

GOLF AROUND THE BAY AREA'S BEST

James Woolwine

The beauty of writing about the best eighteen holes of golf in the San Francisco Bay Area is that I can also write about the courses themselves. There are other worthy courses and holes that should be on this list, but I have strived for a fair mix of public and private courses within thirty miles of the Ferry Building in downtown San Francisco.

HOLE 3, PAR 4 **CALIFORNIA GOLF CLUB OF** **SAN FRANCISCO, SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO**

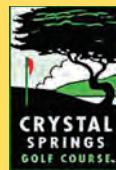
(Designers A. Vernon Macan, Alister MacKenzie, and Kyle Phillips)

The most dramatic, most visually appealing bunkers in the Bay Area are at the California Golf Club. The growth around the bunkers (designed by MacKenzie) gives the course and the bunkers character that make most other bunkers look sterile in comparison. The third hole has an intimacy, created by an elevated tee looking down on a beautifully framed fairway, with trees on both sides and bunkers right with a broad opening left. The hole rewards a nice right-to-left first shot, leaving a second shot to a small green with bunkers front and back. The small green adds to the challenge and makes me wonder whatever happened to the use of the small, well-protected greens so prevalent in the older San Francisco golf courses.

HOLE 6, PAR 4 **CRYSTAL SPRINGS GOLF COURSE,** **BURLINGAME**

(Designer William Herbert Fowler)

William Fowler, who redesigned the eighteenth hole at Pebble Beach, designed Crystal Springs, which sits on



THE BAY — EIGHTEEN HOLES



the edge of a San Francisco watershed area. Number six embraces the edge of the watershed area with an elevated tee box with handsome views of the Crystal Springs Reservoir and the pristine, tree-covered hills to the west. I always try to take time at this tee box to enjoy the view and prepare for my first shot, over a canyon. This downhill, dogleg left hole has a broad, left-sloping fairway. It is a bucolic scene as you walk down the fairway toward your ball for a second shot to a small green that is tucked away and surrounded by trees.

HOLE 16, PAR 4 **SHARP PARK GOLF COURSE, PACIFICA** *(Designer Alister MacKenzie)*

With sixteen, which has a sea wall to the right along the length of the hole and a links-style feel, MacKenzie has captured the essence of Pacifica. As you walk down the wide-open fairway you hear the power of the ocean, smell the salt air, and feel like you are walking down an ancient Scottish course. Your second shot is to a small green with trees behind and the ocean very close on the right. There is always talk about closing this course to protect the threatened red-legged frog and the endangered San Francisco garter snake and even talk about knocking down the sea wall. Like Lincoln Park Golf Course, this course is rough around the edges and deserves a Harding Park Golf Course-style makeover. The denizens of Pacifica and San Francisco deserve Sharp Park Golf Course, and I am sure that golfers, frogs, and snakes can live together happily.

HOLE 3, PAR 3 **LAKE MERCED GOLF CLUB,** **DALY CITY**

*(Designers Willie Lock, Alister MacKenzie,
Robert Muir Graves, and Rees Jones)*

The essence of Lake Merced is best represented by its par threes. The course is lush, with a deep green hue to the



fairways and greens. The par threes distill the grandeur of the course, giving you the feel of the whole course in one brushstroke. Hole three has an elevated tee that slopes severely downhill to a small green with bunkers in front and a landscaped hill behind that forms a wonderful backdrop. A well-aimed shot floats gently to its target, creating a lasting picturesque memory. Golf is about memories, and I have many fond memories of Lake Merced.

HOLE 3, PAR 4 **TILDEN PARK GOLF COURSE,** **BERKELEY** *(Designer William Park Bell, Jr.)*



This is a downhill, tree-lined par four that must be played from the blue tees to really appreciate the narrow chute through the trees that your drive must navigate before the fairway opens up half way to the hole. I can picture Tiger Woods playing here while on the Stanford golf team against Cal, waiting for the green to clear, hitting onto the green, some 140 yards past my best drive. For most, your second shot is to a midsize green at the bottom of the hill with traps on either side. Best to leave your second shot on the front, as the green slopes toward the fairway.

HOLE 13, PAR 3 **PRESIDIO GOLF COURSE,** **SAN FRANCISCO** *(Designers Robert Wood Johnstone and William McEwan)*



If the tree in front of the green is not cut back, you essentially have a blind shot into the green. The only other time I have seen this kind of obstruction is the first time I played Spanish Bay (Monterey) and the reeds in the marsh in front of the par three eighth were so high I could not see the green. You get a glimpse of the green here at Presidio, but you are never sure if you have hit the

green or not. There are traps both left and right, a drop-off behind, and a hill to the right. The hole itself starts downhill then uphill, so that it is almost level between the tee box and the green.

HOLE 6, PAR 4

CLAREMONT COUNTRY CLUB, OAKLAND

(Designers James "Pop" Smith, Alister MacKenzie, and Tom Doak)

This short par sixty-eight course, nestled among stately homes in the Oakland hills, is a shot maker's dream with bunkers reminiscent of the California Golf Club. MacKenzie effectively utilized the room he had to challenge the short games of even master craftsmen. My favorite hole is number nine, but the true flavor of this course is best described with other holes, especially holes six or eleven. Number six is a short and reachable-in-one-shot par four. The safe route is to hit to the right, where the fairway opens up at the bottom of the hill and leaves you a short, but challenging, second shot uphill to the longer part of a small green. If you hit toward the left or go for the green, your shot must fly over four large traps set into the hill and land on the narrow part of the green. Even the safe route is difficult, since any error will leave you in a trap or generally down a hill.

HOLE 14, PAR 4

METROPOLITAN GOLF LINKS, OAKLAND

(Designers Johnny Miller and Fred Bliss)



This is a great risk/reward hole for both your tee shot and, depending on where you are, your second shot. If you can clear the sand traps along the left with your first shot, you shorten the hole, giving you a shot at the green on your second, which crosses a ravine, to an upward-sloping, tiered green. Often you are left with a second shot that you must lay up in front of the ravine, followed by a chip shot that needs to find the correct level of the green.

HOLE 18, PAR 4

HARDING PARK GOLF COURSE, SAN FRANCISCO

(Designer Willie Watson)



This is another great risk/reward par four that wraps itself around Lake Merced, giving you a choice to play it safe and avoid the water, and leaving you a second shot over two hundred yards to a relatively small green. You can aim further up the fairway, where each yard closer in means more of the lake you will need to traverse. Of course you will have to hit over some trees if you try to aim too far up the fairway. Your second shot is to a green that is narrow in front, with two bunkers and trees on the left. The green is tiered, wide in the middle, with an open area to the right. It is much better to miss right than left.

HOLE 13, PAR 4

STONE TREE GOLF CLUB, NOVATO

(Designers Sandy Tatum, Jim Summers, Johnny Miller, and Fred Bliss)

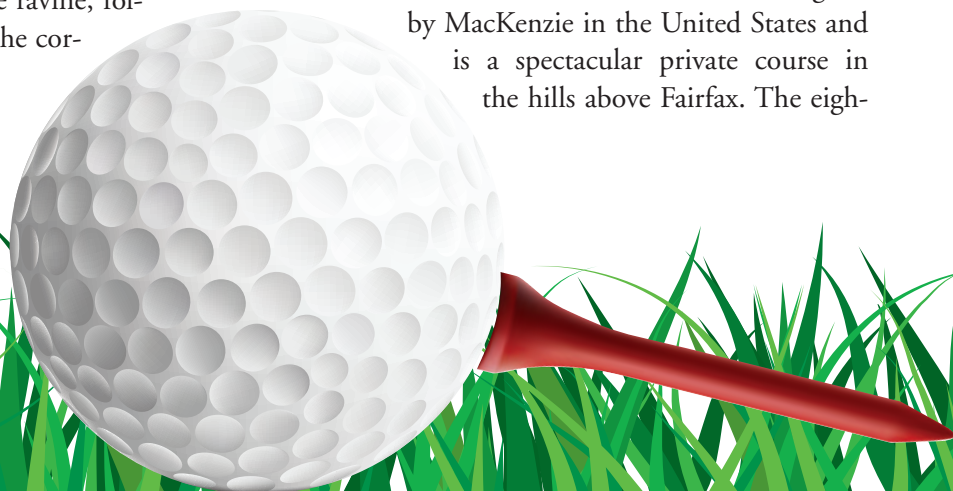
This uphill, beautifully maintained, short, and narrow par four requires a precise tee shot that needs to find the fairway, followed by a difficult second shot to a severely sloped and tiered green. Your second shot needs to find the tier where the pin is placed or your putt will be very difficult, and I have seen many second shots roll off the green due to the severe slope of the front tier of the green. Though I have never seen it, I am sure a big hitter could try to drive the green, but it would be an amazing and extremely risky shot.

HOLE 18, PAR 4

MEADOW CLUB, FAIRFAX

(Designer Alister MacKenzie)

The Meadow Club is the first course designed by MacKenzie in the United States and is a spectacular private course in the hills above Fairfax. The eigh-



teenth hole is a tight, somewhat uphill, dogleg right par four with a hill and stream on the right and trees and the edge of the driving range on the left. Your tee shot is best aimed toward the left side, leaving you a second shot over the large bunker that protects the left front of the green. There is a quiet that pervades this course, and the eighteenth is emblematic of this calm. If Augusta National and Pebble Beach are cathedrals of golf, then this is a fine church.

HOLE 5, PAR 4
**CHUCK CORICA GOLF COMPLEX,
EARL FRY GOLF COURSE, ALAMEDA**
*(Designers William Park Bell and
Desmond Muirhead)*

This par four hole is best played from the back tees, where the lake in front of the tee box comes into play, and takes a good tee shot to clear the lake and make it to the fairway. The shape of the lake and fairway creates a risk/reward shot. The further up the fairway you want to land, the more of the lake you need to cross. Your best landing area is up the fairway somewhat and is best served by a soft left-to-right shot. While standing on the tee box you might have thoughts of your ball swimming, rather than running, but once you have cleared the water, your second is an easy one to an open, though narrow green, with one bunker in the back. This is a heavily played course, but a fun track.

HOLE 16, PAR 3
PEACOCK GAP GOLF COURSE, SAN RAFAEL
(Designers William F. Bell and Forrest Richardson)

Renovated in 2007, this course recently filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. I have always loved this course and had high hopes for the 8 million dollar renovation. In the main, the renovation was done well except for some of the greens, which are better served on a miniature golf course. Number sixteen retains its original beauty and still forces you to shoot over the lagoon to a midsize, well-bunkered green. The sixteenth is a pretty hole, with

the lagoon on your left and in front of the green. Your shot only needs to clear the water and there is plenty of room on the green, and plenty of area back, left, and right for an errant shot.

HOLE 18, PAR 5
**PENINSULA GOLF AND
COUNTRY CLUB,
SAN MATEO**



*(Designers Donald Ross, Robert Trent Jones, Sr.,
Robert Muir Graves, and Ron Forse)*

I was lucky enough to spend the afternoon with three presidents of this splendid, private country club, originally designed by one of the great golf architects, Donald Ross. Typical of a Donald Ross course, the Peninsula Golf and Country Club challenges you on every shot and flows naturally across the undulating hills of San Mateo. On the seventeenth tee, a short par four (285 yards) that doglegs right around some trees to a well-bunkered green, we watched two young gentlemen hit from the back tees. The first hitter landed left, but safe and hole-high, while the second player hit a beautiful, slight draw over the trees, and onto the green for a twenty-foot opportunity for eagle. With some awe and due respect for the shot, one of my companions said, "I hit my ball so short I can hear it land." The eighteenth is a short par five, some 525 yards from the back tees. The eighteenth starts off slightly downhill, with a narrow opening between trees on either side and a bunker on the left for a misplayed shot. Your next shot is uphill and protected on the right with a bunker some hundred yards short of the green and a bunker on the left that is around 30 yards from the green, in typical Donald Ross fashion. There are two more bunkers in front of the green and two tall Canary Island pine trees back of the green. Eighteen is a stunning hole that flows beautifully and allows you fully to view the hole and plan your attack on the tee box.





HOLE 11, PAR 4

**SAN GERONIMO GOLF COURSE,
SAN GERONIMO
(MARIN COUNTY)**



*(Designers A. Vernon McKahn
and Robert Muir Graves)*

Part of the bucolic back nine, number eleven is a challenging dogleg left par four that requires a straight drive that needs to either hug the right side or be just long enough to give you a shot into the green that is nestled between the stream in front, out-of-bounds in back, and the sand and trees surrounding the green. A shot too far left or too short will force you to lay up for a shot of about one hundred yards. Many people consider this the hardest hole on the course, but it is also one of the most beautiful. I love walking down the fairway and looking around at the beauty of the valley and the hills and trees all around you.

HOLE 17, PAR 4

SAN FRANCISCO GOLF CLUB, SAN FRANCISCO

(Designer A. W. Tillinghast)

This über-private course is best known for the par three seventh hole, which some say is A. W. Tillinghast's favorite of all the holes that he designed. It is referred to as the "Duel Hole," being the site of a duel between State Supreme Court Justice David Terry and U.S. Senator David Broderick. The Senator did not make it to the back nine. I prefer the par four seventeenth hole, which doglegs sharply right demanding either an accurate left-to-right shot or a perfectly placed shot just past the elbow of the fairway to the left. Your next shot is to a green nestled between a large trap on the left and trees right and back. Either hole is a treat at this lightly played, well-manicured course.

HOLE 17, PAR 3

**LINCOLN PARK GOLF COURSE,
SAN FRANCISCO**

(Designers Jack Neville, Vincent Whitney, John McLaren, and Herbert Fleishacker)

One of the most stunning par three holes I have ever played is the seventeenth at Lincoln Park Golf Course. Though not in perfect shape, this straightforward, not particularly challenging, long par three has breathtaking views of the

Pacific Ocean, Golden Gate Bridge, Marin Headlands, and the San Francisco Bay. There are three traps around the midsize green, but no traps in front. The fairway is straight and plain, and still it is a stunning hole. I often drive home through Lincoln Park from the Olympic Club just to look at the hole and its view.

HOLE 2, PAR 3
THE OLYMPIC CLUB, CLIFFS COURSE,
SAN FRANCISCO
(Designers Jay Morrish and Tom Weiskopf)

The Cliffs course is a nine-hole par three track, where the first eight holes hug the cliffs above the Pacific Ocean on the west side of Skyline Boulevard. The second hole is an uphill par three nestled along the cliff, overlooking the Pacific Ocean on the left and trees on the right. On many days you can see the world-class hang gliders from Fort Funston drifting along as you walk up the fairway of this majestic setting, and on a sunny day the view is as spectacular as any in California. From the tee, you hit uphill and cannot see the results of your shot until you reach the midsize green, which has four small bunkers protecting the front.

My favorite golf memory is walking up the eighteenth at Pebble Beach after hitting my drive. I looked down the fairway and there was my three-year-old daughter walking up the course with my brother-in-law. Once my daughter saw me, she came running into my arms. My favorite memory of these eighteen holes is my walk by myself up the second hole of the Cliffs Course at the Olympic Club. It was a warm, clear day, and as I looked out over the cliff toward the ocean, a hang glider came swooping overhead. I wanted to share that moment with someone and have since taken many people out on the course to experience the exhilaration of the view and course.

I want to thank everyone at the California Golf Club, Crystal Springs Golf Club, Sharp Park, Lake Merced Golf Club, Claremont Country Club, and the Peninsula Golf and Country Club for their warm hospitality. I had a few of my best days of golf revisiting those fine courses. If you ever get the chance to walk a golf course without playing, you will learn more about the course, the archi-

tect, and how to play the course than when actually making the shots.

To paraphrase a one-time local writer, Mark Twain, it was a good walk, unspoiled.

James Woolwine is a member of the Olympic Club. His dream is to play Pine Valley in Pennsylvania, Cypress Point in Monterey, and Augusta National in Georgia. When he is not thinking about golf courses, he thinks about project management, governance, strategic planning, out-source management, and leadership. He can be reached at james.woolwine@comcast.net.

