

New York State of Mind

By: Nathan Crace Date: June 22, 2004

Years and years before I was born, my parents took a trip to New York City. They left the small Indiana town I grew up in just over the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky and headed off for a sightseeing trip to the Big Apple. Strangely enough, the only person they knew in New York at the time was a friend from high school who had made it to the Yankees as a pro baseball player. And as luck would have it, they ran into him by chance on the steps of the Empire State Building! Their final verdict? Nice place to visit, but they wouldn't want to live there. You make your own call.

Chances are, you may know someone (or know someone who knows someone) who lives in New York City because the 2000 Census indicates that there are more than 8 million people living there. Pull back to the entire New York metropolitan area and there are more than 20 million people. And it may be the world's biggest "melting pot" of people and cultures. In fact, recent studies show that there are more Jewish people in New York City than there are in Jerusalem, Israel!

Okay, so it's a big place. We all know that. But recently, it seems as though the United States Golf Association has been going out of its way to schedule major events in or near the New York Metro area. In fact, I wonder if Billy Joel might not have a seat on the championship committee at the USGA given the two U.S. Opens in the Hamptons in the past three years (Bethpage in 2002 and Shinnecock in 2004)! Tiger has spent more time on Long Island in the past three years than half the residents of Suffolk County. And in 2006, they'll be heading up the Hudson River just a bit to historic Winged Foot in Mamaroneck, New York. I can understand the USGA's desire to cut down on the mileage reimbursements for its employees by keeping things close to its Far Hills, New Jersey home, but how much is too much? Three Opens in six years? One every other year? At this rate, they will have had eight more Opens near the Big Apple before the next crop of Cicadas. And it's not just the Open.

The U.S. Amateur is at Winged Foot this year where the Open will be in two years! Sure it's a great course, but give me a break! There are no other courses in the nation that can host one or the other just once to give the members at Winged Foot a break? And then the U.S. Open is back at Bethpage in 2009 (five years will go by quicker than you think).

In fact, large portions of the big events in the coming years are in the Northeast. And beyond that, only 13 of the USGA's scheduled 76 championships in the next four years are considerably west of the Mississippi River. That's only 17%.

By contrast, you have the PGA of America. Sure the 2005 PGA Championship is at Baltustrol (just a Hank Kuehne drive from Staten Island), but on the whole they seem to be more willing to spread themselves around the country from Kohler, Wisconsin to Tulsa, Oklahoma to Redmond, Washington over the next seven years with the Wannamaker trophy. So what does all of this really mean? Are there some behind the scenes maneuverings that favor clubs east of the Mississippi over those west of it?

Probably not. Although there have been a seemingly high number of championships around the Greater New York metro area in the span of a few years, there are a number of legitimate arguments to be made for doing so. One of the most plausible is the history of the courses in that part of the country. As a young United States grew westward, so to did its recreational activities. So it stands to reason that the more historic clubs that the USGA favors for its championships (especially the Open) are closer to the original thirteen colonies and even more heavily loaded in the northeast.

Then you have the time zone factor. More tournaments on the west coast mean later finish times on the east coast and problems with television networks and ratings. I know it's hard to believe, but money plays an important factor here. If you have to start later and finish later, ratings suffer for it.

So the USGA could say that there are good reasons for hosting more Opens and other USGA championships in the eastern half of the country by a five to one margin, but that still doesn't explain the heavy favoritism for the Empire State and the Greater New York City metro in particular. Notwithstanding the fact that New York City is the largest city in the United States and second on the entire continent to only Mexico City, not everyone in New York plays golf. There are more retired golfers in Florida than any other state in the union, but when was the last time the Open was in the Sunshine State? Answer: Never. No good historic courses there? How about Seminole? And that's just one of the 1.2 gazillion courses in Florida.

When it's all said and done, I suppose there's something to be said for the constant that is Augusta in April. But give me an Open at Colorado's Cherry Hills and I'll get my dose of the Big Apple from the Piano Man's greatest hits.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2004.