

Starting over

RYANGOLF OVERCOMES CHALLENGES RECONSTRUCTING THE NORTH COURSE AT FRENCHMAN'S CREEK IN FLORIDA


by
JOHN
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High expectations from 600 owners, never working with architect Jim Fazio and four hurricanes didn't deter Ryangolf from successfully reconstructing the North Course at Frenchman's Creek in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., and winning the 2005 *Golf Course News* Heritage Award for best renovation or reconstruction.

Frenchman's Creek is a residential com-

munity of 600 families and two golf courses. John Cohen, a resident member of Frenchman's Creek, was the co-chairman of a committee to oversee the reconstruction of the North Course.

"The course is 30 years old, and in south Florida, you can't let courses go that long," Cohen says. "It was time to rehab the course from soup to nuts. We had done some



Golf course architect Jim Fazio added 10 acres of lakes to the North Course at Frenchman's Creek.

Photo: Ryangolf

band-aid work in the past, but now everything is brand new.”

But Ryangolf wasn't one of the contractors the owners initially had in mind to do the job.

“We interviewed four others and were close to hiring the contractor who did the South Course,” Cohen says. “Another nearby course did the same renovations we did on the South Course, but used Ryangolf as their contractor. We had trouble with bunker drainage, and coincidentally, the other course had the same problem. The liner material seemed to have caused the problem. Ryangolf built the bunkers according to the plans and specs, therefore they weren't at fault. Nevertheless, they came back and redid all the bunkers at no cost on the nearby course. We went back to our contractor, and they didn't do what Ryangolf did.”

“We got excellent, first-class recommendations from other clubs that used them for renovations,” he adds. “Thus, we chose Ryangolf for this project, and they lived up to the expectations.”

Phil Garcia, president of Ryangolf, says the company does a lot of renovation work on golf courses in the Palm Beach area that were built in the 1970s and '80s and need to keep up with new supply coming into the market.

“We thought we were in line for Frenchman's after we did the Boca West Country Club renovation,” Garcia says. “Boca West is the *crème de la crème*. We didn't bid on Frenchman's at first. We never worked with Jim Fazio. Frenchman's was not happy with the bids, and then connected with some of our clients, and they said, ‘If you're not working with Ryangolf, then who are you working with?’ I got 30 calls from people I didn't know. Frenchman's owners didn't know Ryangolf. That's why we weren't asked to come to the table to bid. We eventually met with Fazio, and the superintendent, Norm Pilote, called me as well.”

Garcia says Fazio stuck out in his mind as one reason he wanted to do the project, because he wanted to work with him. He also says Frenchman's Creek is a well-known, first-class club, and the timing was right because the company just finished another project.

“We had the right crew, so we started planning one month before we broke ground,” he says. “Everything was set up to be there waiting when we broke ground.”

Getting started

Once Fazio received the plans, he says the owners told him what they expected and didn't care what he did as long as he gave them a good golf course.

“The course was dead flat and didn't have a



More water was brought into play as a result of the reconstruction of the North Course.

lot of land,” he says. “I address all the concerns of the homeowners, who wanted color and to see birds back in the ponds. I added 10 acres of lakes to the course. Frenchman's Creek became the main feature. Now it's a moving creek, and it flows all the time. We took 19 acres of exotic vegetation off the property and regraded everything. We put some rolls in the fairways and built up some greens. We brought water into play and made the course more challenging. The South Course was voted a better course, and now it's a toss up as to which is the better course.”

Fazio says that of the 19 acres of vegetation taken out, less than one acre was put back, and over time, the owners will put more vegetation back.

During the reconstruction, Cohen says there were no substantial changes and there was no additional material cost to the project

for the small changes that were made.

“Ryangolf stuck to the plans and specs by the architect,” he says. “However, there were a lot of changes in the field, such as the size of a green and the placement of tees or bunkers, that didn't affect the outcome.”

Cohen says the owners were fortunate to have Fazio there on a daily basis.

“Jim Fazio, who is a low key guy, likes to do two or three projects a year,” he says. “He was here 98 percent of the time and worked directly with the contractor daily in case he wanted to make small changes, therefore, we didn't have to wait for the contractor to move forward expeditiously. Our superintendent also was involved daily.”

The course is seven miles from Fazio's home, which is one of the reasons why Fazio says he



“Most projects take nine to 10 months to build. This took four to five months. Decisions were made every day. We made sure nothing went wrong, and it got done on time.” – JIM FAZIO



Photo: Ryangolf

Architect Jim Fazio made Frenchman's Creek the main feature of the North Course.

liked the project. Because he only does a few jobs a year, Fazio spends a lot of time on each project. He only missed three and half days on the Frenchman's Creek project.

"Most projects take nine to 10 months to build," he says. "This took four to five months. Decisions were made every day. We made sure nothing went wrong, and it got done on time. It saved everybody time and money. The con-

tractor was the biggest asset. Nothing was too hard for them. They had enough people and equipment to do the job. They understood the architect's wishes. They got decisions in minutes, not hours, and did a first-class job in a professional manner."

The owners decided to use Sea Isle 1 paspalum on the fairways, roughs and tees and TiffEagle Bermudagrass on the greens.

"We didn't need salt-tolerant grass, but when we renovated the South Course, we used TifSport and weren't happy with the results," Cohen says. "So we went to other courses that had used paspalum. It's a hearty grass, and you get a much better lie. I'm not sure if it will stand up to the cart traffic better than TifSport, but it allows for better playability from the fairway than TifSport, which tends to lie down."

Hurricane alley

Another significant and challenging aspect of the project was the removal, harvesting and replanting of about 200 oak trees and 650 palm trees. They were harvested on a nearby farm then placed back on the course as it was being rebuilt. Cohen says the palm trees held up through the hurricanes but the oaks didn't — 40 to 50 of the oak trees went down after the first hurricane (Frances) came through and then had to be put back up. Three weeks later Jeanne came through and knocked down 60 to 70 oaks.

The project was completed right before the first hurricane came through, and it affected the grow-in of the last few holes, but not the construction.

"There's a clear difference between the holes that were done first and the ones that were done last, but that will even up this summer," Cohen says. "The hurricanes delayed the opening about two weeks later than we planned. We expected to open right after Thanksgiving originally, and we opened Dec. 11."

"We had a couple of holes we did last that



Quotes from the judges

"Frenchman's Creek was a total blowout and do over. It had a very large scope of work and also was affected by the hurricanes, and Ryangolf managed to get the project done on time and on budget. I didn't see a lot of the specific techniques other than just working harder, smarter and longer, but that's always a good thing on a renovation project."

— **Jeff Brauer**, golf course architect and president of GolfScapes

"Everything was new, including three waterfalls and a creek system. They were subjected to four hurricanes. They ended up with no change orders, and they were only two weeks behind schedule with all the bad weather. The attention to detail was well done and outlined by all the principles at the club. As a side note, they were pioneers. They elected to go with seashore paspalum on everything except the greens, where they went with TiffEagle Bermudagrass."

— **Terry Buchen**, CGCS, president of Golf Agronomy International

"The impact of the proposal from Frenchman's Creek was most noticeable for me because it was such an extensive project. I found the before-and-after pictures informative, which demonstrated the attention to detail that was used on a comprehensive project."

— **Henry Delozier**, vice president — golf, Pulte Homes

"I was impressed with Frenchman's Creek because they had to deal with four hurricanes, and they were only two weeks delayed through all that. The package they presented was thorough, and they had great before-and-after pictures, so it was easy to see the differences."

— **Chris Wilczynski**, golf course architect with Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates

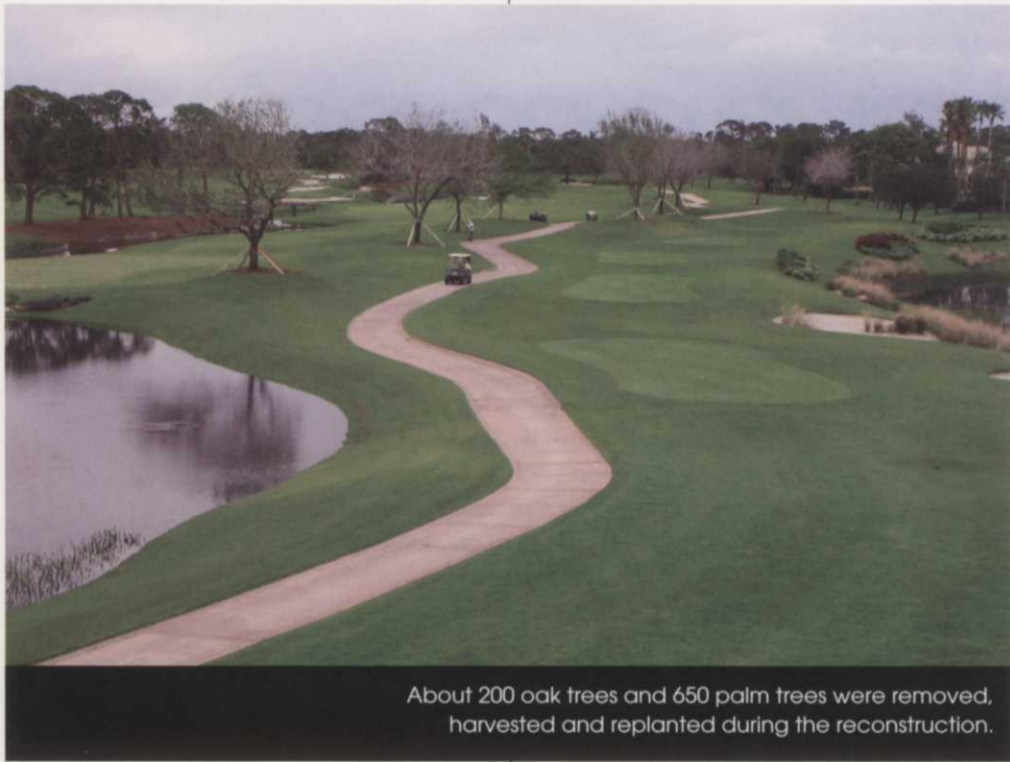


Photo: Ryangolf

About 200 oak trees and 650 palm trees were removed, harvested and replanted during the reconstruction.

got screwed up by the hurricanes, but the hurricanes didn't affect the construction of the course," Garcia says. "The first hurricane came right after we finished. Then we fixed all the washouts. The hurricanes slowed the growth of the grass down a bit because there was too much water."

Fazio says the hurricane defoliated everything and took the wind out of his sail.

"This spring, we might see more trees die because they got knocked down twice," he says.

A team effort

Even though the project was successful, Cohen says the owners were a bit unsure of the project in the beginning.

"The community was leery about this renovation because they weren't happy with the last renovation," he says. "They paid an assessment for the first renovation, and they were charged an assessment for this one. But the coordination was extraordinary. Everyone was well organized. The community has been overwhelmingly sat-

AT A GLANCE	
Frenchman's Creek Country Club - North Course	
Location:	Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.
Builder:	Ryangolf
Architect:	Jim Fazio
Superintendent:	Norm Pilote/Wes Dillard
Owner:	Frenchman's Creek (600 homeowners)
Date construction began:	April 5, 2004
Date construction completed:	Aug. 22, 2004
Date course opened:	Dec. 12, 2004
Total project cost:	\$4.9 million
Greens:	TifEagle Bermudagrass
Tees:	Sea Isle 1 paspalum
Fairways:	Sea Isle 1 paspalum
Par:	72

isfied with the course."

Garcia says spending a month planning the project before the company started was one reason why the project went smoothly.

"It was a team effort with our crew, the subcontractors and the Frenchman's group," he says. "It was so easy to do because Fazio was there every day. He was very proactive. 600 owners are difficult to satisfy because they are used to perfection. People were upfront and honest. We let the owners know what we were behind on and what we were ahead on. The only cloud over this project is Norm's death. He was a great guy and helped in any way he could. All energy was focused on the solutions. This is one of those projects where we can look back and say that we couldn't have done anything better. The fun part is we know how to do it again."

Pilote died of a heart attack one week before the North Course opened, and assistant superintendent Wes Dillard took over as superintendent.

Garcia says the quantity of projects the company does aren't important, service after the sale is important and the No. 1 marketing tool is references.

"All I have to do for references in Palm Beach county is call John Cohen and have him give us a recommendation," he says. "Our clients are the most important asset we have." GCN

For more information about Ryangolf, visit www.ryangolf.com or call 954-571-2088.

"This was a big project - almost \$5 million - and was well done. The most impressive thing was they were delayed only two weeks by the four hurricanes. They received high marks from the superintendent and the architect, and not quite as strong, but strong, from the owners."

— **Ray Davies**, director of golf course maintenance and construction, CourseCo

"Four storms at Frenchman's Creek certainly was a hindrance to the contractor, but they still got the work done in about a four- or five-month period. They received extremely high marks from the architect, superintendent and the owner by only missing their deadline by two weeks. There were no change orders by the contractor - all change orders were derived from the owner. It was a huge project, a complete renovation, including additional water features. They also changed all of the grass varieties to paspalum and TifEagle on the greens."

— **Ken Gorzycki**, director of golf course maintenance at Barton Creek Resort and senior regional superintendent for ClubCorp

