

Against long odds, Tom Doak opens a short course in the heart of Detroit

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DETROIT — On Monday afternoon, 17-year-old Leticia Gittens was among 130 or so high-school seniors who helped Tom Doak usher in his latest design, a four-hole short course on the leafy campus of Marygrove College. With her peers watching her, photographers shooting her, and traffic rumbling by on McNichols Road behind her, Gittens stepped between two tee markers to strike a ceremonial first shot.

In a sporty white zip-up and capri pants, she eyed her target, a flagstick about 75 yards away, then looked down at her ball and swung.

Whiff.

Then again.

Whiff.

And again.

Whiff.

On her fourth attempt, Gittens finally connected, first with the sod, then with the top of the ball. As the orb skittered off the tee box, she smiled. The gallery hollered.

Doak tamped down the displaced earth.

"I have a thing about replacing divots," he said, smiling.

This wasn't your standard ribbon cutting. Then again, the Marygrove layout isn't your standard Doak design. Two years ago, [at the request of the SI Golf Group](#), Doak agreed to donate the services of his Michigan-based Renaissance Golf Design to build a practice site at Marygrove not only for the student body, but also for participants of Midnight Golf, [a 10-year-old mentoring program](#) that combines life lessons with golf lessons to help inner-city high-school students find their way to college.

The finished product — four short par 3s, a spacious bentgrass practice green, and a double-sided practice range that can accommodate as many as 26 golfers hitting limited-flight balls — won't appear on any Top 100 lists, but that was never the goal. In a city still reeling from the effects of the recession and the decimation of the auto industry, the little course is the result of big thinking, community activism, and dozens of tireless volunteers.

It's also an inspired use of urban land.

"To some, it is unbelievable that in the heart of the city, at Six Mile and Wyoming, there is a golf facility designed and donated by celebrated golf course architect Tom Doak," said Detroit Mayor Dave Bing, who spoke at Marygrove on Monday. "To me, it is a testament of the hope people have for Detroit and an example of things to come."

The mayor joked that if Doak is seeking more work in downtown Detroit, where empty lots and abandoned buildings populate the landscape, the city would be happy to accommodate him. "If you need some property," Bing said, drawing laughter, "I've got a little bit that's going to be available."

With the ceremonial tee shots struck — even Marygrove President David Fike, who admitted he has never played golf, jumped in and took a swipe — Doak led a tour of the property. His team, headed by Detroit native Brian Slawnik, felled some of the trees that dotted the site, but many were kept in place to help shape the holes.

"It was an interesting design problem," Doak said after hitting a couple of tee shots of his own (pictured). "How do you get the most golf out of what's little more than five acres at a major urban intersection in Detroit? This is one of the most flexible projects we've ever tried to build, and it's going to evolve over time."

"A lot of it is framing the views and picking the prettiest spots to play from," he added.

Behind him, in the distance, rose Marygrove's architectural highlight: a pair of Gothic, copper-roofed towers that climb nearly 140 feet above the main entrance of the liberal arts building.

The site isn't just scenic; it's also sustainable. Doak's team employed a low-irrigation grass seed mixture that requires little water and an environmentally friendly seaweed fertilizer. Indeed, the entire site is organically maintained, which Doak noted, "very few golf courses can say."



Brian Walters Photography
Architect Tom Doak took a few swings at the grand opening.

When the tour concluded, the Midnight Golfers split into groups to sample their new home track. Brian Cairns, a PGA professional from nearby Fox Hills golf club who volunteers his teaching services to the program, sounded like a drill sergeant as he patrolled one end of the practice range.

"Your arms are too far apart!" he barked to one of his students. "Tighten them up!"

Cairns continued down the range, a florescent yellow Srixon cap tugged low over his brow. Evening had settled in, and so had a chill. Not that the teenagers seemed to mind. Behind the dozen or so of them beating balls, dozens more stood in lines, eagerly awaiting their turns for some whacks.

"There you go!" Cairns said to another of his pupils who had just launched a high, soft fade. "It's not his first rodeo!"

You don't have to look far to appreciate the significance of the golf facility. Behind the practice range, on the opposite side of McNichols Road, is a boarded-up building, which, according to faded letters across the storefront, was once occupied by a psychic. The space is deserted, the paint is peeling, and the former tenant is presumably long gone. It's a symbol of Detroit's struggles, and yet now, just across the street, a very different kind of symbol has become a reality.

A Tom Doak course in downtown Detroit?

Even a fortune-teller couldn't have seen that coming.