



Number 15
Par 5, 520 yards
Kingsway CC
Photo by Daniel Zelazek



KINGSWAY COUNTRY CLUB

Turning a Challenge Into an Opportunity

By Joel Jackson, CGCS

It is just a little over two years ago that Hurricane Charlie took dead aim on Punta Gorda and roared up Charlotte Harbor, gathering strength from the shallow warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the bay just before it slammed into the mainland.

Kingsway CC is located about a mile east of I-75 in Lake Suzy, off Kings Highway in Desoto County and only a couple of miles from where the Peace River flows into the upper bay. Many members live

on the course, while others live in nearby communities like Punta Gorda, Port Charlotte, Arcadia, and North Port.

Superintendent Ryan Willis, CGCS says that Kingsway CC was on the western edge of the 20-mile-wide eye-wall of the storm as it roughly followed U.S. Highway 17 northward on its destructive path across Florida on Friday the 13th in August, 2005. Acting more like a large tornado, the storm destroyed the Kingsway clubhouse facilities and conservatively more than 2,000 large trees and many smaller ones

as well.

The day after the storm, Willis couldn't access the property. He came back the next day and made his way through the debris, fired up the front-end loader tractor and began clearing a path so people could get into the property to begin damage assessments and basic cleanup.

Those early days of shock and awe have finally been replaced by more normal operations on a newly redesigned and renovated golf course and clubhouse. Recovery, rebuilding and rejuvenation have

SUPERINTENDENT FACTS

Ryan Willis, CGCS

From: Born in Newport News, Va. Grew up in Port Charlotte

Family: Wife Catrina. Son Taylor (5) and daughter Morgan (2)

Education: B.S. in Turf Management, University of Florida, 1995

Employment: 2003-present, superintendent Kingsway C.C.; 2002-03 superintendent (IGM) World Woods; 1998-2002 superintendent (IGM) Tarpon Springs G.C.; 1997-98 superintendent (IGM) Poinciana G. & R.C.; 1996-97 assistant superintendent (IGM) Palm Aire Spa & Resort; 1995-96 crew Gainesville G&CC; 1994-95 staff UF Dept. of Soil & Water Science.



Ryan Willis, CGCS. Photo by Joel Jackson.

Professional Affiliations: 13-year member of GCSAA. Certified in 2004. FGCSA member and 3 years on Calusa GCSA Board. Immediate Past President

How did you get into the business? I went to UF to study architecture and building construction. After the initial classes I realized I didn't like being inside all day hunched over a drafting table. I explored other options and discovered turf management and working on golf courses. After a few turf classes I got a job doing research project sampling at the horticulture unit. Soon after that I started working for Jeff Hayden and Buddy Keene at Gainesville G&CC. Jeff was a very big factor in getting me into the business.

Work philosophy and advice: Lead by example. Don't be afraid to get sweaty and dirty. Document or die.

Immediate goals: I want to get our Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program back up and running post hurricane recovery. We have been naturalizing areas and have a long-range plan to re-forest them.

Memorable moments: It has to be the birth of my children.

Hobbies: Golfing, fishing (I jumped my first tarpon recently. Pretty exciting) and the Gators.

become a way of life. The members and employees can never go back completely to the way things were, but they can take pride in a new facility, better designed and equipped to prosper in the future growth of southwest Florida.

Restoration of the golf course to its original condition was not really an option. The pine woods that the course had been carved from by architect Ron Garl in 1976 were gone forever. The club could not afford to plant large tree specimens and neither did it make sense to install thousands of small caliber trees that would take decades to restore the course to its original character and appearance.

It was time for the club to assess its resources and create a vision for the future. It was time for decisive action in order to make lemonade out of the lemon that Mother Nature had just handed the members. A group of members led by Rocky Farhat, long-time resident and die-hard Kingsway booster, contacted Garl about coming back to renovate and redesign one of his early golf courses. Farhat said Garl was visibly emotional as he assessed the damage and discussed possible improvements to the course. After all, Kingsway was one of his babies.

Anyone who takes pride in his work and has labored long and hard on a piece of land and left his or her mark on it will always be tied to that property. It comes with the job. We all move on. It's inevitable. But we always have soft spots in our hearts for those courses we built or maintained. Garl signed on and a new Kingsway began to rise from the jumble of shattered tree trunks and broken branches.

With no stands of trees to define the routing as before, Garl suggested that the committee consider adopting some design features of notable courses that also didn't have many trees. The original Pine Valley golf course came to mind, so the addition of waste areas planted with native grasses became part of the new look to replace some of the former wooded areas left barren by the storm. Other improvements



No. 12 is still the shortest par-four at 391 yards from the tips, but it is no pushover with a new full-length waste area left and strategic bunkering on the right and at the green. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

included new mounding and fairway contouring to enhance surface drainage and expanding several of the current lakes to store more irrigation water and enhance the shot options on some holes that no longer were dominated — or at

least influenced — by trees.

On my ride through the course, Willis recounted how much he had learned about shot values and strategy as Garl moved bunkers that once had merely paralleled the fairways to jut

them into the fairway to provide more risk-and-reward situations. New tees and bulkheading provided additional length and challenging shot-making decisions. The new design has five sets of tees and stretches from 5,100 to

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COURSE FACTS



Kingsway Country Club

Location: Lake Suzy

Ownership: Members Equity

Playing Policy: Members and guests

Holes: 18; 7,138 yds; Par 72; Slope/Rating: 142/75.2

Designed by: Ron Garl. Opened: 1976

Management Team: Club Manager: J. B. Belknap; Club President: Rocky Farhart; Green Chairman: Bill McDermott; Head Golf Professional: Jimmy Karr;

Golf Course Superintendent: Ryan Willis, CGCS

Major renovations or ongoing projects: Rebuild and redesign in 2005 by Ron Garl to repair damage from Hurricane Charley in 2004 and upgrade course playability, infrastructure and facilities.

Total acreage: 160; 110 under maintenance

Greens: TiffEagle; avg. size 5,000 sq.ft.; 2.5 acres; HOC .110 - .140 in.; green speeds: 10+ ; No overseeding.

Tees, Fairways and Roughs: Tifway 419. No overseeding. Tees 4 A, HOC .500 in.; Fairways 30 A, HOC .500 in.; Roughs 60 A, HOC 1.25 in.

Bunkers: 64; Sand type GA26; machine raked.

Natural areas: 9 acres of crushed rock (250 mesh screening) waste areas with native plants and trees are machine-raked 3 times per week.

Waterways: 15 lakes and ponds, 18 acres. Monthly inspection and maintenance by Aquagenix.

Irrigation water source: Reclaimed water from Charlotte County; backup of two small supplemental wells capable only of watering greens. Flowtronex VFD pumping system. Toro Site Pro/Network 8000. Fertigation system.

Water Management and Conservation practices: Monitor and adjust run times daily in conjunction with weather station ET data. Hand water hot spots on greens.

Wildlife Inventory: Annual nesting and fledging of bald eagles, strolling sandhill cranes, alligators ambling across a fairway, great blue herons gulping down a fish, members wetting a line to catch and release huge fish from the lakes, and a host of wild birds and other small critters.

Maintenance Staff: Total including superintendent 14 (12 plus 2 part time); weekly budgeted hours 40 ST. Key staff specialists: Assistant Superintendent Scotty Helmig; Equipment Technician Paul Gesell; Pest Control Technician William Connelly; Irrigation Technician Norman LeBlanc

Communications/meetings: Daily check-in with Pro Shop. Monthly Green Committee meetings. Special crew meetings as needed.

Special events: Hosted PGA Charities tournament and will be hosting first round of Charlotte County Open in the fall. Hosted Calusa GCSA Annual Meeting.

7,100 yards for the enjoyment of golfers at all skill levels.

Kingsway CC is Willis' first head superintendent's position after spending eight years with the International Golf Management team, so he had plenty of seasoning before taking over the reins at Kingsway in 2003. Willis laughs now, but in his first major event that first year, a PGA section charity fundraiser, an irrigation blowout occurred in the back half of the third green putting surface. Willis and staff jumped through hoops to fill in the golf-cart-sized hole and remove nearly six inches of sand that caked the lower half of the green. The next year – Hurricane Charlie! What a welcome.

As noted before, things are almost back to normal, but the hurricane also did more than just knock down trees; it also had an impact on membership as some people defected or failed to renew during the recovery and rebuilding. Those who stayed and pitched in have been rewarded with a new layout that has a promising future in the competitive southwest Florida golf market.

Some of those residents who pitch in live along the course and help marshal the holes, generally cleaning up debris, picking up fallen limbs, filling divots and repairing ball marks. Each marshal is assigned two holes, and they also serve as an extra pair of eyes for Willis reporting unusual conditions, etc.

Willis sees progress as he learns how best to manage the new layout with the extensive waste areas. "We selected crushed coquina as the material for the waste areas for several reasons. It doesn't blow and drift like sand. It compacts and the waste areas can be used as cart traffic areas during wet conditions. Unlike sand, pine straw or other mulch material the coquina is actually not a bad surface to play from. Weed intrusion is kept in check by cultivating the areas two or three times a week. However, we did take the tines of the bunker rakes to keep the material firm and playable."

"Since these are waste areas and not sand bunkers under the rules of golf," he said, "players can smooth away the

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stone chips behind the ball to allow for good clubhead contact. Now members are sometimes actually aiming for some waste areas to get more ball roll on a long hole or to avoid a more unforgiving water hazard."

While the waste areas were a good option and solution for the loss of so many trees, there is a master tree-planting plan to add trees where they make sense and when time and the budget allow. Willis wants also to experiment with wildflower beds in some of the now-bare out-of-play areas. If they are successful they will provide an appealing, colorful low-cost and low-maintenance solution. But right now Willis is concentrating on the critical "must-do" practices and adds the "nice-to-do" touches whenever he can.

Nematodes were one of the "must-dos" on the list, and long overdue because of the recovery effort. "We wanted to go with a Curfew application last year, but since it was getting late in the warm season, they suggested we wait to get the best timing and effect from the product and best bang for our buck. So we bit the bullet until this past spring and made the application, and I have to say the turf is looking the best it ever has. In the future we will be rotating the treated acreage annually to cover the most critical areas.

"We also had a bout with fairy ring last year that was hard to get under control. We had a green committee meeting and I brought in Todd Lowe from the Florida USGA Green Section along with a couple of graduate students in pathology from the University of Florida. It was probably one of the best committee meetings I



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Ron Garl has designed 215 courses worldwide with 96 in Florida. Photo from Sylvia Garl.

Architect Goes Back to the Future

After Hurricane Charlie, Lakeland-based golf course architect Ron Garl was commissioned by a post-hurricane task force at Kingsway CC to put all the pieces back together and make a new, modern course out of the rubble. For Garl, it was going back to the future since he had designed the original layout back in 1976 and then he was asked to create a design for the future.

Garl also is a course owner, avid golfer and longtime member of the Florida Turfgrass Association. He appreciates that a course is a business that must return a profit and, as a golfer, he knows that good design and maintenance elements enhance and build golfer loyalty to a course. The challenge now was to come up with a design that would please the old members while attracting new ones.

Garl related the story of the resurrection of Kingsway during a lull in the International Network of Golf spring conference.

"The sheer magnitude of the power of the storm and its devastation to the golf course was unbelievable," he said. "The majority of the trees on the course were gone and the resulting litter covered the whole course. With the clubhouse destroyed, and the whole region reeling from the effects of the storm, it was critical that someone take charge and lead the effort to decide

what the club was going to do. It literally became a battle for survival of the club and its members.

"They formed a task force and, utilizing the talents and specialties of various members, began to hammer out a path to recovery and created a timetable and strategic plan not only to rebuild the course and clubhouse, but to think ahead five to ten years and project what the club would be like. I was honored that they asked me to come back and help them revitalize the golf course with a design that would fit the altered setting and appeal to golfers of all skills.

"I suggested that since most of the hole-defining trees were destroyed, why not look at successful designs that didn't depend on trees. Pine Valley and Fiddlesticks both used waste areas to help shape holes. We also expanded the lakes by five acres to provide fill to construct new tee complexes and fairway mounding. But first we needed a plan to clean up the golf course and at least get the doors open to give the members something play.

"We decided to clean up the greens first so we could perform basic maintenance and keep the turf alive. Then we would clear tees and fairways and move the large debris to the roughs for cutting up and removal. Finding a contractor at a reasonable price was a challenge since they were in demand. We struck a deal with one outfit that had the proper equipment to do the work with the minimal damage to the turf areas. We also had to work out an agreement with Charlotte County to pick up the debris if it were cut and tacked along the county road at the entrance. I have to say they were great to work with.

"The new look of the golf course required replacing and repositioning bunkers and creating waste areas to offer shot-making options all the while incorporating existing features and the remaining stands of trees. We also created a total tree plan — including type, size and location — that the club could execute as funds became

available.

"The redesign allowed us to make improvements to the irrigation and drainage systems. Technology has changed dramatically in recent years and Kingsway needed to upgrade to be competitive. This opportunity allowed us to improve weaker holes like No. 12, a short par-4 by today's standards. We added a new back tee, which makes the hole more challenging with the new bunker and waste area complexes.

"During the whole process Ryan Willis, the superintendent, was helping to guide the clean-up and keep the turf alive. He's a great young superintendent who had to reorganize and revitalize his crew to face the challenges. The members certainly appreciated the efforts to get the course back into playing condition.

"Keep in mind all this recovery work began without power for several weeks. Insurance companies weren't easy to deal with either, with all the chaos in the region. But I give a lot of credit to the members who decided to turn this disaster into an opportunity to modernize the club. With Rocky Farhat leading the charge, they made timely decisions to get equipment and services they needed to get the project under way and stay on track. This committee put in thousands of hours hashing out details and decisions, and getting permits and equipment. They all stepped up. It was great to see how much they cared for their golf course."



In appreciation for Garl's innovative redesign at Kingsway, the members dubbed the entrance road "Ron Garl Lane." Photo by Joel Jackson.

have ever had. They were able to explain the total situation from the stresses and causes to the solutions including cultural needs control costs.

“We make pre-emergent herbicide applications with fertilizer in the early spring and late fall to control weeds. Like most courses we spot treat any weeds that do emerge. We also combine fertilizer with our mole cricket control application in late spring.

“I really appreciate that the members realized from that meeting that we haven’t been in a normal maintenance mode for several years as we have been making a comeback from mass destruction.

“Before the storms we had a good reputation for competitive greens and our goal is to have the best greens, tees and fairways in the area. To achieve that goal we are exploring revenue options of opening up for outside play and charity events. This time of year most clubs have “reciprocal season”



A snapshot of a few of the 2,500 large trees that were destroyed. More trees have died due to internal damage from twisting in the wind. The oak at 17 tee is lying 90 degrees to the large pine in the background showing the wind shift as the eye of the storm moved through. Photo by Ryan Willis.

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Thanks to five sets of tees, the par-3, 13th hole can play from a respectable 147 yards to a challenging 246 yards from the back tees. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.



Here's another Fun Fact: Willis says members intentionally hit into the crushed coquina waste areas for more ball roll and legally improved lies. Photo by Joel Jackson.

FUN FACTS

The Wild, Wild Willis

- 1. Vehicle:** 1995 Ford Ranger Work Truck
- 2. Last good movie I saw:** Deja Vu
- 3. I stay home to watch:** Any UF Gator sporting event
- 4. The book I've been reading:** The Boys From Old Florida, The Gator Nation by Buddy Martin
- 5. Favorite meal:** Pizza
- 6. Favorite performers:** Jimmy Buffet and Drivin' and Cryin'
- 7. Prized possessions:** My children
- 8. Personal Heroes:** My parents for supporting me in everything
- 9. The one thing I can't stand:** People who talk down to you like you are stupid

- 10. Nobody knows that I:** Hate to lose
- 11. I'm better than anyone when it comes to:** Not catching fish
- 12. I'd give anything to meet:** Urban Meyer
- 13. If I could do it over:** I would not change a thing
- 14. My fantasy is:** Win the lottery and spend my time golfing and fishing
- 15. If I could change one thing about myself:** I'd lose weight
- 16. My most irrational act:** Was thinking I could do it all myself
- 17. Most humbling experience:** Birth of my children
- 17. Words that best describe me:** Hard working and dedicated
- 18. My best fish story:** Still working on that one


where members from area clubs can play each others' courses. We want to generate more traffic so area golfers can see we are back and in good shape. We have hosted the Calusa GCSA annual meeting the last two years and the club will also host the first round of the Charlotte County Open this fall."

While touring the new clubhouse facility, head pro J. B. Belknap and club president Rocky Farhat chimed in that they wanted the green speeds at 12 as part of their quest to have the best greens in the area to help draw more play. I didn't see them wink, but they were smiling as they also gave Willis kudos for the progress made since Charlie.

On the course data form sent to all cover story courses, Willis put down 10-plus as the green speed goals, so these folks are serious about being competitive. To achieve those speeds Willis has turned to more rolling of the greens while adjusting the height of cut between .110 to .140 inches depending on the weather conditions. "We have been able to keep the turf healthier and keep the speeds up by rolling," he said.

I asked Willis if there were any other built-in challenges with the site itself.

"The course does have a few muck pockets with No. 14 being the worst when we get lots of rain, but we deal with it and install drainage where we can. Managing our lake levels is also something we are quite aware of since we store reclaimed irrigation water and it mixes with stormwater. By expanding the lake acreage during the renovation to supply fill for the additional tees and



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The new bulkhead on No. 6 is evidence of the five acre expansion in lake area to generate fill for the new mounding and to store more irrigation water. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

mounding, it has helped store more water. We do need to look at some lake banks in the future to prevent undercutting when the lake levels rise and fall.”

I asked Willis what were the

biggest challenges facing today’s superintendents in the industry overall.

“You hear people say about our jobs that growing grass is the easy part, and it’s true. I think the biggest challenge is finding really good people. Finding

people that you can build and coach into a core group of reliable crew members. Managing, organizing and communicating effectively with them is vital. No less important is being able to communicate and work with the whole

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Kingsway doesn't have wall-to-wall cart paths, so this new waste area on the 5th hole serves a dual purpose as hazard and cart path. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.



Working together to create the best playing conditions and amiable atmosphere for members are, from left, head golf professional J. B. Belknap, club president Rocky Farhat and superintendent Ryan Willis, CGCS. Photo by Joel Jackson

management/ownership team and the members on committees and general members as well.

"The labor market around here is just beginning to improve again now that the housing construction has slowed down, but finding good quality people can be a challenge. On the other side of the chain of command, I am playing golf once a month with the men's association. I am only a bogey golfer, but I can't imagine a superintendent not playing golf. It has helped me get a different perspective on playing conditions on the course and the vision and expectations of the players."

Kingsway Country Club has come a long way since the devastation of Hurricane Charlie to fulfill the vision of a better golf club with the hard work and leadership of a lot of people. People who turned the challenge of destruction into an opportunity to rebuild for the future.

CONGRATULATIONS

Ryan Willis, CGCS and the Kingsway Country Club
for being selected by the Calusa GCSA as the
2007 Fall Florida Green cover story.



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