

## Merion Golf And Cricket Club Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Designer: Hugh Wilson (1914)

	Yards	Par	Rating	Slope
Blue	6482	70	73.5	149
Middle	6103	70	71.6	144

### Overview:

In 1914 the members of the Merion Golf and Cricket Club tapped one of their premier players, Hugh Wilson, with the responsibility of creating a championship golf course on a mere 110 acres of hilly ground outside of Philadelphia. This was no small task considering he had no previous experience in course design. He took a trip to England to study the construction of the great courses of the British Isles and came back inspired that his first stab at golf design could be a success.

With the invaluable help of a young William Flynn as his lead construction man, later one of the most prolific designers of this Golden Age of course design, the two of them created one of the memorable tracks one will ever play. Except for Pine Valley, Oakmont, and Pebble Beach, there are no other examples of such quality design by an individual on his first try.

Merion has a certain mysterious quality about it that kind of creeps into your mind long after you have left the course. The sequence of holes defies any obvious pattern which gives you a sense of arbitrary fate as you work your way through the course. There are no distance markers on the course either on the tees or in the fairways-no indications of pin positions. Fortunately, there are a group of the most knowledgeable caddies you will find anywhere, and they know the distance from every blade of grass on the course and the break on every putt down to the most subtle nuance.

This is a course that asks you to show great patience, to wait for the opportunities as they occur. You cannot force a good score, you must knead one out of the layout with great patience and adept shot execution. There are very few tricky holes, all the challenges are quite obvious, but they are also quite real. If you try to bite off more than you can chew you will likely choke on the effort. Carefully pick and choose your challenges and when you set your mind to taking one, do not waffle on that decision-you must play every shot with great confidence or the course will eat you up.

With both five pars in the first four holes you find yourself searching for rest holes the last three hours of your day. You are going to be rudely disappointed because even the shortest par fours, and there are a plethora of them, do not provide you with obvious scoring opportunities. You can have short irons and wedges in your hands for second shots all through the first thirteen holes but it better be from the fairway and you better keep those approaches beneath the flag sticks. The last five holes are as harsh of a finish as you can imagine. It is full prevent defense of your scorecard the rest of the way to the clubhouse.

The most obvious characteristic of this course is the impeccable quality of the putting surfaces. The greens are the finest I have ever seen, very fast, very true with lots of pitch and yaw. The condition of the course is equally impeccable-it looks like a fine manicured yard everywhere you look. Another signature characteristic is the severe bunkering-the bunkers are deep and often strewn with wild sage grass. The best strategy is to stay out of the sand entirely and when you get in one take the most conservative path to exiting it.

The full Merion experience begins when you get out of your car and ends after a refreshing post game shower. There is a special hamish relationship between the members and their long standing employees that run the place. An informal atmosphere exists without much of the pomp and circumstance typical of an old line club. The floors are uneven and creaky and there is a bit of a musty odor pervades the place-it feels like a comfortable visit to your grandma's place when you were a kid. The members themselves take great pride in the tradition and care of this place. Try to take a mulligan off the first tee and they will show you the door. My host was walking the fairways bending over to pull offending weeds from the turf-a bit of greens keeping vigilantism.

The signature of Merion are the wicker baskets atop the flagsticks. Makes it tough to get a wind reading on the green from the fairway. Unsubstantiated rumor says that Hugh Flynn, on his pre-design trip to the review the great courses of Britain, saw shepherds tending their flocks with long staffs with hollow wicker baskets on top where they would stash their lunches to keep them away from prying animals. He thought that was a cool look and came back to the states with this notion for unique flagsticks. With the help of local artisans he had them made and patented and today they are guarded as treasure, taken in every night at the end of play to insure no one comes hunting for souvenirs.

Playing this course is much more than a simple round of golf, it is a golfing experience. The place is steeped with tradition and memories of golf's greatest players making great shots in major championships. You cannot help but get caught up in the ghosts of championships past. Take in all this ambiance as you stroll these fairways and enjoy the special character of this hallowed place.

#### Hole-By-Hole Analysis (Blue/Middle):

#1 Par 4 362/333 yards

The opening hole is a simple short par four that will test your ability to contain the temptation to try and bully this course. Your drive needs to be slightly left to right between the fairway bunkers, but short of the bunker in the center of the fairway. Stay out of the fairway bunkers on the right-there is no recovery from those-so do not try to cut the corner for a short line to the green. The second will be a short iron into a sliver of a deep green that slopes from back to front. The approach shot needs to be accurate because the target is very narrow, and staying below the cup is a must if you want an aggressive putt at the hole. Much like many of the holes out here, there is a birdie opportunity from the correct drive position, but from anywhere else par is an excellent score. The green will be swift and undulating but get used to this because there are seventeen more just like it ahead.

## #2 Par 5 536/518 yards

The par fives on the course will drive you crazy. They appear simple from the tee, and are in fact opportunity holes, yet they all have the potential of being a disaster for your scorecard. As I said in the overview the hole sequencing is very arbitrary there are only two par fives and you see both of them in the first four holes. This first one is very narrow on the right with OB running next to the road all the way up. The drive is downhill to an uphill landing area-the correct drive is right to left in the left center of the fairway. The bunkers on the left are reachable, and let me say again, you do not want to hit any of the fairway bunkers on this course. A visit to this fairway bunker will lead to a sensible sideways pitch back into the middle of the fairway-you must learn to take your medicine at Merion. The second can be a layup iron as the hole even narrows more severely on the right as it approaches the green. The third shot will be a level short iron into a green very similar to number one. This hole can be a birdie with a wedge if you do not cash register the card with OB or a visit to the punitive bunkers.

## #3 Par 3 181/168 yards

This is a very deceptive hole, extremely difficult target to hit and a very hard pin placement to read from the tee. It is only about a five or six iron depending on the depth of the pin placement. But the green is set slightly above the tee so it is difficult to get a good mental picture of the landing area and it is set at a funny angle so you do not have much depth to shoot at except if the pin is back right. The bunkers left and back are not a bad place to miss. Short and right are no place to miss because you will have trouble hitting the green with your second shot from there. The putting surface on this hole is the most undulating so far and it portends things to come. This green is slick and has a funny pitch from right to left. You will do well to get a par here and head for the fourth tee.

## #4 Par 5 600/560 yards

Maybe the toughest driving hole on the course-totally blind landing area-it requires a clear mental picture to drive well. There are a few bunkers on the right and some mounds and bad rough left. The idea drive is right center. Your second shot will be a blind long iron directly over the bunkers in the center of the fairway to a layup area below. The approach is a short iron from a downhill lie to a downhill target surrounded by more bunkers than you can count with your shoes off. This iron can be played with purpose and should give you a bona-fide birdie opportunity. Just try to keep it below the hole for an attack putting angle.

## #5 Par 4 418/405 yards

Up to now this has been a Sunday walk in the park-but it will start to look like Central Part at midnight the next two holes. This may be the most difficult scoring par four on the course. Like the 13<sup>th</sup> at Avenel, unless you get the perfect drive you are best to play layup on the second and treat this as another five par. Your driving area is narrow to begin with because of the creek that runs up the left side. The fairway pitches to the creek so do not hit a right to lefter or it will end up in the drink. The right side of the fairway is sharply inclined and will give you a difficult stance on your second if you miss right from the tee. The second shot will be a long club into a green with a narrow opening. If you do not have the perfect lie and stance play a slight shorter club at the right edge of the bunker on the right of the green. Your next pitch will be no piece of cake either,

this green undulates big time and you need to get in the twenty-foot range to guarantee a two-putt. A real alka-seltzer hole-you have to play defensively here and guard against the big number.

#### #6 Par 4 420/410 yards

This measures the same as the last but has slightly less ominous pleasures awaiting the wayward traveler. The drive is fairly narrow but the landing area fans out a bit when you get out there. Right center and long is the calling here. Second shot will be a long iron into a deep green with open access. The bunkers short and left are the real danger here. This green is big by Merion standards so just trickling on the front with the pin in the back leaves you a cross county putt. Unlike the last hole, you should not make a high score here so I suggest you be aggressive if your tee ball ends up in the right position. One other observation here. At Merion where you see tall trees and ivy on fences there is OB not far away-the course was built on a very small piece of land and there is no wasted space (i.e. no extra space to miss). What you see is where you play-what you do not see is penalty strokes.

#### #7 Par 4 350/343 yards

In the next five holes the course changes rhythm rather dramatically. You are faced with a series of finesse holes most of which are 350 yards or less, but all of which are demanding the most precise play you can render. This section is where aggressive play can be rewarded and, if you are to make a good score on this course, you must be close to par in these five holes. This hole is a slight dog ear left into an uphill green. Your drive is left center which will leave you a downhill lie into an uphill target. The short iron you hit in here needs to be very accurate to catch this narrow target. The green is ridged across the center so make sure your incoming shot reaches the correct segment for the day's wicker placement.

#### #8 Par 4 360/342 yards

What a cute little hole. Hit your drive to left center into the blind landing area. Now you have only wedge to the green-but it is one of the most demanding wedges you will ever hit. The green is tiny and severely bunkered and you will have a somewhat blind shot because the lip of the front bunker hides the front part of the green. The fact that this is a downhill shot makes it even that much more difficult to judge precisely, and precise you must be or you will be pulling your sand wedge next. The green has severe pitch back to front and left to right so play beyond the flag and let it back down. Prepare yourself for a slick putt. The Bert bunker on the top left of the green is the only bunker on this course that seems to be placed without purpose.

#### #9 Par 3 193/160 yards

The outward nine ends with a sneaky little par 3 that is downhill into a well-guarded target-water in front and bunkers everywhere else. The club selection will vary one to two clubs depending on the pin. Front pin is a short iron but into a very tight landing area. The back positions are more open but will bring more sand into play. The green is again severely pitched back to front so keeping a putt around the hole will be difficult. Par here is a good score.

#### #10 Par 4 310/294 yards

A billy goat climb awaits you to the tee on number 10 from which you get a rather intimidating view of this short par four. The landing area is very tight and it is easy to overplay this driving area. A fairway metal or long iron played into the turn of the dogleg will leave nothing but a wedge up to the green surface. The wedge in is to a very tight sliver of a green-ridged across the center-short left is into a bear of a bunker-complete with sage weed-long right is on a county maintained roadway. This is an opportunity hole-birdie is a definite possibility but you will need to hit a pair of adept shots. Look for a bit of break in the putt if you are beyond the hole.

#### #11 Par 4 369/349 yards

This hole has notoriety because it is where Bobby Jones completed his amateur grand slam. This is also the hole where another contender threw his club in the air in desperation and konked himself on the noggin as a result. You may be tempted to do harm to yourself as well before you reach the next tee-this is a pivotal hole on the incoming nine. You want to play a lay up club on this tee to a landing area that is downhill, very narrow, and protected by wiry rough on the right and trees on the left. Your second will be six to eight iron off the downhill lie into a wedge of a green bordered on the front and right by a stone wall and a babbling brook. Your approach here needs to be high, tight, and very accurate-there is no bail out on this hole. If you manage a good score on this hole the back nine will play much easier. But seven is a real possibility and you must be extremely careful not to try to pull off anything foolish if you are not in an optimum attack position. The green pitches back to front which make the target receptive. To some this is the signature hole at Merion-it has all the charm and treachery you could ask for in a short hole.

#### #12 Par 4 371/334 yards

You may grow tired of looking at the scorecard and seeing holes under 350 yards with bogies next to them-but this is the last of the string of shorter holes and is as hard as any of them. Dog ear right with a broad landing area but it behooves you to hit it hard and left to get an open angle at the uphill green. The approach is a short iron to a sharply angled green that moves away from you front to back. The bunkers in front would have been nice to have in London during the blitz but you do not want to experience them now. The pitch of this green is so severe that if you are deep and right you can easily play back into the bunker on your chip or putt. The sweeping breaks on your putt toward the traps will astound you. Defensive putting is the call for this hole. Do not go to sleep-it looks easy but it is very, very demanding.

#### #13 Par 3 127/121 yards

Jack Nicklaus calls this one of the best short three pars he has ever played. The hole is simple-level 120 yard pitch to an oreo of a green guarded by bunkers front and back. What makes it difficult is that you cannot see the putting surface from the tee so you must visualize your landing area. The green is receptive to the high pitch but getting close to the hole is another story-the green breaks away from you and it is difficult to get it to stop abruptly. A pitch from the bunkers does not appear to be that demanding so I would try to be aggressive

going for the flag. This hole will pop back into your memory late at night and you will wonder why so simple a hole could have confounded you.

#14 Par 4 408/387 yards

Well, just when you were convinced that this is nothing more than a cute little finesse course, the character changes 180 degrees, and from here in the holes are long, uphill, and downright difficult. The true measure of a championship course is how consistently it puts pressure on you throughout your round and how much momentum it can build toward the end when you are tiring and must muster that little extra to reach the end in good stead. Much like the Golden Horseshoe in Williamsburg this course leaves its best for last and your endurance will be tested on these last five holes. This one is deceptively long-an uphill drive into an awkward landing area. It dogears left so you are tempted to try to cut the corner, but if you fail to clear you are on the road and off the course. The right gives no hiatus either, deep rough, bunkers, and undulating lies. The green is still slightly higher going in, just enough to give you a little view of the bottom half of the flag. This green, a generous size, has big undulations and is well guarded by sand. This is a driving hole-you have to hit it long to take pressure off your approach shot. Like so many of the holes at Merion this is more than what it seems.

#15 Par 4 366/353 yards

Shorter than the last but another position driving hole. There is a temptation to cut this dogleg right by playing as far over the bunkers as you dare, but the best position is over the center of the left bunker so you can carry across to the left side of the fairway and have a clear look at the elevated green. The problem with this thought is the OB left if you hit any kind of a big hook off the tee. If you are right of center and in the fairway you will have a severe elevation shot over a gaping bunker front right. Since the green moves away from you and right, even from the left side the bunker seems to draw the flight of the ball into it's midst. You are not likely to get a level lie in this fairway, so you must fight whatever tendency your stance is indicating to keep it on its intended line. The green is severely pitched back to front and to the bunker so you must hit a shot between the wicker and the bunker to have a reasonable putt. Boy you have to be in total control not to lose your edge in these finishing holes.

#16 Par 4 428/407 yards

The quarry hole is the most difficult hole on the course without a doubt. Your drive is a simple downhill shot to an open landing area that will position your approach over a rock abyss into a green set on top of a hill. The shot over the quarry is very intimidating, not only in what you must carry with your middle iron but in the narrowness of the access pinched by tall trees on either side of the quarry. If you manage to hit a miraculous shot and put your approach on the green the shortest walking route is like Dante's sojourn, you must walk through the abyss to reach purgatory. Seems appropriate to me. The green is shelved and severely undulating, there is no easy putt on this green. I tell you I would not want to have to play these last three holes one over to win the Open-it could be a psychologically threatening experience that could lead to many couch hours with the team therapist.

#17 Par 3 220/208

Boy just what you were waiting for, a long iron par three-and I mean long iron like the butter knife-into a narrow wedge of a tiered table top green with nothing but sheer disaster lurking on all sides. This shot is as demanding of a par three shot I have ever seen and the fact that it is downhill makes it all that much harder figuring the correct club and swing to get you on the surface. You need to hit nothing less than a perfect shot and if you do not end up on the right tier a two-putt will be a challenge. I kid you not, five might be a good score here.

#18 Par 4 463/411 yards

Well it's almost over, but not quite. Another extremely demanding driving hole out of a chute of a tee box into a narrow driving area. There is little room to miss on the right though that is not apparent from the tee, but anything short of 95% will leave little chance of hitting the uphill green arrangement. As you walk to your second don't miss the plaque commemorating the spot from which Hogan struck his famous 1-iron from 211 paces to help close out his win at the Open. Good chance for a Kodak moment of you striking that pose. The second is likely to be played with a long club off a downhill lie-tough combination. The green sits on a crest of the hill so you must carry your shot all the way to the surface. Green seems to slope away from your approach so do not be surprised to find yourself through the green. One tough-ass finishing hole-can't wait for the Miller Lite.

The reflections of a round on this course are almost endless-the course has such facet and character that it seems to charm you while wedging your underwear. You cannot come away without some satisfaction in playing the round, because aside from the score it is sheer pleasure to walk these hallowed fairways and take in the ambiance of a special place. My compliments to the chef.