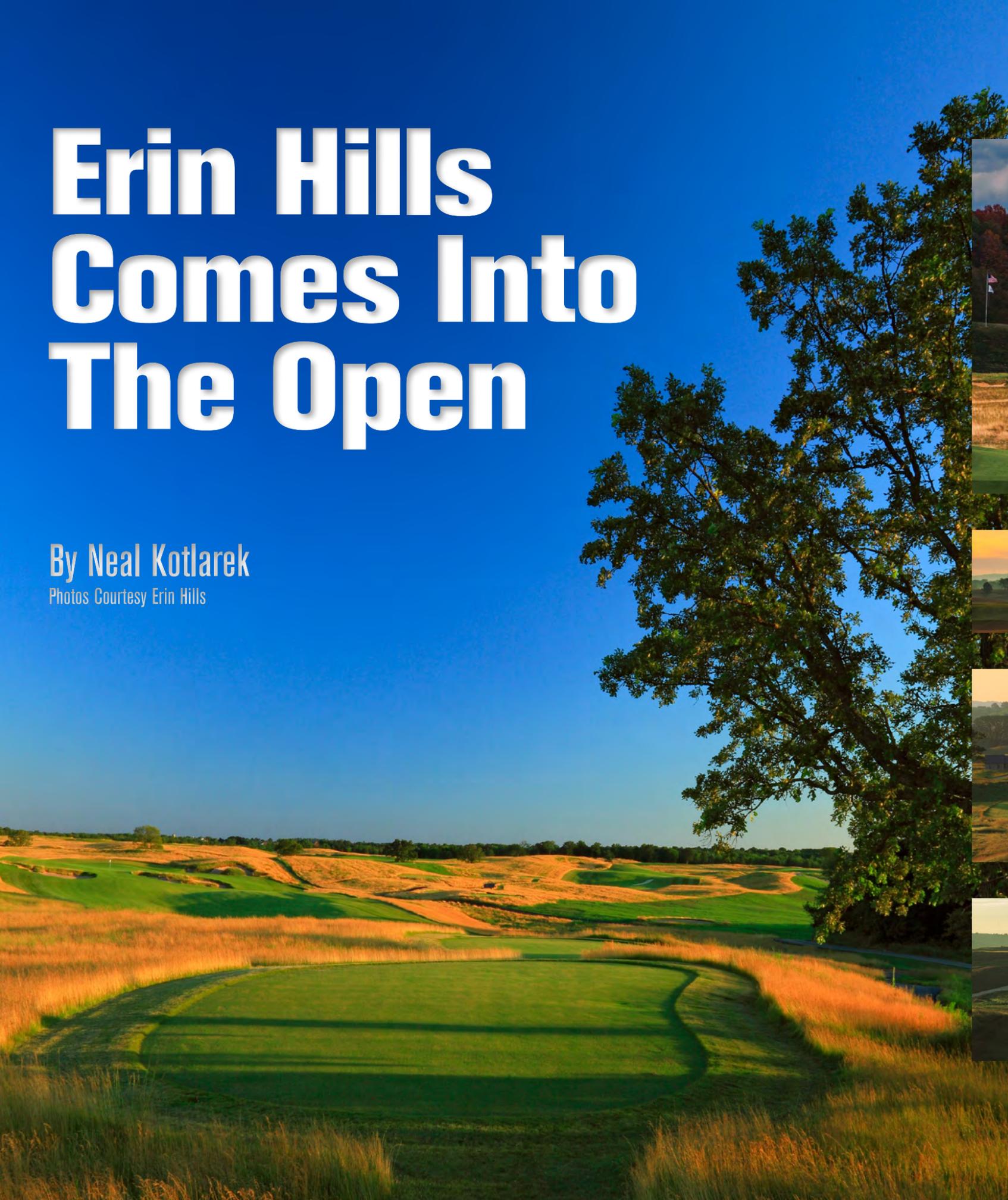


# Erin Hills Comes Into The Open

By Neal Kotlarek

Photos Courtesy Erin Hills



**T**he short history of Wisconsin's Erin Hills makes Cinderella's story seem unremarkable.

Ponder, for a moment, a simple fact: only 13 years ago, this golf course about to host the 2017 U.S. Open was merely a theory. Laid out over 650 glorious acres of farmland 35 miles northwest of Milwaukee, Erin Hills didn't open until 2006. Only three years later, it was bought by financier Andy Ziegler, who immediately ordered a significant renovation of the layout. One year after that, Erin Hills was selected by the United States Golf Association to host the national championship.

How all this happened so quickly involved a confluence of great timing, exquisite architecture, nifty salesmanship, and, of course, a fantastic piece of land. When the committee reviewed all eight of the candidate courses under consideration, including the likes of Long Island's Shinnecock Hills Golf Club, Erin Hills was selected largely due to its quality, its challenge, its commitment to low-impact irrigation techniques, its capacity to host daily galleries of up to 60,000, and, not insignificantly, its designation as a public golf course.

Spectators, TV viewers and the world's finest players will get to experience a course that combines a little bit of Scotland (fescue fairways and knee-high fescue in the second cut of rough) with a whole bunch of Pinehurst (natural design, vast bunkers, limited irrigation) to create a wonderland in the Dairyland. While the course can be set up to play as long as 8,000 yards, it's a fair bet that USGA executive director and CEO Mike Davis will adjust distances daily to take into account prevailing winds and conditions. The end result will be a fair if rigorous test that promises to make for an intriguing event.

In many ways, today's version of Erin Hills is a tribute to the power of determination and vision. When the course opened, no one disputed the beauty of the landscape nor the care architects Dr. Michael Hurdzan, Dana Fry, and Ron Whitten used in letting the property's natural contours determine the character of each hole.

"We had been looking at that piece of land since 2000," Hurdzan said in an April interview from his Columbus, Ohio, office. "We had put together 12 to 15 routings and had a single goal: not to change the natural grade of the land by more than a foot." That self-imposed restriction was put in place for

financial reasons as well as philosophical ones. Original owner Bob Lang wanted to build a natural course that didn't require excessive irrigation. Those guidelines would keep costs to a minimum, and could translate to competitive green fees.

Those restrictions inevitably resulted in some interesting design challenges. The original version of the course included an imposing par-5 opening hole that called for a second shot woven between an ominous sand bunker to the right of the fairway landing area and an overhanging, ball-munching oak tree protecting the left side of this elevated fairway. That tree now departed, the hole remains very difficult but far more playable than its former self. Likewise, the short par-4 second hole involved a blind approach shot from the left side of the fairway to a small, fast green perched upon a knoll like a bent grass version of a billiard table. Invariably, few approach shots made it to the green and many of those that did trundled over, resulting in a difficult chip shot back to the flagstick. The character and spirit of this hole remains intact, yet the design crew re-graded much of the landing area to provide better sight lines to the green and expanded the putting surface to make it more receptive to holding approach shots.

In the end, Erin Hills 3.0 (a first renovation occurred prior to the 2011 U.S. Amateur) saw the elimination of hundreds of trees, needed adjustments on the size and contours of many greens, reduction of the number of blind shots faced, and the addition of more than 125 acres of fescue grasses across the property that transition in color from pale green to glorious gold in early summer. Credit must be given to Ziegler for sticking with the original architects to calculate and manage these adjustments to the satisfaction of the USGA and most every player tackling the course, which is now walking-only.

Hurdzan states that one of the truly consistent characteristics of the course are the three sand bunker types used



across the 18 holes. "There are three types of bunkers," he said. "Erosion bunkers that are 6 to 8 feet wide and tail out at the end of other bunkers; blow-out bunkers that appear as if wind has pushed the sand out of them over time, and a combination of erosion/blow-out bunkers." The stunning result is a course that looks decades older than its age—a true modern classic.

If there is one renovation of the course that I miss, it's the elimination of the delightful par-3 No. 6. Formerly a blind hole built in tribute to the Dell Hole at Ireland's Lahinch Golf Club, the lack of any sightline (save for a movable white rock) to the green only a wedge shot away from the tee box slowed play down significantly, as calculations for the location of errant tee shots needed to be made by every foursome. Making matters more cumbersome, a bell needed to be rung by groups leaving the green to signal successors of the hole's availability.

The romantic in me feels that such a pot luck shot in the middle of a round is good for the spirit. The pragmatic in me, on the other hand, grasps the fact that slow play has been the bane of golf since its inception. Thus, almost any adjustment that enhances speed of play needs to be embraced.

While Erin Hills was always a long course (and made longer by the sometimes imposing treks from greens to ensuing tees), it was from its inception built to play firm and fast. Thus, tee shots tend to spring forward and approach shots to the holes with ground-level greens can be attacked both through the air and through pitch-and-run. That aspect serves to make even a long par 4 like No. 3, 431 yards from the blue tees, play a club or two shorter.

Every hole on the course is a feast to the eyes; thus, it is difficult to pinpoint just one as a signature hole. That said, No. 14 is a truly spectacular par 5 that encompasses virtually every aspect that makes the course special. Wetlands and fescue grasses swirl around the right side of the



hole. A foursome of sand bunkers pinch the tee shot's landing area. Short hitters are at a disadvantage on the second shot as the fairway narrows in their landing area. Long hitters, on the other hand, have a large target to hit toward around the green but over fescue grasses. The large putting surface is virtually unprotected, save for a couple of sand bunkers to the far left and far right. Finish the hole and enjoy the view of it going backwards from the 15<sup>th</sup> tee.

Erin Hills should be in top condition going into the tournament with virtually no play allowed prior to the event. Contours on many of the greens were reduced to allow for speeds with a Stimpmeter reading as high as 13 for the tournament. "The USGA likes speedy greens for the U.S. Open," says Hurdzan, adding, "I am really looking forward to how the players and golf fans respond to the course."

Chicagoans attending the 117<sup>th</sup> U.S. Open from June 15-18 are in for a rare treat, as the tiny community of Erin and its surroundings are virtually unfettered by everything except nature. Try to plan your trip with an additional hour to spare to enjoy the state's iconic Holy Hill which towers over Erin Hills in the distance. A neo-Romanesque church built in 1926 over 435 acres, the breathtaking building features a 178-step climb to an observation tower. Holy Hill is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and features a half-mile outdoor Way of the Cross with 14 groups of life-size sculptures.

Tickets for the U.S. Open can be purchased online at [www.usga.org/tickets](http://www.usga.org/tickets)

Accommodations near Erin Hills are at a premium due to the aforementioned open spaces near and around the property. Nearby cities with hotels include Hartford, Oconomowoc, Delafield, Waukesha, Brookfield and Milwaukee. Spectator parking will be at two outlets, with free shuttle busses running all day.

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