

WOMEN'S GOLF

Sebonack gets high praise as site of 2013 Open

BY MARK HERRMANN

mark.herrmann@newsday.com

With a stiff wind and the deep blue Great Peconic Bay at their backs, officials stood on the second-story patio of the Sebonack clubhouse and praised the picturesque new course that will host the 2013 U.S. Women's Open. The most telling tribute, though, came from someone who was out on the back nine.

PGA Tour pro Daniel Chopra is vacationing in Southampton after having just missed being part of the European Ryder Cup team. He was playing Sebonack Golf Club (est. 2006) during the news conference that marked the formal start of Women's Open preparations. When he finished, his opinion was stronger than the East End breeze: The place is ready for a major championship right now.

"Absolutely," said the Sweden-born pro whose first major was the 2004 U.S. Open at Shinnecock Hills, which is almost next door to Sebonack. "You know what? It's a perfect major venue and it's a golf course the USGA doesn't need to touch. They don't need to put rough in. This is a golf course that doesn't need rough.

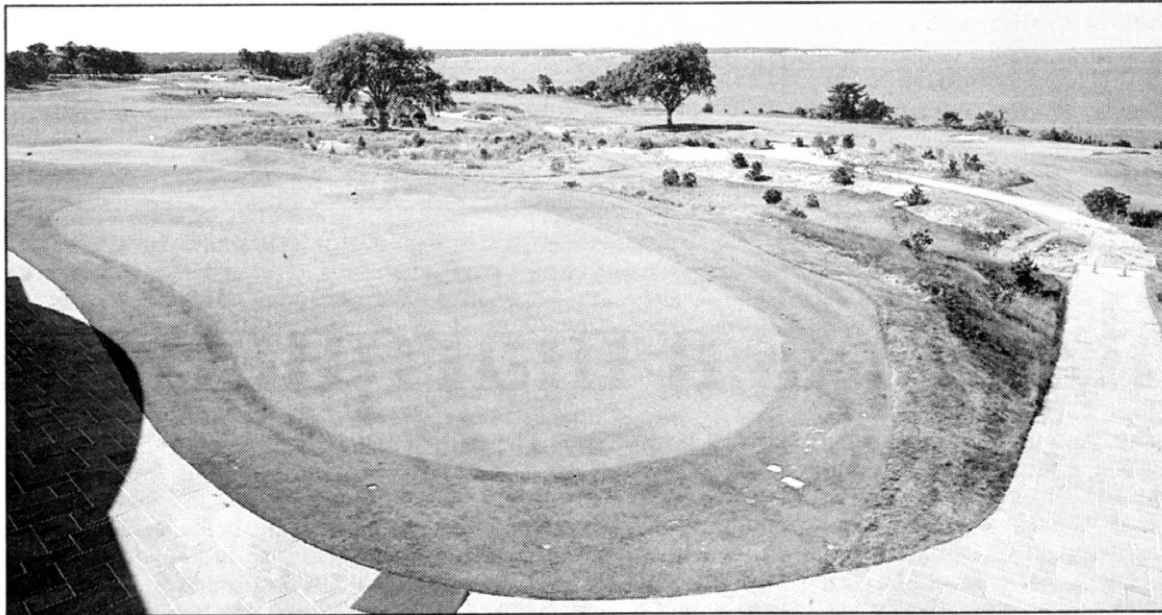


PHOTO BY PETER DILAURO

Sebonack, which was established in 2006, is picturesque course that plays like a British links.

"I love it. I played it for the first time a few days ago. I fell in love with it straightaway. It's just one of those courses you can play over and over and over and never get bored . . . The members here are very fortunate."

Chopra's cousin and a sponsor both are members at Sebonack, which is right next to the National Golf Links (which is right next to Shinnecock). He

has spent much of the week at the course and happened to be there while Sebonack founder and owner Michael Pascucci, chairman of Channel 55, hosted officials from the United States Golf Association, Suffolk County and Southampton Town. Speakers were struck by the beauty of the Jack Nicklaus/Tom Doak layout.

Chopra said Sebonack was

distinct from Shinnecock because the fairways are generously wide but its greens are fast and unfathomably contoured. On one hand, he said the winds and the greens make Sebonack like Kapalua in Hawaii. On the other, he said, "It's going to play more like a links course, a British Open-style course." That is, the challenge will be improvising low, bounc-

ing approach shots amid the bumps and swales.

Mike Butts, deputy director of the USGA, cited the historical significance of the 2013 event. The USGA has held 25 championships on Long Island, including the second U.S. Open (Shinnecock in 1896), first U.S. Women's Amateur (Meadow Brook, 1895), first Walker Cup Match (National Golf Links, 1922) and first Open at a municipal course (Bethpage Black, 2002).

But it never has held a Women's Open here. "This is such a special place in American golf," he said, "we can't think of a better setting."

Nor could Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy, who said the 2004 Men's Open at Shinnecock pumped \$27 million into the economy. And there are lasting benefits to holding a major championship, he said.

During the Open four years ago, the shoulder of County Road 39 was used as a traffic lane. It worked so well that county officials permanently widened the chokingly congested road into a four-lane highway. "It used to take people 40 minutes to go four miles," Levy said. "This has been a godsend for the East End."