Old world style: Silva’s new Black Creek Club celebrates Raynor tradition

By PHILIP HALL

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

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., Yeamans 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 Biritz (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.

"Brian Silva," according to Golf Digest architecture editor Ron Whitten, "is now doing some of the most interesting work out there. Nothing outlandish or revolutionary. Just the opposite. It’s retro design, very much reflecting the features and philosophies of grand old architects whose courses Silva has reworked over the years: Ross, Tillinghast and, especially, Raynor."

SETH RAYNOR FAN CLUB

It should come as no surprise that Black Creek Club (BCC) was developed by an ardent but unofficial chapter of the Seth Raynor Fan Club.

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 Munegue. "These clients wanted a traditional golf course in the Raynor style, and that’s just the direction my own designs have taken."

Even more, 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.

continued on page 36