

# The first island green?

TPC at Sawgrass?  
Think about  
50 years earlier to  
Ponte Vedra Beach.

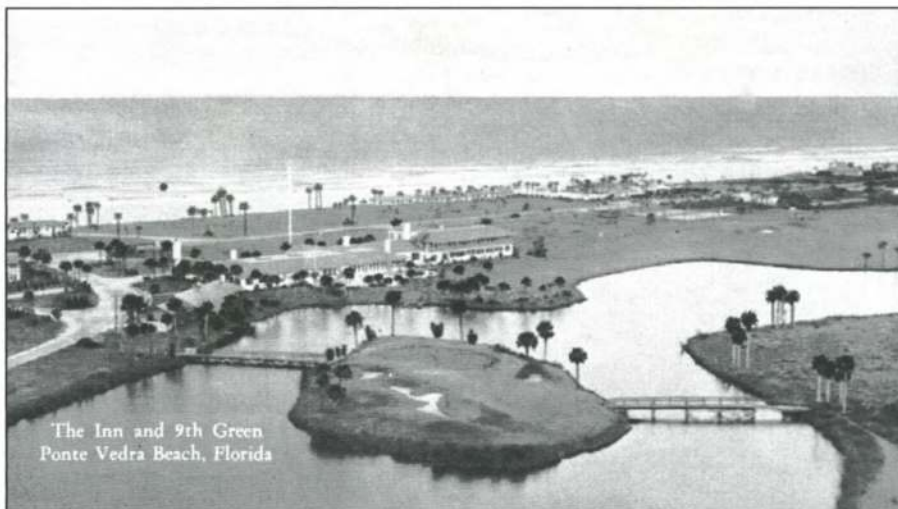
By John Fischer III

Think island green and your mind immediately races to the 17th hole at TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach with a tightly cropped green in the midst of a lake. It has captured the minds of television viewers who watch The Players Championship and wait to see who would hit or miss the target 132 yards from the tee. A miss results in a splash, a penalty and national embarrassment on television, and surprisingly, for such a short hole, there have been a lot of splashes by big name players.

But this island green, designed by Pete Dye and his wife Alice, despite all its notoriety, is not the first island green. In fact, it's not even the first island green in Ponte Vedra Beach. That honor goes to the 9th hole at Ponte Vedra Beach Inn and Club, approximately three miles down the road, which opened in 1932, 50 years before the island green at Sawgrass.

Ponte Vedra Beach was originally a site for mining titanium, but as the mining industry declined, it became more desirable as a vacation destination. Herbert Bertram Strong was retained to design and supervise construction of a new golf course along the ocean in 1931.

Strong was a native of England and had been a professional at Royal St. George's Golf Club in Sandwich, a difficult course known for its menacing bunkers. In 1905, Strong came to America to take a job as professional at the Apawamis Club in Rye, New York. Strong was a fine player known for distance off the tee, but



The Inn and 9th Green  
Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida

**9th at Ponte Vedra Beach**  
was open for play 1932, the year the resort and the Ocean Course opened. At top is a post card from the mid-1930s.

The bottom photo, from more recent times, shows a relocation of the bridge, a few tweaks to the green, and the addition of several new buildings to the resort.



also a strong all around player with more than a dozen holes in one. He played in many tournaments, including multiple appearances in the U.S. Open (finishing 9th in 1913) and was one of the founders of the Professional Golfers Association in 1916 serving as its first treasurer.

Strong moved from Apawamis to the Inwood Country Club where his golf course design career began with a remodeling of the course. This was followed by a commission to design Engineers Golf Club. Each of these courses hosted a major championship twice within a few years of opening, Engineers, the 1918 PGA Championship and the 1920 US Amateur, and Inwood, the 1921 PGA and the 1923 U.S. Open.

In 1920 Strong designed Canterbury Golf Club near Cleveland which has been the site of several major tournaments including two U.S. Opens, two U.S. Amateur Championships and the PGA.

Strong was frequently referred to as the "British golf course architect," which had a certain patina in early American golf granting automatic expertise because

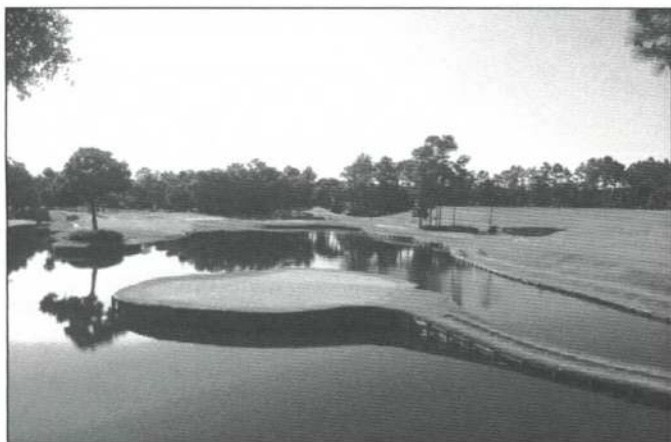
of the transplanted game, but there is no evidence of any design work by Strong before he came to the United States. Strong's brother Leonard also emigrated to America and was a well regarded course superintendent. Strong frequently consulted with him on design but Leonard is not credited with any course design.

By the time Strong was selected as the architect for the Ocean Course at Ponte Vedra Beach he had a wealth of design experience and had produced major championship venues. He also had a reputation for a variety of bunkers and wildly contoured greens, maybe as a result of his tenure at Royal St. George's. Some called his designs "quirky," "a bag of tricks," or just too difficult to play. Similar allegations have been made about Pete Dye's designs and pointedly applied to his island green at Sawgrass.

The property given to Strong for his layout at Ponte Vedra Beach was relatively flat. Strong wanted to have more rolling fairways with uneven terrain reflecting links courses from his native British Isles.

To do so would require moving a lot of





**The famous island green 17th at TPC Sawgrass, which held its inaugural Players tournament in 1982.**

dirt and to accomplish that Strong used 100 mules dragging slip pans to shape the contours, dredge lagoons and build mounds. Construction cost was not insignificant, \$500,000 including a \$50,000 irrigation system.

As Strong dug up earth, the high water table at the site resulted in a large meandering lagoon. Strong decided to make use of the large mound created by the dredging, shaping it into a green for the ninth hole.

It is not known what inspired Strong to surround that green with water, thus creating his island green. His was not the first. Merion architect Hugh Wilson designed an island green in 1917 for Cobbs Creek, the first municipal course in the Philadelphia area. Wilson's island green was created by encircling the green with a creek. Due to flooding problems, the green at Cobbs Creek was redesigned not long after its creation.

In 1920, Strong formed a golf course design partnership with George Low, Sr., who was the professional at Baltusrol Golf Club. It has been suggested that one of the earlier designs at Baltusrol, prior to the creation of the Upper and Lower Courses by A.W. Tillinghast, contained an island green. Perhaps Low passed the island green concept to Strong, although their partnership never produced a course and did not last long.

In any event, Strong's island green has stood the test of time. While the Ocean Course was redesigned by Robert Trent Jones and again by Bobby Weed, the 9th hole remains substantially the same as it did when it opened in 1932. The hole is 140 yards with a green surrounded by seven bunkers. The green has some of Strong's contours with three tiers, not an easy par especially if the flagstick is on the uppermost back tier.

There are several similarities between Strong's island 9th and Dye's island 17th. Both were the result of construction considerations, Strong's because he was creating a lagoon to get fill dirt, and Dye's because he was filling in a swamp and running out of dirt. The holes are about the same length and play at both is affected by wind.

Dye's island green is just that, all green with no bailout. Hit or miss. Strong's design has a bailout area at the left front of the green, but a bailout still requires a delicate pitch or pitch and run to save par.

Dye's 17th is the penultimate of the round, making or breaking many a tournament or match. Strong's 9th is perfectly positioned

for a nassau match, or as a finishing hole.

Strong connected his island green with a bridge from the tee to the green and a second bridge from the green to the 10th tee. Dye has a single walkway behind the green for access. A few technical types suggest that Dye's 17th is attached to the mainland by an earthen isthmus and is not truly an island, but that's a bit over the top.

Strong's island green is an undulating mound that slopes down to the water on all sides, while Dye's is elevated and supported by railroad sleepers, one of Dye's early trademarks.

Both Strong and Dye preferred on-site supervision of construction and a hands-on approach to implementation of their designs, so each island green reflects the architect's vision.

There is an understandable assumption in the Ponte Vedra area that Dye got the idea for his island green from Strong's example, but that is strongly denied by Alice Dye. She recounts that she suggested an island green to her husband instead of trying to fill the entire swamp.

Strong's Ocean Course was well received. The September 1938 *Golf* magazine ranked it as one of the six hardest courses in the country along with National Golf Links, Garden City, Pine Valley, Oakmont, and Pebble Beach, reflecting a brave group of editors who left a host of challenging venues from the list, but such was Strong's reputation and the course's character.



**Herbert Strong**

The magazine was not the only golf authority impressed by Ponte Vedra Beach Ocean Course as a challenging setting. It was selected by the PGA as the site for the 1939 Ryder Cup, but the match was cancelled because of World War II. In 1947 the Ryder Cup resumed, not at the Ponte Vedra Beach Ocean Course, but at Portland GC in Oregon.

With all the respected courses to his credit, Herbert Strong has largely disappeared from view. He was in the company of such giants of golf course architecture as Tillinghast, Mackenzie, and Ross, but didn't have the staying power. Like many golf course architects, Strong had a rough time during the depression and lost a good deal of money. He died in 1944 before the recovery of the golf industry.

Many of his courses were redesigned, removing some of his trademark contours and making play easier. Still, he deserves recognition as one of the early innovators of golf course design, and whether he started the island green concept, they became quite popular in the 1980s and 90s. It seemed as though every designer had to include an island green, most on par-3's, but Strong's 9th at the Ponte Vedra Ocean Course stands as the oldest extant island green.

And as an aside, Strong's brother, Leonard, credits him with inventing the golf pull cart for which he never sought a patent. Strong scored the double eagle of designing courses on which major championships were played, establishing the island green, and inventing the pull cart.

Not a bad golf legacy.

