

PLAYING THE GAME



Marching to Val Halla

For years, the e-mails sent to Val Halla members have ended with the missive: “Good things are happening at Val Halla.” Never has this been truer than it is today. This town-owned muni in Cumberland, Maine, is undergoing a renaissance under the watchful eye of Brian Bickford, the club's director of golf since 2006. First came its recognition as one of the “best values” in Maine by the New England Golf Guide. Then it was awarded “family friendly” status by U.S. Kids Golf. And now the Maine State Golf Association is moving into its new headquarters at Val Halla, making the club Ground Zero for Maine golf.

Val Halla has always been an enjoyable and challenging course. Its combination of memorable par 4s like the dogleg-right, downhill seventh hole, reachable par 5s (Nos. 9, 13 and 14) and what is perhaps the toughest finishing hole in the state, have made Val Halla a favorite with local members and visitors. Now Bickford and his crew are taking the course to the next level.

“We're very fortunate that the town of Cumberland has recognized the value of maintaining the course at a high level and has budgeted funds to make that happen,” says Bickford. “The course is a huge asset, and with the town's help, we're working hard to improve it in every way we can.”



Val Halla will hold an
open house on
Saturday, April 11
from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.
207.829.2225,
www.valhallagolf.com



The renaissance started in earnest three years ago when several fairways were re-graded and reseeded and several new tees were built. Two years ago, new sand was brought into all the bunkers on the course. Gone was the pebbly, granular stuff that used to give members fits and in its place came real sand that can also give members fits, especially if a ball plugs as it now can do. In late 2007, the 10th fairway was re-graded and reseeded so that it now drains better and stays drier.

Then last fall, the club began installation of new Rain Bird Decoder double-row irrigation system. The old water system, so full of breaks and holes that it was useless to even send water down the lines, will give way this year to computer-controlled irrigation that can put water right where it's needed.

"It's going to make a huge difference," said Bickford. "Superintendent Toby Young's right-hand man used to be his shovel...now it will be a mower. We're going to be able to maintain healthier turf throughout the course and bring back some areas of rough that will make the course both more challenging and more appealing visually. Everybody here is really excited."

And now, the MSGA is moving its headquarters to Val Halla. In conjunction with the Maine Golf Foundation, the MSGA worked with the town of Cumberland for the better part of a year in planning the future of Maine Golf House. The foundation represents the MSGA, SMWGA, WMSGGA, Maine Golf Hall of Fame, Maine Chapter of the NEPGA, the Maine Golf Course Superintendents Association and Golf Maine; plans call for all of these groups to be safely ensconced in Golf House by 2011.

Val Halla has always had an active membership. In fact, the club boasted more members than any other MSGA club in 2008. There are men and women's association tournaments almost every weekend. And the junior program has exploded over the past several summers, with more than 250 boys and girls coming to the club to learn the fundamentals of the game. Val Halla even has enough girls to field an all-girls golf team – something no other course has ever been able to claim.

Starting in 2009, the club is also offering Maine's first-ever "Risk-Free Membership." Here's how it works: you sign up for your membership, and if for any reason you don't play 20 rounds during the course of the season, a credit will be awarded

allowing you to make up the difference the following year. This applies to all membership categories, and along with Val Halla's low membership rates, it makes the course a great value for new as well as avid golfers.

With all these club improvements, and the arrival of the MSGA and the opening of Golf House, it's clear that good things are going to continue to happen at Val Halla for many years to come.

"It all bodes well for our future," Bickford said. "Returning members are going to continue to see a lot of positive changes here, while new members and visitors to the course are going to be getting a better value than ever. We're really psyched for the season to start. In this economy, this could be the Year of the Muni's." ■

AMELIA ISLAND

