

## I did it my way

ONE GOLF COURSE OWNER ISN'T SO CRAZY AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

by  
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GCN INTERVIEWS  
JOE SALEMI,  
OWNER OF  
BOULDER CREEK  
GOLF CLUB IN  
STREETSBORO,  
OHIO

About eight years ago, I received a phone call from a guy who said he was building a great new course about 20 miles from my home in Cleveland and I should come see it as soon as possible. He said he was a novice, but he was designing and building the course pretty much himself and it was going to be special. Boulder Creek, he called it.

I receive many of these calls – usually from well-intentioned folks with more money than sense – so I told him, “Yeah, sure. I’ll get out there sometime.” Another crazy rich guy, I thought. Then blew it off.

During the next couple years, driving by the site near Interstate 80, I watched the course come to life. Hmmm ... nice piece of land, I thought. I should check it out. Still, I didn’t. Then the course opened and, to my surprise, it turned up on *Golf Digest’s* list of best new public courses. Wow, I’ve got to get out there, I told myself. Still, I didn’t.

Fast forward five years ... a buddy of mine called to say he needed a fourth for a tee time at ... Boulder Creek. Cool, I finally get to check out the crazy guy’s course. When I get there, before I even get to the first tee, I notice the crazy guy has done many smart things.

The small clubhouse is integrated – one wide counter doubles as an all-in-one pro shop sales desk, check-in point and snack bar. One person can do it all. Doors on either side of the building lead to a partially covered, lighted practice range. The covered part of the range features banks of garage doors so it can serve as secure storage for carts in the off-season. A clever system allows picked-up range balls to be fed into a cleaning hopper and automatically fed right into the machine that dispenses them again.

The price point is attractive for a ranked course at about \$55. Lots of nice landscaping, including hanging baskets of geraniums, lined the route to the first tee.

Another thing I noticed: The parking lot was full ... on a drizzly overcast Tuesday ... in October.

Wow, maybe the crazy guy’s onto something. So I decided right then and there

to find out more about what led Boulder Creek’s owner, designer, builder and chief cook and bottle washer, Joe Salemi, to create his own course and run it in a way that seems pretty different from the average “country club for a day.” Turns out he is crazy ... like a fox. Here’s what I found out.

**Q What prompted you to do this?**

My family’s in the excavating business. We do a lot of big jobs, like the office buildings in downtown Cleveland. I got into development and was looking for a parcel for a residential subdivision. I was checking it out when I noticed the parcel behind it was a spectacular spot for a golf course. It was being leased by a sand and gravel company at the time, so we had to get that changed and finally bought it in the mid ’90s.

I never played golf until three or four years out of college but fell in love with the game. I always had wanted to build a course. If you love this game, you have two dreams: play on the Tour or build your own course. Well, I can think just as good a game as Tiger, but my body just can’t do it, so I went for option number two.

**Q You didn’t know much about course design and construction. What did you do to educate yourself?**

I read every book on design that I could get my hands on. If I had to pick one book, it’s A.W. Tillinghast’s “The Course Beautiful.” He wrote some brilliant stuff. I read everything by Alistair MacKenzie, who’s the architect I admire most. We’re using quotes from him on the inside cover of the yardage book. I’m also erecting a MacKenzie monument near the clubhouse along with quotes from different architects on plaques around the course.

But the guy who blew me away was George Crump. If you read his books, he said way back then that Pine Valley would be one of the greatest ever. How did he know that?

The other one I love is Pete Dye. Nobody

today can even carry Pete Dye’s briefcase. His book “Bury My Heart in a Pot Bunker” should be required reading for everyone in the business.

**Q How’d you get the project done?**

We had aerial topography (mapping) done, and I did the routing plan myself. Then I had a retired superintendent on site for about eight or nine months clearing the property from the center line. We did three clears of about 30 feet from the center each time.

One advantage I had was that I had all the big toys – the dozers and excavators – that we needed to clear and shape. It took us two years to open, but we got it done. We were lucky to find a handful of people at various points to help with drainage, soil profiles, etc., just at the right times during the build.

**Q Sounds like luck played a big part in this thing.**

Do you believe in destiny? That’s us. I don’t know if I could ever do it again. This was such a massive project. I’ve done bigger stuff, but I built this golf course without any drawings. When I went to get permit approval from the city, I sat down with the mayor and city engineer and told them I had no plans. I had a copy of Pete Dye’s book with me. That’s it. They actually let me do it.

Also, at the time, the Army Corps of Engineers wanted to regulate isolated wetlands, which would have really killed us, but fortunately we fell into a legal black hole just before a Supreme Court ruling and avoided a huge amount of costs and hassles. It’s almost impossible to build a golf course economically. Between permits, stormwater regulations, inflation in the construction industry (steel, copper, oil, etc.), the complications and costs are just too much. We got incredibly lucky in so many ways. It was destiny that we pulled it off.

Then, one day, as I’m looking for a





D.S. Resch



shaper, this guy just shows up out of the blue – Matt Loos. He'd heard about our project and just stopped by. He'd been working all over the world, was looking to stay closer to home and wanted a shot at our project. He said, 'Show me something you want done.' Well, I'd cut out hundreds of pictures from different golf magazines and showed him a mounding feature I liked. He took off, and I came back later that afternoon, and you'd swear he'd shaped it just like the picture. Matt ended up doing the shaping, all the pipe work, etc. He talked his brother, Chris, into coming up here and working with us. He did all the greens and grow-in. We did everything in-house except the cart paths.

We also struggled to find labor during the project. Next thing I know, there's a van full of Mexican workers that pulled over right off the highway. They brought 20 to 35 guys. I would have never, ever got this golf course built without those guys. They worked seven days a week, weather permitting. A couple of them still work for us.

It's like Texas hold 'em poker: Every time I got down to my last card, I rolled a flush on the river. I'm so lucky that I got a chance to do this and didn't go broke.

## **Q** What makes the course different?

It's a great golf course and a great value. We've never heard we have 'Mickey Mouse' holes or it's unfair. The general golfing public likes us. You can't buy that, you have to earn it.

## **Q** You still do marketing to attract play though?

We advertised on radio, in print and on TV to attract golfers that first time. We collect e-mail addresses and make offers on the Web site. But, golfers' experiences are what keeps them coming back. We listen to people. You have to cater to your customers. People who blow smoke up your butt do you no good. We fixed many things on the course based on that input.

Initially, we had many complaints about yardage markers. So, we put in the Kirby markers and eliminated the complaints. Green speeds were also a little too low. Unfortunately, the average golfer judges golf courses by the speed of the greens ... even if they can't putt on them. Our greens are G-2 bentgrass. They're Ferrari greens, but we manage them cautiously because we also want keep up speed of play.

If I had to sum up why average golfers like us, it's because we give them a fair round of golf. There are no blind shots. People don't leave unhappy about surprises. If you don't

give the people what they want, you're going to go broke. They want lush conditions, they want fast greens, and they want to be able to find their ball. They don't like unplayable golf courses where you're constantly looking for lost balls. Right now, we're spending the money to clean out areas that slow down play and frustrate golfers.

## **Q** Was the course meant to be an anchor for real estate?

That wasn't part of the plan at all. I just wanted to build the best course I could. But I recently sold part of the adjacent property to Ryan Homes and it is putting in 265 units.

## **Q** How did you set your price point?

We never did a marketing analysis or anything like that. I had no numbers at all. I had purchased the land free and clear and put a couple of million dollars of my own into it. Then I borrowed another \$2.5 million to finish.

The one thing I knew was the general public can't afford \$150 per round – that's Economics 101. Also, I wasn't in this to make a lot of money. Then, a few days before we were set to open, I read an article in *Golf* magazine that suggested \$68 per round was about the maximum an average golfer would pay. So we stuck with that. Now, we're doing 20,000 to 25,000 rounds per year at about \$60 per round average.

## **Q** What kind of play do you get?

We get many customer golf. We get many guys that decide if they're going to play somewhere outside their club, they want to come here. We also get many guys who've dropped out of private clubs.

We don't do many big outings. We stay busy enough with our tee sheet. We have that luxury.

## **Q** You did some things structurally that are different than most facilities. How did you come to design the set-up that way?

When I laid out the range, I eliminated steps to reduce labor. The way we're set up in the pro shop, it takes a total of two or three people to run the entire clubhouse. We could write the book on lean golf management. We have no budget. We just spend as little as we can.

For grow-in, I bought used equipment – it's going to be destroyed in the process anyway. When you're done, you don't feel like you've wasted it. One of the biggest mis-

takes made by new golf courses is buying \$500,000 worth of new equipment that's going to get trashed.

We bought our equipment and carts versus leasing. My background is accounting. We can write those off effectively. We get five years of use out of the carts. After five years, they're still worth \$1,500 each. I'm only down a little at that point. And I've paid the equivalent of the lease costs and still have the down payment on new carts. We pay cash for everything and buy used equipment whenever we can.

It goes back to my Italian family roots. We say, 'There's the right way, the wrong way and the Italian way.' We do things a little differently.

## **Q** What do you like most about your business?

I'm lucky we don't have a budget, and there are no committees or any of that junk. Also, the opening of the course was just the beginning. Now, we're dressing things up and constantly adding new features. That's fun.

This course is a legacy to my family. Plus, I always wanted to do it. We've been a great nation and every generation has given more than it's taken. When I leave I want this to be a public golf course that every one can enjoy and afford. It's my contribution back to the game and society.

## **Q** What trends in the industry do you lose sleep about?

Most operators aren't looking at simple economics. We've built too many courses and put too much financial pressure on operators, such as the changes in the tax laws, permitting costs, etc. Plus, Cleveland has changed. There are fewer big corporation headquarters and a lot fewer people with club memberships.

The whole lifestyle in America has changed and made the private country club a dinosaur. The stay-at-home mom isn't sitting around the club playing bridge all day long. The dad isn't playing golf and hanging around playing cards all night. No one hangs out at clubs like they used to. Also, there's been an explosion of restaurant options, and the elite dining concept that used to support clubs isn't in demand any more. It's an absolute waste.

## **Q** You mentioned leaving a legacy behind when you're gone. How would you like your golf obituary to read?

Just like Sinatra. Boulder Creek: I did it my way. GCN