By PHILIP HALL

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. — When it comes to “traditional” golf course design, most architects talk the talk. With the recent unveiling of Black Creek Club, Brian Silva continues to walk the walk.

Inspired by the work of legendary architect Seth Raynor, Black Creek Club raises the bar on layouts that presume to integrate vintage design characteristics into the modern game.

Silva, *Golf World’s* “Architect of the Year” for 1999, has painstakingly equipped Black Creek with a raft of genuine Old World chops: blind approaches, punchbowl and Redan greens, drivable par-4s, random bunkering (promoting alternate routes of play), and green settings whose contours encourage, if not require, players to put the ball on the ground.

“There is more to creating a traditional golf experience than mere appearance,” Silva explained. “It’s one thing for a course to look old school; it’s quite another for a course to play that way.

“At Black Creek, all the design elements and strategies are there,” he said. “The bunkers, for example, are certainly retro in their appearance — but it’s their placement, their integration into golf hole and landscape that influences decision-making. That’s what Raynor did so well, and that’s what we’ve done at Black Creek.”

OLD WORLD INFLUENCE

Though Raynor and his on-again, off-again design partner, the estimable C.B. Macdonald, worked during the early years of this century, they were unabashed devotees of 19th century British course design.

So strong was this Old World influence, so dutiful was their homage, that all the Raynor/Macdonald products — National Golf Links of America and Fisher’s Island GC on Long Island, Shoreacres and Chicago Golf Club in Illinois, Yale GC in New Haven, Conn., Yeaman’s Hall in Charleston, S.C. — include loving replicas of famous Scottish holes such as the Redan at North Berwick and the Alps at Prestwick, among others.

Silva has carried on this practice by reprising Raynor’s Redan and Punchbowl greens at recent designs like Waverly Oaks and Cape Cod National, a pair of award-winning layouts in Massachusetts.

At Black Creek Club, opened for play this fall, the architect has included a larger complement of Raynor standards: the Birkittz green (number 17), the Redan (11), the Reverse Redan (7), the Cape Hole (15), the Short Hole (3), the Double Plateau green (1), and an Alps/Punchbowl hybrid at the one-of-a-kind, blind-but-reachable par-5 6th.

Silva, for his part, is currently refurbishing a pair of esteemed Raynor tracks: Mountain Lake Club in Lake Wales, Fla., and Pittsburgh’s Fox Chapel GC (scheduled to host the USGA’s Curtis Cup Matches in 2002).

For their part, BCC’s developers are all members at nearby Lookout Mountain (Ga.) Golf Club, a 1926 Raynor design, which Silva finished restoring in 1999.

“Black Creek Club is a unique project because the architect, developers and contractors were all of a very, very like mind: We all have the utmost respect and admiration for Raynor’s work,” said Silva, a partner with Uxbridge, Mass.-based Cornish, Silva and Mungeam. “These clients wanted a traditional golf course in the Raynor style, and that’s just the direction my own designs have taken.”

Added BCC developer Doug Stein, “With Brian’s restoration work at Lookout Mountain and Fox Chapel — not to mention what we saw in his original work at Cape Cod National and Waverly Oaks — we could see he had absorbed the artistry and strategic sensibilities of Raynor. And it’s just these characteristics that shine at Black Creek.”

THE ‘RETRO’ DESIGN MOVEMENT

Silva’s restoration portfolio also includes vintage Donald Ross layouts like Seminole Golf Club in North Palm Beach, Fla., Old Elm in Chicago and Biltmore Forest CC in Asheville, N.C., site of the USGA Women’s Amateur in 1999.

With this sort of experience, it’s not surprising that many of Silva’s more original holes at Black Creek, while they have no specific Raynor progenitor, stand out as beautiful, strategic golf holes detailed in the traditional style: The short, par-4 10th (dubbed “Double Cross”), the long, par-4 12th (“Dry Branch”), and the tantalizing, reachable par-5 14th (“Go On”), to name just three.

Whitten has written that “Brian Silva is leading the Retro design movement.” Black Creek Club supports this assessment in spades.

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Many architects play lip service to "promoting the ground game" via transparent efforts like grass selection. Yet appropriate turf choice is merely the final step. Making the ground game really work requires time, dedication and a thorough understanding of agronomy and traditional play strategies.

THE GROUND GAME

Over the course of its 7,044 yards, Black Creek truly delivers on the ground game, thanks in large part to the 60-plus site visits Silva, a former USGA agronomist, made during course construction.

"Brian spent an inordinate amount of time getting the contours 'just so,'" Stein says. "When he didn't feel the proper effect had been achieved, he'd be out with one of our shapers for a couple of hours, paint gun in hand. This attention to detail continued through the grassing stage, with Brian out there the whole time flagging fairway contours."

At Black Creek, many holes simply wouldn't function properly without this sort of meticulous attention to detail. The "reverse" Redan 7th, for example, is a 235-yard par-3 which can play as long as 250 yards. The Redan characteristics at number 7 call for a low, running tee shot played short and left of the putting surface, where Silva's contouring (combined with firm turf conditions) will usher the ball onto the green.

Even the best players cannot fly their tee shots to, and stop the ball on, the back two thirds of this putting surface, which is firm, shallow, pitched front-to-back and surrounded by intimidating bunkering.

FORGET THE AIR MAIL

"This is what makes traditional design so intriguing, so strategically interesting, and so much fun," Silva explained. "A guy who couldn't hit a 235-yard 2-iron to save his life can hit a five wood to the left approach of number 7, let the ball take the Redan slope, and when the ball finally stops rolling, he may well have 10 feet for birdie. He can get a result - a result his game couldn't achieve via the dart-board approach - provided he thinks out and executes the shot properly.

"By the same token," he added, "a stubborn scratch player will hit 2-irons all day at number 7 and, depending on the pin position, never get the ball that close.

"This strategic scenario," Silva said, "is common at Raynor courses. The holes play fun for an average player but they're a real challenge for a scratch player, who is perhaps more accustomed to having his way with a golf course. At 'traditional' layouts - like Fox Chapel and Black Creek - a good player is forced to recognize the alternate routes of play and adjust. If he doesn't, there occurs this leveling dynamic, which is even more applicable today when good players are used to 'air-mailing' shots into every green. You simply can't do that and expect to score at a place like Fisher's Island or Black Creek."

PRIVATE LAYOUT

Black Creek is a private club which accommodates outside play for guests of the Bluff View Inn, an amalgam of Victorian B&Bs in Chattanooga's Bluff View Arts District, just 10 minutes from BCC.

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