Panks developing a Native American niche

By DAVID HUBBARD

PHOENIX, Ariz. — More than a few sovereign Indian nations across America are building golf courses in their desire to direct the phenomena of Indian gaming into a major hospitality and entertainment industry. With two such projects behind him, Gary Panks would like nothing better than to be the golf course architect they call.

In Phoenix, Ariz., the tribal officials from the Gila River Indian Community liked what they saw in Panks' work at the Raven Golf Club at South Mountain, and invited him to design the community's 36-hole Whirlwind Golf Club as the feature amenity to the Sheraton Resort Hotel-Casino now under construction. Managed by Troon Golf, the first course, Devil's Claw, opened in late 2000 to rave reviews.

"We have always envisioned a very high-end destination resort for this area, and find it very reassuring that Mr. Panks shares our enthusiasm for this venture and can work so easily with the community to make it happen," stated Steven Heedley, deputy general council for the community.

For Panks, the commission has turned into far more than the next project on his to-do list.

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stitched together at Wild Turkey included an abandoned quarry, several open field ponds, woodlands, and hilly terrain. The result is a course that offers pleasantly unique holes.

Wild Turkey’s “basin holes,” number three and 12 through 17, incorporate ponds left behind from the quarry operation and have a links feel to them, reminiscent of nearby Ballyowen. The course’s “ridge holes,” numbers one, four, 10 and 18, offer a number of spectacular views of the surrounding countryside.

The greens at Wild Turkey are moderate in size and demand precision approaches, as Rulewich created sometimes severe slopes at the sides of many of the putting surfaces. The greens, fairways, and tee boxes are of creeping bentgrass, while the rough is a mixture of Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass and fescue. There are 55 bunkers and water on four holes.

Rulewich and his team overcame a number of design challenges at Wild Turkey, which was constructed by Sussex National Development, Inc. of Hamilton, N.J. The builders undertook demanding grading work in several sections of the course and also solved the tricky proposition of having to cross over a railroad track.

“We believe we’ve created a course that is user friendly,” said Rulewich. “You can stretch it to over 7,000 yards from the tips or move up and play it from around 6,000 yards. I wanted to build a course that better players find challenging, but also one where higher handicappers will have fun.”

There are several startling holes at Wild Turkey. Perhaps the best of which is number seven, a par-3 that plays a knee-knocking 208 yards from the tips. The hole demands almost a full carry over a yawning quarry pond to a green that sits atop a cliff.

While number seven could easily be the signature hole, Rulewich prefers number 17, a monstrous 625-yard par-5.

“There’s a large pond to carry on the drive, which runs far down the left side, fairway bunkering all the way up, and an elevated green which is well bunkered,” said the architect. “I like 17, I think it’s a bear of a hole.”

The par-71 layout has four sets of tees, ranging 7,233 yards from the tips to 5,024 from the forward tees.

The operators of Crystal Spring, owned by Gail Mulvihill and Rosalind Dazidowtiz, believe Wild Turkey gives golfers yet another reason to spend several days in the Great Gorge area of New Jersey.

“Our goal is to be a little Pinehurst right here in northern New Jersey,” said general manager, Art Walton. “We appeal to people who want to get away and enjoy an upscale and well-rounded resort experience.”

Summit

according to Samuelson.

Construction at the course started two years ago, with the majority of the grassing completed last year. There’s a variety of bluegrasses in the fairways and roughs, Penncross on the tees and Dominant bentgrass for the greens.

Because of the short playing and construction season, the majority of the course was sodded. “The greens and tees were seeded though,” said Samuelson. “Jack doesn’t like to sod putting surfaces if he can help it. We also try to keep the greens consistently quick here.”

‘DESIGNED IN THE FIELD’

Nicklaus’ design associate, Ken Balzer, moved his family here from Florida during construction. “He was onsite almost everyday,” Samuelson said. “Ken and I did the muns and bolts work of putting the course together, and when Jack came he tweaked it.”

Wadsworth Golf Construction was the course builder. “We did the bulk of earth moving in house,” said Samuelson. “Wadsworth did a lot of the finish work, and grasse the course out for us.”