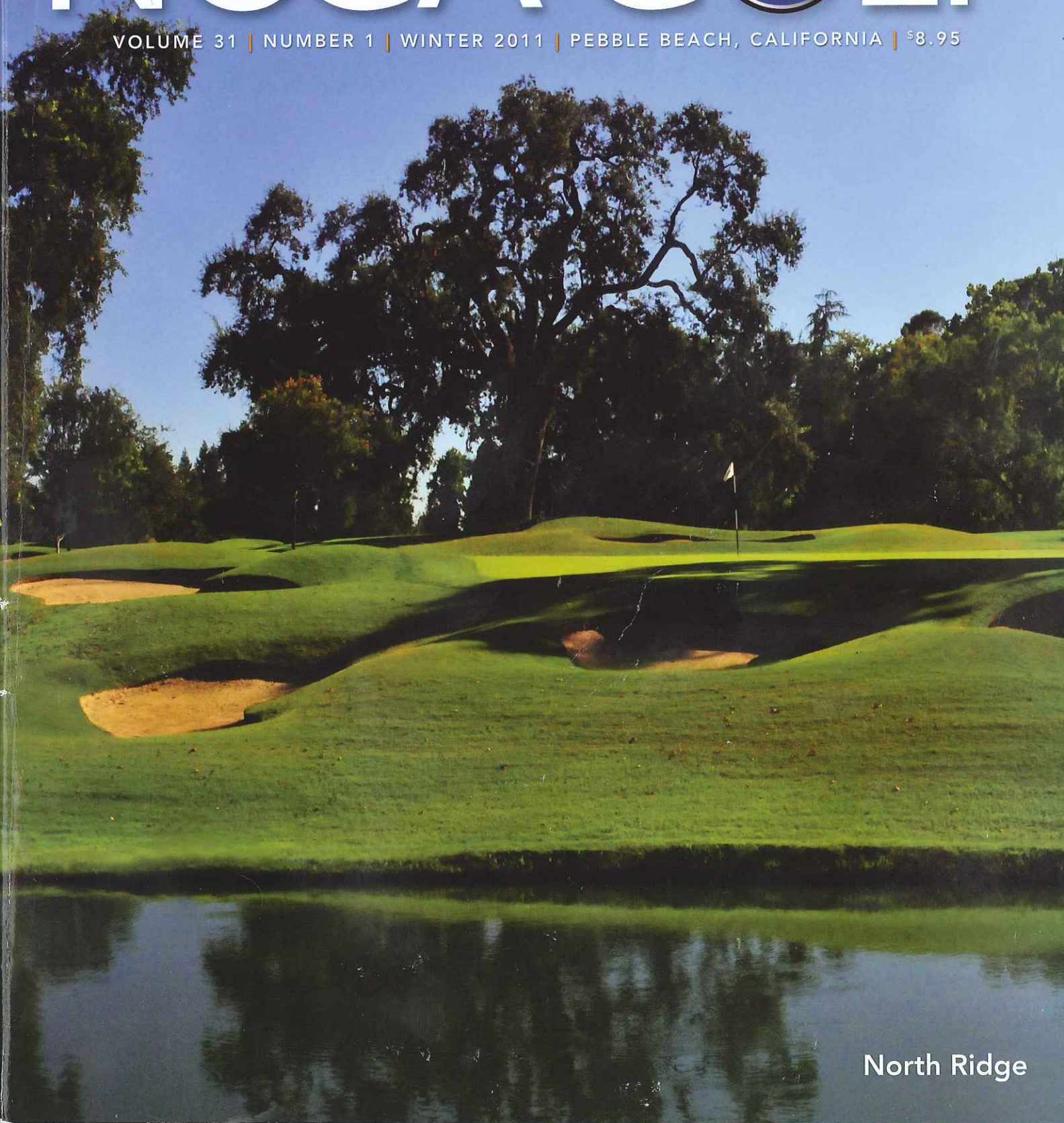


GOLF COURSE DIRECTORY ISSUE

NCGA GOLF



VOLUME 31 | NUMBER 1 | WINTER 2011 | PEBBLE BEACH, CALIFORNIA | \$8.95



North Ridge

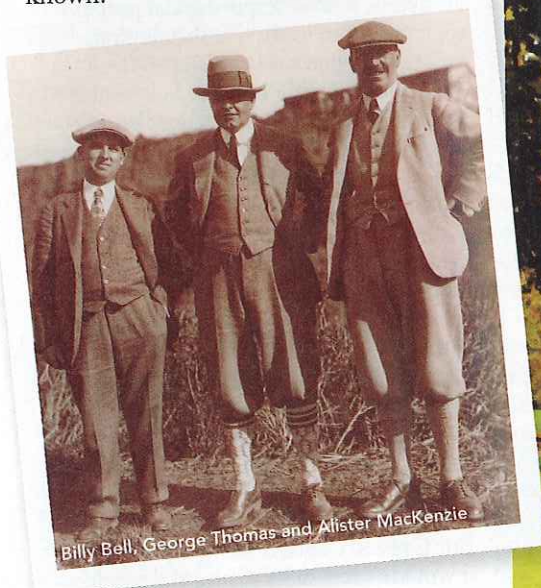
SPLENDOR in SACRAMENTO

NORTH RIDGE COUNTRY CLUB HAS STOOD
THE TEST OF TIME | BY RON SALSIG

*Sacramento has a secret,
something it has kept
from golfers outside the
city. Now is the time
to let that secret out,
to unfold its mysteries
to the general public.*

There is a golf course hidden in the vast suburban wilderness east of our state capital, a course that may be the epitome of classic parkland design. This course has a history and a legacy that has been lost to the outside world through time, which needs to be revealed.

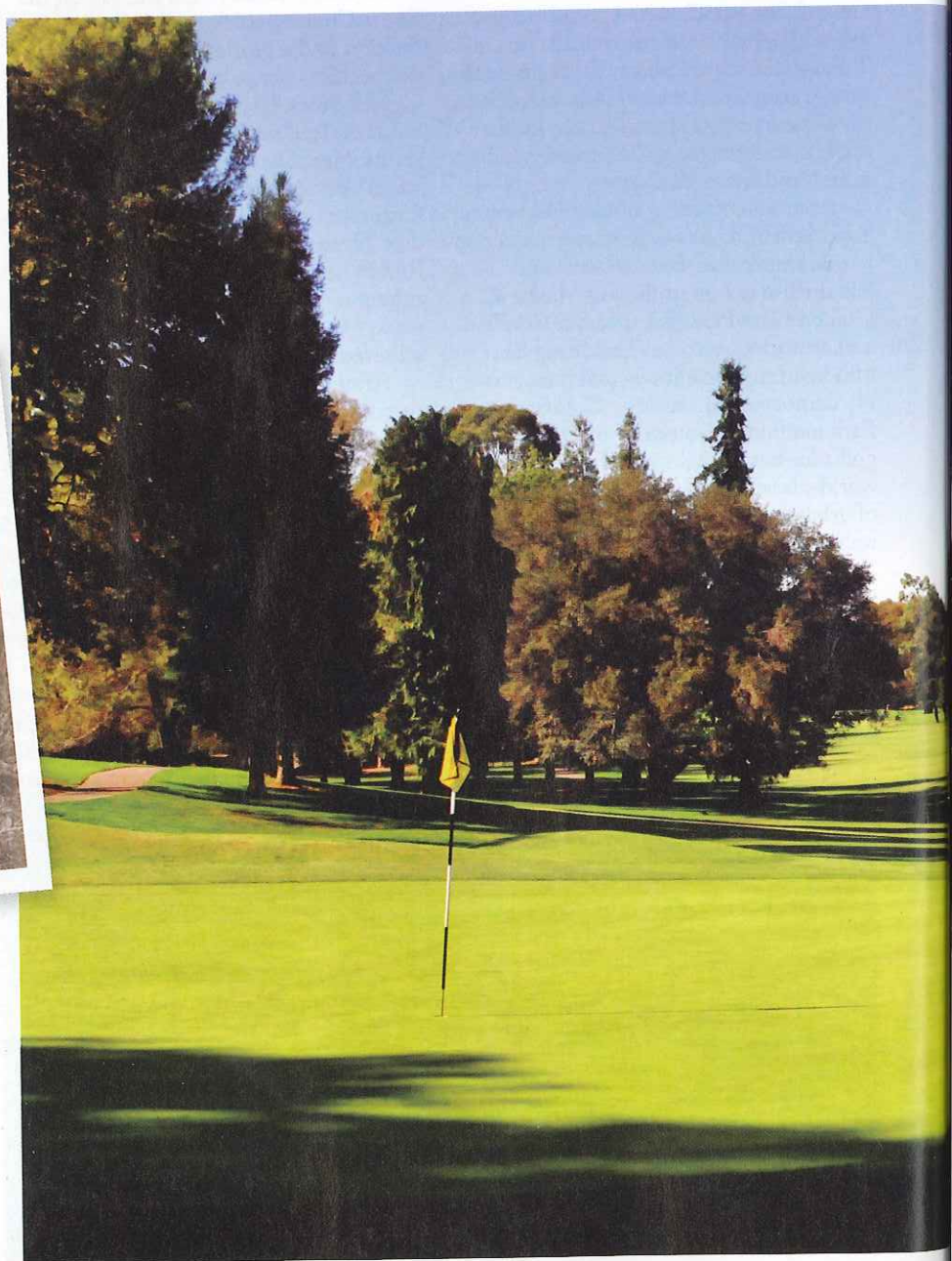
North Ridge Country Club was the toast of Northern California when it opened in 1955. Today it is lesser known.



Billy Bell, George Thomas and Alister MacKenzie

An old-timer who chose to remain anonymous for this story was sitting outside the snack bar by the practice facility between the ninth and tenth fairways, sipping a cup of coffee when I caught up with him. I just sensed he might know the story.

"It was hardly intentional," he said. "This course was widely heralded at its birth in the 1950s. At the time this was old farmland, well removed from the



metropolitan area. As time wandered on, this suburban jungle gobbled it up. Then all those new courses started popping up in the area and they started creating noise; we may have become somewhat pushed aside in that blitz, relegated to the background. If we became a secret, so be it. We'll guard that secret."

Indeed, North Ridge Country Club is busy. There are plenty of tournaments, and membership is near capacity. Somehow this place remained from the

economic downturn that has affected most golf courses in recent years.

"When Billy first came to this land, I saw a sparkle in his eye," the old-timer said. "It was like he finally saw the property where he could build his masterpiece. He came alive, like he saw something we couldn't."

That would be Billy Bell, one of the most famous golf course architects in California, if not the most prolific. Bell had collaborated with Ben Hogan to build Tamarisk in Palm Springs.

He built Stanford Golf Course with George Thomas and Alister MacKenzie. With Thomas he built Riviera CC, Bel-Air CC and Los Angeles CC. He was construction superintendent for Willie Watson on many projects. On his own he designed and built Del Rio in Modesto, Castlewood in Pleasanton, Tilden Park in Berkeley and Torrey Pines, to name a few.

Bell was given no restrictions for his design of North Ridge. The golf course came first. The founders were not interested in real estate development. Bell reciprocated by waving his fees many times to get the project going. He came to the property frequently, which was no small feat. Billy did not drive. He took the Greyhound bus up from his Pasadena office. Clearly, this course was important to him.

But the founders of North Ridge were shocked to hear that Billy Bell Sr. had passed away before construction began in 1953. Fortunately, his son had been in on the project from the start. Billy Bell Jr. had all he needed to complete his father's vision. But North Ridge was not the only project left hanging when Bell died. He also had Torrey Pines on his plate. The son came to North Ridge first, to complete this course before he began work on Torrey Pines.

North Ridge does not spring immediately to mind today when masterpieces are discussed in Northern California. But the golf course is clearly a masterpiece.

The simplicity of genuine art is easily obscured through the noise

of traffic in our complicated world, just as the gate to North Ridge is obscured through the intense traffic of its Madison Avenue address today. But the hustle and bustle that has swallowed up that entrance does not diminish the feeling of turning into a retreat, once that gate is found.

"I never get tired of playing this course," said member Ross Farmer.

No greater compliment could be given to a golf course, and most of the members echoed the sentiment, from seasoned champions to Sunday duffers. Kevin Sutherland calls North Ridge home. The PGA Tour champion said this course keeps his iron game sharp, but more than that the course is just comfortable, like that old glove you simply can't throw away.

The routing and design remains true to Bell's 1952 drawings today, with very minor changes. Every hole at North Ridge has distinct character. The golfer will quickly recognize how well the greens are framed, especially the par 3s.

The 15th might be a signature hole, but like Jack Nicklaus once said, there are no signature holes on a truly great golf course—all the holes are signatures. This 523-yard par 5 starts with a very wide fairway through a valley that bottlenecks as the forest of trees closes in from the right, starting about 150 yards from the green. That green is straight uphill from the bottleneck. The closer a golfer gets to the green, the less he can see, until the green cannot be seen at all. And it is a very small green with many bunkers.

The common theme through the 2,100 trees on this golf course is how every hole is an individual experience. Many of the greens are elevated slightly from the fairway, which creates an artistic framing for the shot, but requires a pinpoint iron game. No detail is without purpose, no matter how aesthetic it may seem.

If North Ridge is a secret to the outside world, Sacramento golfers will guard their secret. But that secret is out now: Billy Bell's masterpiece resides at North Ridge. ◀

Ron Salsig has won three national awards from the GWAA.



As tradition dictates the cover story depicts the home course of the NCGA president. This year that's Kerry Gordon's North Ridge CC, a private club in Sacramento.