. “There are no dull days here,” said Sayers.

Major sporting events aren't exactly the norm for Alaska, which has just 17 golf courses. The Great Alaska Shootout attracted high-profile college basketball teams from 1978 through 2017; the Alaska Baseball League features top college players and claims its share of major leaguers among alums; and the Iditarod, the annual sled dog race that starts in Anchorage and finishes almost 1,000 miles away in Nome, draws international attention. U.S. Open qualifying was scheduled for May 23 at Palmer Golf Course, northeast of Anchorage. But the U.S. Senior Women's Amateur finally brings a high-profile, standalone golf championship to the state.

"It's a special place," said Bodenhamer. "The players will see things they won't see anywhere else, and you do have to watch out for the wildlife. But it's such a unique part of our country and a unique part of our world."

For Sayers, finally landing a USGA championship will mark the culmination of an effort he started more than a decade ago. "I never doubted that we would be able to put the championship on, and that we would be able to field the volunteers," he said. "We are all in."

Tom Mackin is an Arizona-based freelance writer whose work has appeared on USGA websites and Golf Journal.

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