

SPORTS



LORI DUCKWORTH

# The Golf Father

Perry Maxwell put Oklahoma golf on the map.

BY SUSAN DRAGOO

**ATOP A CLIFF** in the foothills of the Arbuckles, in the shadows of a classical colonnade overlooking the seventh fairway of the Dornick Hills Golf and Country Club, devotees leave offerings at the foot of a black granite gravestone. Golf balls and gloves ring the marker's lower edge, tokens honoring the man who had been laid to rest there above the first course he designed. Some describe him as fabled; others refer to **Perry Duke Maxwell** as the father of Oklahoma golf.

"Golf as we know it in Oklahoma is a derivative of what he did," says Tripp Davis, golf architect and member of the 1989 national champion University of Oklahoma golf team.

Davis knows Maxwell's work better than most, since he's restored four of the forty courses Maxwell designed across Oklahoma between 1914 and 1952.

Estimates vary, but Maxwell was involved with the original or complete redesign of perhaps eighty golf courses during his lifetime and remodeled another fifty or so.

"He built a lot of the original golf courses in Oklahoma, giving Oklahoma a reputation for being a really good golf state," Davis says. "We've got great golf courses all over the state in large part thanks to him."

Born in Kentucky in 1879, Maxwell ended up in Ardmore, Indian Territory,

in 1897 seeking the semi-arid weather of the West to help with tuberculosis. He'd also taken up tennis to improve his health and became an avid competitive player, and he was in his thirties when his wife, Ray, suggested a less strenuous sport. In 1913, Maxwell read in *Scribner's Magazine* about the National Golf Links



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near Southampton, Long Island, and wondered if it was possible to have a golf course in this part of the world. Ray encouraged him to consider adapting their property north of

Ardmore for golf and, after visiting courses in North Texas, Maxwell built the first four holes of what would become Dornick Hills. Maxwell soon expanded the course and, introducing a strain of Bermuda that was heat-resistant and able to grow in the clay soil of southern Oklahoma, added grass greens—the first in the state.

Formally opening Dornick Hills in 1914, Maxwell grazed a herd of Shropshire sheep on the grounds to aid in maintenance. By 1917, Maxwell was advising on the design for the Platt National Park golf course in Sulphur and began to take on voluntary design engagements. After his wife's untimely death in 1919, he retired from banking and continued his focus on golf architecture. It wasn't until 1925 that he took his first professional design fee: \$500 for the design of the Arkansas City Country Club in Kansas. Around that time, he visited Scotland and met renowned golf architect Alister MacKenzie, with whom he began to work professionally in the United States in 1927. Their projects included the University of Michigan Golf Course and Crystal Downs Country Club in Michigan. Another of their combined efforts was the redesign of the Nichols

« Before Maxwell transformed his property into Dornick Hills, it was a dairy farm. The Ardmore club was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2004.

Hills Country Club, now the Oklahoma City Golf & Country Club.

On his own after MacKenzie's death in 1934, Maxwell's career continued to flourish. His designs maximized natural topography to create challenging holes.

"The site of a golf course should be there, not brought there," he said in *The American Golfer* in 1935. "A featureless site cannot possibly be economically redeemed. Many an acre of magnificent land has been utterly destroyed by the steam shovel, throwing up its billows of earth, biting out traps and bunkers, transposing landmarks that are contemporaries of Genesis."

His trademark greens are known for their Maxwell rolls, or undulating landscape contours.

"He really understood that to get a green to play in an interesting way and tie it into the landscape, you need to let it fit the land," Davis says. "So his greens would slope off in three or four different directions; there's not a predominant high side or low side. This creates a lot of movement in the green and makes it very interesting to play."

Maxwell worked in association with his son J. Press Maxwell until his death. The University of Oklahoma—now Jimmie Austin—and Lake Hefner courses were two of the senior Maxwell's last designs before he passed away in Tulsa in 1952 at the age of seventy-three.

Davis acknowledges Maxwell's significant influence on his own work, noting that Maxwell didn't just design a course and give it over to someone else to build but was often present at the job site. That hands-on involvement is something Davis emulates.

"I finish the shaping myself, and every time I'm shaping a green, I think of Maxwell," he says.

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