

Early History of  
Meadow Park Golf Course, Tacoma, WA  
Established 1915, Course Opened 11-14-1915  
Course Architect: 1915 – John Ball



Meadow Park Golf Course – 1950 Aerial



Meadow Park Golf Course - 2021 Aerial

It was a risky venture. In 1915, two men, employed as salesmen at a shoe store in Tacoma, Washington devised a plan to build a public course, a business model virtually unknown in an era when golf courses meant private country clubs. Second only to Jefferson Park Golf Course (est. May, 1915) in Seattle, Meadow Park Golf Course joined the ranks of earliest public courses in the Pacific Northwest.

Perhaps it was the success of Jefferson Park Golf Course which inspired the two men, William Fremont Jowders (1861 – 1921) and Clint Walker Beal (1874 – 1950) to take the chance. By September, 1915, they had secured a long term lease on a 160-acre prairie-land property at what was then called the “Manitou Park” district in the outskirts of Tacoma.

The venture seemed even riskier considering that there was a glut of golf clubs/courses in Tacoma at the time. Following the historic win by Francis Ouimet over the two British champions Harry Vardon and Ted Ray in the 1913 U.S. Open in Brookline, Massachusetts, new golf clubs/courses sprang up all across the nation. That was no less true in Tacoma where five new clubs/courses were established in short order. While the venerable Tacoma Country and Golf Club (est. 1894) had dominated the golf scene in Tacoma for twenty years, five new golf clubs/courses were added from 1913 to 1915. They included Lakewood Golf Club (est. 1913), Lochburn Golf Club (est. 1913), and Lakeside Country Club (est. 1914). In addition, Steilacoom Lake Golf Club (est. 1914) was nearby. Meadow Park Golf Course would soon join the ranks.

In September, 1915, Jowders and Beal hired course architect and builder John Ball to lay out the course. Astonishingly, two short months later, on November 14, 1915, the course opened for play.



**John Titus Ball (1848 - 1938)**

Originally a gardener/landscaper in England, John Ball emigrated to America in 1884, first settling in Minneapolis, MN, then moving to Seattle around 1900. He is credited with constructing the St. Paul Town and Country Club in Minnesota.

Once in Seattle, Ball laid out and built the original Seattle Golf Club course at Laurelhurst in 1901. He returned in 1907-08 to construct the Seattle Golf Club course at the present location though the design of the course is attributed to Robert Johnstone, Seattle's golf professional.

Ball designed the courses at Grays Harbor Golf Club and the Bellingham Golf and Country Club, both in 1912. Ball would go on to design and build numerous other courses in the Northwest until his death in 1938.



Meadow Park's original clubhouse – 1922 (Tacoma Sunday Ledger 2-12-1922)



Ad announcing opening day - 1915

Given that it took only two months to construct and prepare Meadow Park for play, the course was no doubt rudimentary and rough. Described as "prairie land," the interior of the course had virtually no trees, resembling a Scottish links, a far cry from the tree lined fairways we see today. A contingent of Jefferson Park players visited the golf course in 1918 for an interclub match and described it thus:

Seattle [Jefferson Park players] took very kindly to the Meadow Park course, despite the strangeness of its play. The owner of the links has done very, very well with his links. The greens are rather small, and there is no fairway turf, but the Seattleites really favored the loamy fairway compared with the gravelly going of the Tacoma Country and Golf Club. It was all carry, mostly, with no run to the ball, but the lies were almost invariably good. And after a few iron shots off the loamy field the visitors took to it like a duck to water. (*Seattle Times* 7-14-1918)

Over the course of a hundred years, golf courses typically go through numerous transformations. Holes are rerouted or removed entirely, new holes are added, holes are lengthened or shortened, bunkers are added and trees are planted or removed. Unfortunately, the original layout of the course has yet to be discovered and as a consequence it is unclear to what degree Meadow Park has changed over the years.

However, in comparing the holes and yardages from 1921 to the present time, it is evident that the changes are considerable.

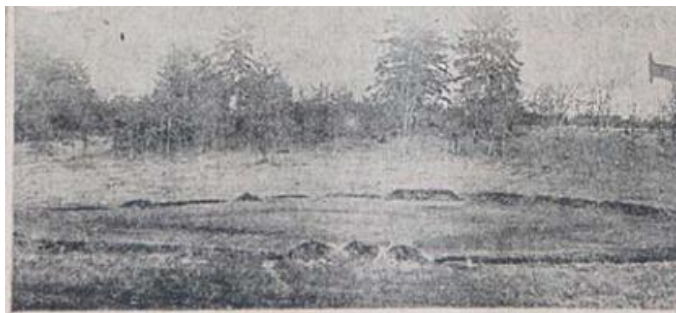
	1921	
Hole	Par	Yards
1	4	425
2	4	310
3	4	435
4	4	255
5	4	355
6	3	175
7	4	365
8	4	235
9	5	520
Front	36	3075
10	4	415
11	4	280
12	5	460
13	4	250
14	4	275
15	4	350
16	4	345
17	3	130
18	5	505
Back	37	3010
Total	73	6085

	2021	
Hole	Par	Yards
1	4	402
2	4	300
3	4	429
4	3	179
5	4	260
6	4	332
7	5	559
8	3	162
9	4	402
Front	35	3025
10	5	540
11	4	415
12	4	348
13	3	161
14	4	355
15	4	277
16	5	471
17	3	157
18	4	387
Back	36	3111
Total	71	6136

One clue as to the layout of the course is provided in an article which appeared in the Feb. 1921 edition of the *Northwest Golf and Motor Life* magazine:

“On the first nine, a player possessed of a pull is not penalized, but woe betide the duffer who plays with a pronounced slice, for his portion will be one ‘out of bounds’ after another. The second, or inner nine, is harder than the first nine and much nicety of play must be shown on Nos. 11, 13 and 17.”





17th green, tee box is top of hill on right.

“The latter hole [17<sup>th</sup>] is undoubtedly the hardest hole on the course and is a beautifully designed hole for a player in the championship class.

“It is 130 yards in length, with the tee placed high above the green which is surrounded with bunkers and hidden from view by a clump of trees.”

This feature hole was essentially an island green surrounded by a circular bunker. This hole no longer exists as it likely was located on the southern edge of the course where the driving range now sits.

Another noteworthy hole is the short par-3 thirteenth. This hole was added in 1927 and featured in the local newspaper:

“Besides finding that the new holes to be thrown into play at Meadow Park today present golfing problems hitherto unknown, regulars at the local public links will undoubtedly admire the wonderful settings utilized for some of the holes. [Below] is shown the short 13<sup>th</sup>, one of the finest one-shotters in the Northwest, calling as it does for a mashie shot across a deep ravine to a green set among giant firs.”  
(*Tacoma News Tribune* 4-24-1927)



13<sup>th</sup> Hole added in 1927 – oversized pin for photographic purposes (courtesy of Tacoma Public Library)

Much of the original front nine skirted the perimeter of the golf course property while most of the back nine was located in the inner portion of the course. The original first hole, for example, was located on what is now the ninth hole in reverse direction. It ran adjacent to Lakewood Drive West as shown in the photo below. The reversal of first and ninth holes was done in 1993 when golf architect John Steidel made significant renovations to the course.



Meadow Park Golf Course c.1961 (courtesy of Tacoma Public Library)



Teeing off on the first hole adjacent to Lakewood Dr. W. prior to course renovation in 1993 (courtesy of Tacoma Public Library)



In November, 1915 Meadow Park hired twenty-two year old James W. Runchey as its first golf professional. Runchey was one of few golf professionals in the Pacific Northwest who was born in the U.S. at a time when most were either Scottish or English born.



James Runchey (1893-1953)

James Wesley Runchey was born in Red Cloud, Nebraska on May 18, 1893. After his father's death, his family moved to Seattle where Runchey found work as a caddy at Seattle Golf Club.

Under the tutelage of Seattle golf professional Robert Johnstone, Runchey became a caddie master, a clubmaker, and an accomplished golfer. He was hired as golf professional at Lochburn Golf Club in Tacoma before moving on to Meadow Park.

He would only stay for a year at Meadow Park before being named the golf professional at the University (of Washington) Golf Club course in Seattle. He subsequently moved to California and worked at various courses. He died in San Francisco in 1953.

In 1916, Runchey was succeeded by Raymond W. Ball, son of golf architect John Ball, as Meadow Park's golf professional. Like Runchey, Ray Ball was also a one-time caddy at Seattle Golf Club under Robert Johnstone.

Ray Ball was followed by Syrril Shreyer in 1917 and then by Victor Jowders, son of W. F. Jowders, in 1918. Ball would return to Meadow Park in 1941 to serve as its golf professional.



Raymond W. Ball.



J. W. Runchey, R. W. Ball, V. R. Jowders hickory clubs



Ray Ball teaching new students in Tacoma, 1941 (courtesy of Tacoma Public Library #D11746-2)

Top players in the early years of Meadow Park were Ross V. Palmer who won the Tacoma City Amateur in 1916 in a field of 250 players, William W. Cooper who won the same in 1917, and William "Bill" Noonan who won the title the next three years. Noonan held the course record of 73 during these years while the professional course record of 69 was held by Bert Wilde (grandson of John Ball) and Neil Christian. Mrs. Howard Wright was the best woman player and held the course record of 83.



Gladys Flaskett – 1916 (photo courtesy of Meadow Park Golf Course)



Walt McDonald – 1916 (photo courtesy of Meadow Park Golf Course)

A popular form of competition during this time was the interclub matches, commonly known as home-and-away. Typically, two clubs would match up their opponents based on their skill level and play straight up in singles matches. One point was awarded for winning the front nine, one point for the back nine, and one point for the total. No points were awarded for ties.

On June 16, 1917, the two public courses, Meadow Park and Jefferson Park, met for the first time with the match ending in a tie 22-22.

Meadow Park.		Jefferson Park.	
Wright	0	Griswold	3
Wildt	2	Stein	1
Cooper	0	Stiles	0
Cavanaugh	2	McMicken	1
Palmer	0	Henderson	2
Dexter	3	Vandever	0
Kitchen	0	Norman	2
Peer	0	Scott	3
Magee	1	Taft	2
Granrud	2	Hatton	1
Perkins	3	Jackson	0
O'Neil	2	Muir	0
McKeehan	2	West	0
Janes	0	Young	3
Long	0	Crooks	2
Lynch	3	Harlow	0
Matthews	2	Spencer	1
Backus	0	Allen	0
Total	22	Total	22

The return match was a different story, however, with Jefferson Park winning by a lopsided score of 43-16. The following year, the Meadow Park team, unbowed, issued this challenge: "On our own links, and with quite a bunch of our boys going steadily in the lower 80's, we believe we're strong enough to beat you fellows." To which, Capt. Harry E. Griffith of the Jefferson Park team gave this chesty reply: "With quite a few of our boys shooting in the lower 70's, we don't care much what links we meet you on, we're going to give you a beating." True to this word, Griffith's team beat Meadow Park 41-16, and followed it up with an even worse trouncing a month later with a score of 46-5. The friendly rivalry between the two public courses would continue for many years.

The "friendlies" extended to the women players as well. Women members from both clubs met at Meadow Park on June 14, 1921 where the Jefferson Park team won 17-11.

From the outset, Meadow Park Golf Course proved to be a successful business venture. The course was well located, accessible by street car. It was the only course in Tacoma that was within the 5-cent street car limit from downtown. It also had the advantage of being an 18-hole course rather than the 9-hole courses which were common at the time. As a result, the course was attracting not only public players but players from Lakeside, Lochburn, and Lakewood clubs began to play more of their golf at Meadow Park rather than their home courses. Facing a dwindling membership, the three clubs, by 1918, had closed their doors leaving Meadow Park and Tacoma C&GC as the only two courses in Tacoma.

By 1921, the course was being run by W. F. Jowders and his son Victor. "Business is good," said the elder Jowders, with 60,000 rounds being played over the previous two years. Sadly, six short years after the founding of Meadow Park Golf Course, W. F. Jowders died of cancer at the age of sixty. His son Victor "Vic" Jowders at the young age of twenty-four, took over the management of the golf course after his father's death.





Victor "Vic" Jowders (1897 – 1975)

Victor Ryder Jowders was born in New Hampshire in 1897. Only eighteen years old when his father opened Meadow Park Golf Course in 1915, the younger Jowders was involved in all aspects the golf business. He became an accomplished golfer and served as the golf professional and greens keeper in the early years at Meadow Park.

Following his father's death in 1921, he became sole owner and operator of Meadow Park and guided the golf course through the turbulent years during the Great Depression and World War II. He died in Tacoma in 1975.



Aerial of Meadow Park Golf Course, Tacoma c.1961 (courtesy of Tacoma Public Library #D129800-68)

In 1961, Meadow Park Golf Course was sold to the City of Tacoma for \$250,000. Since then, this popular course has been managed by the Metropolitan Park Board of Tacoma.

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