

California Golf Club San Francisco, California

Architect: Willie Locke, A. Vernon Macon, Alister MacKenzie (1927) Kyle Phillips Restoration (2007)

	Par	Rating	Slope	Yardage
Venturi	72	74.6	139	7215
Back	72	72.7	135	6794
Middle	72	70.5	130	6293
Forward	72	66.5	122	5401

Overview:

The Golden Age of Golf Architecture left its imprint in San Francisco in the 1920's and one of its finest entrants was the California Golf Club. The Cal Club is located at the southern end of the city in the hilly topography at the foot of San Bruno Mountain State Park. From the many high vistas throughout the property you can see the splendor of the city set against the mountain backdrop. As we see on many of these layouts in California the early architects used the movement of the ground coupled with clever routing and imaginative green complexes to present challenging and entertaining golf with virtually no water hazards or forced carries.

The original design was actually the compilation of the work of three distinct architects over a three-year period. Scot Willie Locke, who later designed Lake Merced, was the first to the plate in 1924 and is responsible for the design of the overall routing. Before the construction began they replaced him with an Irishman, A. Vernon Macon, who built the tees, green complexes, and original bunkering.

Macon designed the green complexes with bold contours that caught the attention of the golfing community when it opened in 1926. The fairway bunkering was left for later on purpose, so the architect could analyze from actual play the best positioning based on the divot patterns left by players.

In 1927 the task for creating the fairway bunkering was given out to a third architect, a young Alister MacKenzie, who had recently finished the 9 hole track at the Meadow Club north of San Francisco. MacKenzie redid the 10th and 18th green, all the greenside bunkers, as well as adding the fairway bunkers. His flair for the dramatic took this track to a whole new level in the minds of the golfing public.

By 1960 the course was in dire need of a attention due to the state's rerouting of a road adjacent to the property. The club hired the biggest gun of the times, Robert Trent Jones Sr. to do the update. As was his habit when approaching renovation of U.S. Open Course of the era, Jones could not resist putting his entire footprint on the course. He re-routed holes, changed things dramatically and pretty much redefined the character of the Cal Club.

In 2005 the course was suffering from major maintenance issues due to turf disease and inappropriate grasses so they solicited proposals for a complete shutdown and renovation of the course. Kyle Phillips submitted a bold proposal to undo the previous rerouting by relocating the practice area and creating new holes on the front nine and was chosen to do the job. The results supported that choice.

One of the base principles of Phillip's renovation was to add about 6 inches of sand across the entire layout-this improved the drainage and facilitated the introduction of fescue to replace the rye and poa anna in the fairways and eradicate the poa from the greens. Kyle undid the mess Trent Jones had done to the front nine by introducing three new holes and, at the same time, went back to aerial images of the course to reclaim many of the parameters and features MacKenzie had put in the original work.

He made sure that width was king, the rough was not significant reducing the search for balls, and let the strategic MacKenzie bunker positioning steal the show. What emerged was turf that would support hard and fast playing conditions to force the players to respect the topography as a strategic element of play. The presentation of fairway width, no rough to speak of, complimented by generous bunkering in the green complexes puts the premium of positioning on every hole.

In reading the Hole-By-Hole Analysis below you will see that Phillips gave them a seamless combination of the outward and inward nines that once again emphasized the design thinking of the Golden Age.

Hole-By-Hole Analysis (Back/Middle):

#1 Par 5 512/499 yards

Standing on the first tee the player is greeted with a resplendent view of the hills of southern San Francisco. This user friendly par five offers a manageable start with plenty of room in the landing area that is uncluttered by any turbulence. Drive to left center at the fairway bunker. The hole falls precipitously down the hill favoring a layup to the left to get a proper angle into the green complex banked back to front and encircled by yawning bunkers. The roll of the green is right-to-left off the hill behind the bunker.

#2 Par 4 409/392

Very old school style par 4 here. Blind tee shot over the hill should be hit left center off the edge of the right fairway bunker. Hole levels off to a long and narrow green set 20 yards behind the bunker on the left. There is a fall off to the right to a short grass recovery area. This green is seamlessly connected to the fairway, from the approach position it is very hard to discern where the putting surface begins and the fairway ends.

#3 Par 4 415/387

Of the new holes this one makes a Golden Age statement. Majestic downhill dogear right around a sea of sand on the right corner. Drive to left center to get a peek around the corner to a green raised slightly with a complimentary set of bunkers left of the green. The closer your drive is to the bunkers off the tee the less

of a hurdle the green side bunkers are on the approach. Green has a wide front with a steep face front right and a sharp fall off right of the green which can leave a tricky elevation recovery pitch..

#4 Par 5 542/464

Fairly conventional five par-drive the ball left center into the upslope. The layup up is straight away to leave a proper angle into the green complex set to the left. The bunkering is heavy on the left, access to the green from the right up a bit of a slope. This is a great scoring opportunity.

#5 Par 4 325/304

Now things get really interesting over the next five holes. This short quasi-drivable Par 4 would feel right at home at Pine Valley. The fairway bunkers on both sides are in play for a driver. If you lay up to center the shot up the hill is a club and a half more because of the slope and the fortress green sits behind a deep, deep fronting bunkers. The green has a distinct tilt left to right and back to front so two putting is an adventure.

As you walk through the woods to the next tee stop and get a bit of refreshment from the water fountain they cleverly carved into a full grown tree.

#6 Par 3 182/170

Middle range three par set against the startling back, drop this hole reminds me of the looks you get of L.A. at Hillcrest Country Club, another Phillips renovation. The green sits on a bit of a knob so there is trouble off all sides, getting your approach to stay on short grass is a feat. What makes this tricky is the worst miss appears to be short left into the face bunkers yet, with the green sloping away from you and off the back left, a shot in the back will roll off to a deep low tightly mown area behind. That recovery may be harder than the bunkers shot.

#7 Par 4 395/306

Kyle's third new hole on this side is a very clever addition with distinct Pine Valley character. Talk about fitting a hole into the given topography. It presents a wonderful set of strategic options from tee to green. This is a dry cape hole with no water feature that tempts you to carry a booming drive across a chasm of grassy abyss into a downsloped fairway that plummets toward the putting surface. Normal folks hit a safe shot over the cluster of bunkers they see across the chasm to a plateau on the left of the fairway. The longer hitters can play right of that cluster and cut off a serious amount of hole on leaving a short pitch to the green. Lots of sand and scrub on the line so there is a price to be paid if you do not lay the lumber to it. The last 70 yards is so steeply sloped to the green that 110 yard shot needs to only travel 50 yards in the air and then let gravity take care of the rest as it tumbles down to the green. Green setting is lovely, the back edge is almost an infinity look against San Bruno Mountain on the horizon.

#8 Par 3 216/156

Of all the three pars you will see today this one is the best combination of beauty and playability. Stunning look from the high tee to the green below set against the mountain in the distance. Since you are hitting a longish club you will be grateful the egg shaped green is rather deep, but they added a little kicker mound, ten yards from the putting surface, that will kindly propel a ground approach onto the green. Not very evident from the tee but once you are aware of this asset it makes sense to make use of it. The green moves away with a slight tilt from right to left so balls will tend to drift back toward the center.

#9 Par 4 402/380

This is an old school original Locke hole that is one four and half Par 4 from the back tee. From a slightly elevated tee you hit the ball into the steep face of a hillside whose crest defines the blind drive. If you don't clear the hill it will be a blind approach to a green setting down the back side of that hill. The middle tee is more user friendly because the carry over the hill is much less daunting and you can get your drive rolling down the slope for a short iron approach into the green. As you walk over the crest you have the perfect postcard look of the day- the green framed by trees and sprawling MacKenzie bunkering with a mountain backdrop thrown in for good measure. This green is shaped and contoured similar to the last so balls will lean a bit right to left once on the surface.

#10 Par 4 391/378

The first hole on the inward half sits in the given topography like it was just waiting to be uncovered. Locke's use of the right to left camber of the fairway landing area juxtaposes neatly with the left to right lean of the green complex. The MacKenzie bunkering dresses up this presentation nicely but the underlying balance of the land gives it special playability. Drive is off the last bunker on the right releasing the ball to left center of the slope. The green hangs precipitously off the hill on the left over a couple of deep MacKenzies on the right. Using the short grass slope on the approach to get close seems to make sense.

#11 Par 4 399/379

This is a spectacular looking downhill par 4 approaching the back of the clubhouse. The hole turns left in the landing area before going downhill to a green complex laid into the foot of the hill on the left. Slingshotting draw off the tee will use the slope to move the ball to center. The bunker about 30 yards short of the green has a slope behind it that can be used to feed the ball down the slope to pin positions on the front left of the green. The bunkers short right and back right can get some traffic from an approach moving too much left to right.

#12 Par 3 201/183

A long uphill one shotter comes may be the most challenging short hole of the day. Ocean is to the right so the flag will likely be moving from that direction. The wind and the uphill account for an extra club on this

approach. Seems to set up for a draw to avoid the sprawl of bunkers short and left of the green. There is more room between the left bunker and the front edge than appears from the tee so trust the ground and be bold.

#13 Par 4 393/371

This hole will play longer than the card because it actually runs uphill, in spite of the look off the elevated tee, and the wind is generally at you out of the west. The MacKenzie bunkering tempers the look of the hole considerably but the ground does not lie-this is the second rated handicap hole on this side. Drive is off the right edge of the left bunker leaving what looks like a strong fade with one extra club into the green slightly above leaning to the right. He provides a short grass chipping area over the front left bunker which is not quite at the green's edge that can be a bail out spot.

#14 Par 4 443/433

Which brings you to the hardest rated hole on this nine. The hole has a right to left feel to it so a draw off the tee is preferable. The massive constellation of bunkers short and right of the green adds emphasis to the advantage of being left off the tee and having an unfettered look up the long stepped green. Any pins on the back right half will make an already challenging hole incrementally more difficult. In many ways the architectural elements of this hole typify the Cal Club experience.

#15 Par 5 494/474

This is a manageable length five par where you drive to center to get a look up the hole. The two center line bunkers Phillips restored at about 150 yards from the green make the approach and/or lay up based on the day's pin position a thoughtful task. The hole is a bit uphill and can play into the prevailing wind so be mindful of the club choice to get past these two bunkers. Green setting is tucked to the right into the foot of the hill and has plenty of sand turbulence surrounding the putting surface. The green surface banks heavily back to front so anything long and above the hole will require deft touch for a two-putt.

#16 Par 3 125/109

This is clearly the little brat of par 3's for the day. Looking at it this shallow perched amphitheater green stretching between massive front and back bunkers elicits thoughts of 12 at Augusta without the pond. It is nothing but a short pitch but club selection is very tricky especially with the wind blowing from the right. Double bogies abound because there is no bail out at all and the back bunkers leave an awkward shallow pitch down the slope of the green. Par here gets one on the field.

#17 Par 5 559/551

Second par 5 in the last two holes is definitely three-shots for mortals. From the drive position it is obvious that a lay-up left center gives the best look into a green that leans right out of the side hill. Local knowledge is the

best way to get there is land it near the high right bunker and let the ground feed it down the slope to left center. The firmness of the turf is your friend in this regard so put a solid strike on this counter intuitive line and let the topography do the work. They did some clever ground shaping in front of the green and an approach hit short right on line to the edge of the right bunker will bounce left and forward up into the green. Balls hit left will tend to trail away from the green.

#18 Par 4 394/372

The finishing hole is another testimony to Kyle Phillips skill in reclaiming the original feel of the course. Drive is straight away to the end of the hill in front of you. From the crest of the hill you take of the full measure of the the clubhouse overlooking the approach to the green below which sits on a shelf just above the 11th green surrounded by a full measure of MacKenzie sand cordoning from the right hillside. It is clever how he worked the green with the slope toward you begging for a right-to-left flight up to the flag.