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## SLAMMING THE DOOR

BROOKS KOEPKA SNARES FIRST MAJOR AT U.S. OPEN WITH FINISHING FLOURISH

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# Lessons from Erin

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It's now at least semi-official: Erin Hills is the second-best ballpark in Wisconsin.

Apologies to the Milwaukee Brewers, whose home feels more like a space-age warehouse when other new baseball stadia feel retro. Erin Hills falls right behind the Green Bay Packers' Lambeau Field as the coolest place in the Badger State to hang around watching a ballgame.

Every U.S. Open has some sort of design legacy. Merion in 2013 reaffirmed the value of small-ball golf. Pinehurst in 2014 showcased scruffy, native sand hills architecture. In 2015, Chambers Bay's path to fame as a municipal testament to the splendor of the Pacific Northwest stumbled on bumpy greens and a routing that prevented spectators from getting around. Oakmont in 2016 reminded us, once again, of the enduring power of well-sloped, glass-slick greens.

As for Erin Hills, here are several takeaways to its architectural legacy.

## 1. STICK TO THE LAND.

The Erin Hills design team of Michael Hurdzan, Dana Fry and Ron Whitten relied upon the existing terrain for their fairways, greens and even their bunker shapes. They got the scale right: big slopes and broad terrain juxtaposed against subtle rolls that tie in to existing grades.

## 2. THE F-WORD.

For the world-class players at the U.S. Open, Erin Hills was fun – or at least not torture. Their skills as drivers of the ball were fully tested, as were their imagination with escape from some gnarly bunkers and recovery skills around the greens. Anyone can design a hard golf course that nobody can score on. The skill is in creating a venue that showcases a diverse skill set. Tiger Woods shooting 19-under par to win the 2000 British Open at St. Andrews does not diminish the reputation of The Old Course. Likewise at Erin Hills, which (it has to be said) played most of the week under weather conditions ideal for low scoring.

## 3. LONGER AND SHORTER.

After two decades of making courses longer, we need to focus on stretching courses in both directions so they are lengthened from the back while shortened up front. It's clear from Erin Hills, which maxed out during the

first round at 7,845 yards, that these players can easily be tested at 8,000 yards. Just make sure the course is also outfitted with more forward tees for the vast majority of everyday, fee-paying golfers, for whom courses of 6,200 yards and 5,000 yards are more than enough.

## 4. MAINTENANCE COUNTS.

One reason there was a record 140 under-par rounds during Open week, including Justin Thomas' amazing 63 on Saturday and winner Brooks Koepka's winning score of 16-under par, was the meticulous conditioning of the fairways and greens. Credit for this goes to director of course maintenance Zach Reineking (who has been there from the beginning of construction) and his fulltime crew of 50, supplemented by 115 volunteers. Special praise should flow for the unsung hero of any grounds operation, the head mechanic team. Erin Hills' Tim Roddy normally oversees 45 mowers and vehicles; this week he handled a fleet of 105. No matter how good the architecture, if the crew isn't up to the task of creating the right mowing patterns, nothing works right.

## 5. FESCUE ISN'T FOR EVERYONE.

The dirty little secret of modern architecture is that fescue is overrated and takes more work to establish and maintain than commonly claimed. It works at Erin Hills' sandy ground, but only when it's kept outside of the spray zone of irrigation heads – and even then it needed a little last-minute trimming. Actually, there are lots of different fescues, and if you get the wrong one, it's a nightmare of clumpy unplayable gunk. It also doesn't work in heavier clay soils. It takes years to grow in and looks like garbage the first two years if it's being properly tended. And if it's anywhere near where everyday players hit the ball, you'll



The maintenance efforts at Erin Hills produced nearly perfect playing surfaces.

# Hills

## USGA's gamble pays off, and organizers should plan a return trip

have a nightmare of frustration, slow play and anger.

### 6. THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A MODEL.

Every golf course is built for a purpose, for a target market and for a specific budget. Erin Hills is a spectacular facility and will become one of those must-play destinations to which everyday golfers will flock and pay \$280 to get their brains beat out. That's a pretty narrow marketing plan, but that's the one they have acquired. It's not ideal for an everyday course that wants to draw volume play at an affordable rate.

### 7. THEY'LL BE BACK.

This is a prediction and a recommendation, not an

Erin Hills proved again that a public-access course could handle a U.S. Open.

analysis based upon interviews of U.S. Golf Association officials. Their recent dalliance with public courses (Pinehurst in 1999, 2005, 2014; Bethpage-Black in 2002 and 2009; Torrey Pines in 2008) and with new venues (Chambers Bay and Erin Hills) as counterparts to classic venues has largely proved successful. The USGA has an impressive lineup on the horizon including such classics as Shinnecock Hills in 2018 and 2026, Pebble Beach in 2019, Winged Foot in 2020, The Country Club in 2022; Los Angeles Country Club in 2023, Pinehurst in 2024 and Oakmont in 2025. I suspect they'll be back at Erin Hills soon. As for new courses, among those worthy in terms of design and market location are the new Bill Coore/Ben Crenshaw-designed Trinity Forest Golf Club in Dallas and Sebonack Golf Club in Southampton, N.Y., a Tom Doak and Jack Nicklaus design from 2006.

### 8. THE FINAL TAKEAWAY.

Erin Hills reaffirms the USGA's idea that a new public course can be worthy of a U.S. Open. Let's hope the golf industry learns something from what made the place work. Gwk

