

Extreme Makeover

A CLEAR GOAL, COMMUNICATION AND ARCHITECT-SUPERINTENDENT COOPERATION DELIVER AN OUTSTANDING GRANDE PINES RENOVATION

by
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Robert Waller's first impression of the International Golf Club in Orlando, FL, was that the course was in a perfect location – on International Drive in the midst of vacation heaven. Waller, Marriott Golf's director of golf course grounds operations and construction, says the course itself was a mess.

"It needed to be blown up," Waller says.

"An overgrown mess with poor drainage," adds architect Steve Smyers, of Smyers Golf Design, Lakeland, FL, who worked with Waller in 2003 to recreate the 18-hole course as the centerpiece for Marriott Vacation Club International's new Grande Pines Resort.

Waller is a veteran of numerous course renovations. He was superintendent of Atlanta Athletic Club's Highlands Course when it was renovated by Rees Jones in 1995, and he has overseen four renovations since joining Marriott Golf seven years ago. Through that experience Waller says he has developed an approach

as the superintendent that makes a maximum contribution to the project's success:

- Serve as the owner's representative and consultant.
- Maintain ongoing communication — "the absolute key to success" — between the superintendent, architect, builder and club members.
- Stay focused on what it will take to maintain the new course for a 30-year period. "Don't get sidetracked into critiquing the design," Waller advises, "but as a superintendent I want to focus on maintenance issues that will help make the course successful and profitable in the long-term."

- Contribute to clearly defined goals of what the renovation is to accomplish. "A renovation is an opportunity to improve traffic flow, airflow, sunlight and other environmental factors," he says. "You're going to close your books and shut the course down in a renovation, so seize the chance to do the work that will keep that course open for many years to come."

- Get ahead of the curve on permitting. "Do not wait on permits. Also consider the value of hiring consultants knowledgeable about water management, zoning or any other specific issues you face," he recommends.

- Work with the architect and builder to set a realistic timeline that factors in rain or other unavoidable delays. Grande Pines was built during the fourth-wettest summer of the last 109 years in Florida, but Waller, architect Smyers and the contractor, Weitz Golf International of North Palm Beach, FL, anticipated such delays in their construction schedule.

- Pre-qualify to select the right contractor. "Open up projects to bids to give everybody a chance, but be wise in your final decision."

- Apply the old business success adage — location, location, location — even down to the placement of the putting greens. "Decisions made on the front end — re-routing the course and setting the greens in place — affect the long-term health of the course. As the superintendent you want to look at tree management, the tilt of the greens, drainage and traffic. Planning can avoid fighting endless environmental or traffic problems," Waller says.

Clear goal and vision

The keys to making everything work more efficiently are establishing a clear goal in the planning stage and ongoing communication throughout construction.

"Everybody has to understand the vision up front — what the property will

give," Waller says. "What you do with the golf course goes straight to the bottom line. We've all seen projects that ended up as maintenance nightmares. To avoid this, the superintendent must be empowered. The tendency early in the process is that the architect is the only voice and the long-term function of the golf course falls off their radar for a time. The superintendent's role is to bring that voice back."

Architect Smyers agrees. "Waller understood the goal — to create a dynamic, world-class course. He also wanted a course that could be maintained to world-class standards."

Ongoing communication

Living in nearby Lakeland, Smyers and his top landscape architect, Patrick Andrews, were constantly on site, which made ongoing communication easier.

"The cooperation between all parties and the high level of enthusiasm were ultimately reflected in the quality of the final product," Smyers says. "We had gone through the whole design with Waller before we started construction to make sure we were all on the same page. Then, whenever we were about to build something, Waller would come out and look at it and react. He has been through construction processes before and knew what to look for. He has a good set of eyes both as a superintendent and as an accomplished golfer. We worked together to address situations such as existing vegetation, what we had to clear out to get adequate sunlight, what type of plant materials might be invasive, those sort of questions."

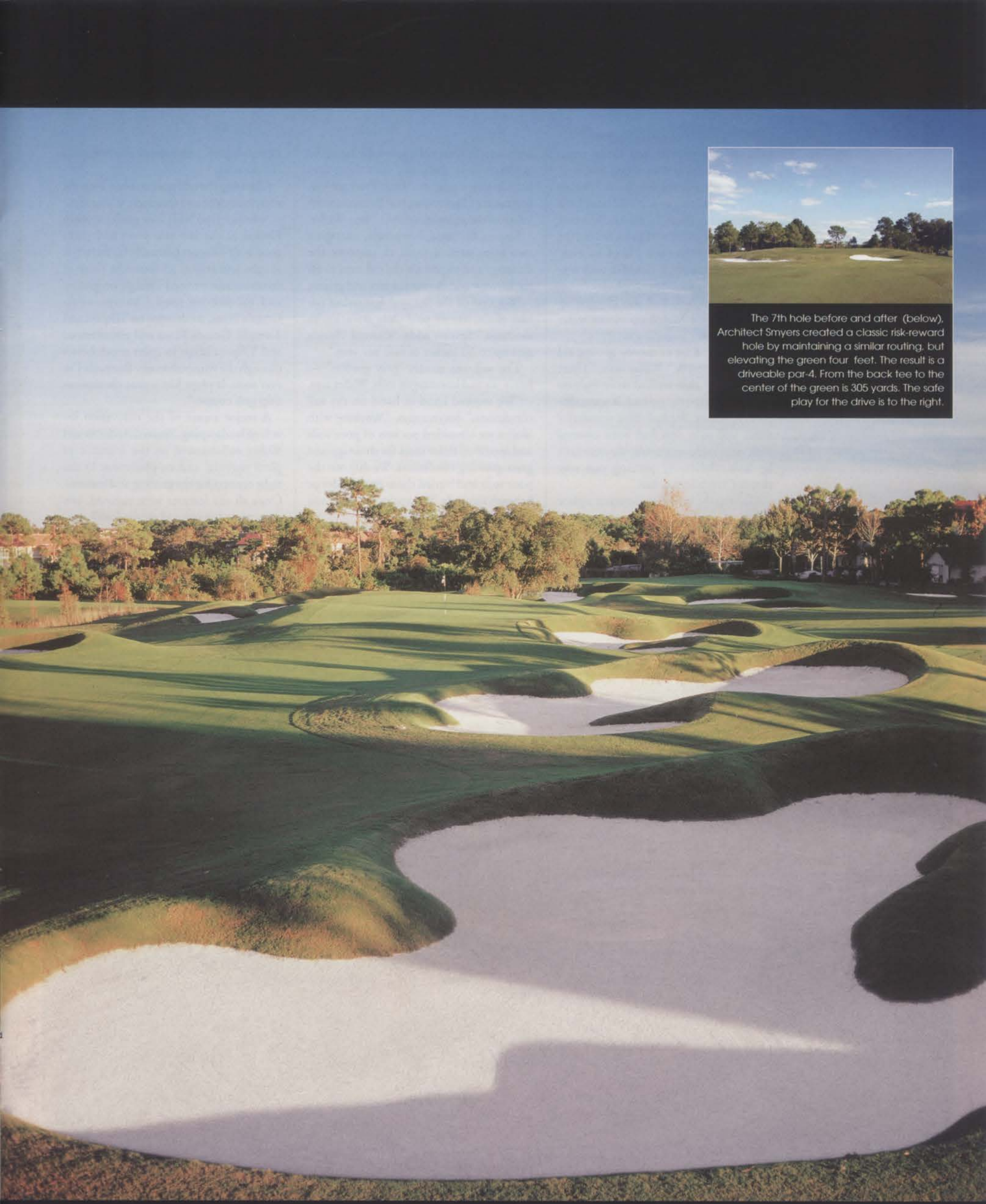
To be on board in time for the entire grow-in period, Waller hired Chuck Wagniller in March 2003 to serve as Grande Pines' superintendent.

Communication was important in resolving challenges that included wetlands,

AT A GLANCE:

Marriott Grande Pines Golf Club

Location:	Orlando, Fla.
Course type:	Public
Course closed:	December 2002
Course re-opened:	January 2004
Yardage:	7,012; 6,593; 6,070; and 5,418
Par:	72
Number of bunkers:	70
Greens:	Tifeagle Bermudagrass
Fairways and tees:	TifSport Bermudagrass
Slope:	To be rated
Rating:	To be rated
Superintendent:	Chuck Wagniller
Golf Course architect:	Steve Smyers
Landscape architect:	Patrick Andrews
Builder:	Weitz Golf International



The 7th hole before and after (below). Architect Smyers created a classic risk-reward hole by maintaining a similar routing, but elevating the green four feet. The result is a driveable par-4. From the back tee to the center of the green is 305 yards. The safe play for the drive is to the right.

extreme overgrowth, too many trees, poor turfgrasses and outdated bunkers.

"Drainage was the key issue," Waller says. "The existing course had been built to different standards. By the time Marriott purchased the property the area around the course had taken on a life of its own. The corridors were so closed in with vegetation that it was claustrophobic."

The overgrowth had also clogged up waterways and fouled up storm water management.

"We spent a lot of money getting rid of the overgrowth," Waller says. "There was so much that we had to investigate what plant material we had. It was a discovery process. We had some wonderful pines and oaks that had been covered with vines and overgrowth. We went hole by hole, delicately picking our way through trash and debris."

Clearing the land gave the water a place to go.

Where drainage swells had become

wetlands, Smyers redesigned the layout to enhance those areas and turn them into functioning wetlands. "Even the State Department of Environmental Protection saw value in the reconstruction," says Waller.

Smyers designed five ponds, averaging two acres in area each, to improve the drainage and to provide the soil used to lift the fairways and elevate the tees and greens.

"Because of the flat and featureless nature of the site we paid close attention to drainage," Smyers adds. "Central Florida gets up to 50 inches of rain per year."

The soil was mostly "gray gumbo" — heavy silt and low-oxygen soils, Waller says.

"We worked hand-in-hand on the soil conditions," Smyers says. "Working with Waller we identified pockets of poor soils and modified those areas for drainage and grass-growing conditions. We dug out the poor soils and buried them to the sides or beneath mounds. We stockpiled good soil and capped the course with it."

Because the course had aged, Waller says it had 17 different cultivars of Bermudagrass. Weaker strains of

Bermudagrass had limited the height of cut possible.

Choosing the turf type involves both the superintendent and architect, Waller says.

"Marriott has built four golf courses in Florida in the last two years and we've gone with TifSport Bermuda for fairways, roughs and tees at all four. On three of those courses we used Tifeagle on greens, and on one we used Champion. At Grande Pines, we decided on TifSport and Tifeagle. Grande Pines will not overseed and TifSport keeps its color much better through the winter than any Bermuda I've ever seen. It plays like a true championship golf course."

A major aspect of the renovation involved landscaping. Smyers, Andrews and Waller collaborated on the selection of plant material and its placement in the right context for the grading and features. Once all the features were exposed, low areas were dug out and marked with wetland material. If a ridge was created, the vegetation patterns were changed to create a pleasant feel and to allow golfers to



The 15th hole before and after (below). The par-3 hole was lengthened from 172 to 214 yards and the putting surface exposed. Tee space was doubled and native grasses provide low-maintenance aesthetics.





The par-3, 4th hole before and after (above). Improvements included lateral shelves and wetlands in front of the green, elevating the green six feet, clearing overgrowth and lengthening the hole from 155 to 189 yards.

more easily read the course. Key plant materials selected included broomsedge, mully grass, coregrass, Fachahatchee grass, oaks, pines, magnolias and sable palms.

The \$1-million landscaping budget also included creating 40-foot buffers around ponds, Waller says. The aesthetics of the wetlands were enhanced with cypress trees, swamp lily, Golden Canna, arrowhead, pickerel plant, Eleocharis and Blue Flag Iris.

The art of compromise

Compromise between the superintendent and architect, and between the vision and budget, are facts in any renovation, Waller says. How well the compromise is handled often depends on their relationship.

The Grande Pines renovation required several compromises. Smyers is known for his bold and dynamic bunkering that sets a course apart from its competition. At the same time, maintenance concerns

were noted by Waller.

“Waller felt that bunkers are a pain no matter what kind you build,” Smyers says. “But he agreed that without great bunkers we would never be able to build the reputation for Grande Pines that we wanted. His was an extremely switched-on attitude toward design. Waller understood the game plan.”

In a number of areas Waller and Smyers worked at creative compromises to gain dynamic design and viable maintenance.

One compromise involved poor drainage issues on the first and second holes, where the soils were the heaviest.

“Florida is so flat you don’t have runoff,” Smyers says. “So you try to create a pitch that will move water from the two- to four-inch rains we get. On these two holes, Waller and I worked together to get not only the right pitch but also the right soils in place.”

Another compromise was handling the divide between parallel 13th and 14th holes.

“The 13th is a par-5 dogleg right, and the 14th is a par-4 dogleg left. On the earlier course, players would cut the corner off the 13th — something we all wanted to

change,” Waller says.

“Smyers had a design goal, and I looked at it through a superintendent’s lens. I didn’t want to have to build a satellite maintenance facility in that area just to maintain two holes. Severe sloping was a possibility, but it would have created too much handwork. Smyers was great in helping to solve this issue. He designed a series of bunkers, a 22-foot fill, and a lake to the right of the 13th green, which prevents cutting off the dogleg. Steve got the separation of the holes he needed, and I’m happy because we can now mow 90 percent of the area.”

Working together to overcome a variety of obstacles, Waller and Smyers say they accomplished the Marriott vision of creating a standout golf course that serves as the cornerstone of a future vacation property. GCN

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