

GOLF BUSINESS PROFILE

Nature and architecture combine to create quiet Florida resort

by Scott Scredon, assistant editor



The delicate warmth of a May morning reassures golfers in most parts of the country that the season is just beginning. They don't even care too much about those first few double bogeys; they have at least four months to work the kinks out of their game.

For others, though, the fresh air flashes back memories of the week or 10 days when they jetted to Florida during winter. Some of those vacationers came to the Grenelefe Golf & Racquet Club, where they played golf every morning and the evenings were disturbed only by snowplows that rambled past cars buried in snow on the television news.

When people step outside of their condominium or home at this central Florida resort, they are getting ready to barbecue dinner or walk to their cars and drive to the golf course. Grenelefe includes two 18-hole courses that sit about 12 miles north-east of Cypress Gardens. It also seems to be a few miles from just about anything else except acres of orange groves, an environment its owners try to sell to prospective buyers.

(Clockwise): A golfer stops for water at one of the cedar kegs placed on Grenelefe's West course; the architecture of a condominium's sharp-angled roof is duplicated with tee markers on each hole; pro shop employees prepare for early morning rush of vacationers.

Although the 800-acre complex also includes a tennis village, two swimming pools, two restaurants, and a lounge, these facilities are almost throw-ins, according to Ed Causey, director of golf operations. "Grenelefe is really a golf resort. A person comes here to relax and play golf."

The real estate venture has been put together by Florida's Arrowhead Associates, Inc. and will eventually include 759 condominiums and 188 homes. The condominium owners rent their units to vacationers during much of the year and share the revenue with Grenelefe management. About half of the land is now covered with recreational facilities or living units, the new East golf course designed by Ed Seay being the latest addition.

Causey and Paul Hickman, director of grounds maintenance, have the

"Red ball washers take away the natural beauty."

job of making their courses more attractive than other resorts in Florida and the southeastern United States. The Grenelefe project is about 4¼ years old and the biggest push to sell its real estate program is on now. A mediocre golf operation could easily send retirees and investment seekers elsewhere.

Blends with natural setting

Hickman has attempted to integrate the central Florida vegetation and the architecture of Grenelefe's red cedar buildings with the golf courses. The three buildings under construction when he arrived here in 1973 featured sharp-angled roofs. A number of other buildings in the complex have similar shapes since cedar needs this slope for proper drainage.

Hickman decided then to use blocks of cedar for tee markers, cut at an angle similar to the roofs so the courses would blend with the development. Out-of-bounds markers, signs designating golf car paths, and

stakes that hold ropes keeping cars off the tees are also cut with this angle.

Other man-made structures have also been altered to complement the terrain. Ball washers are painted green and the benches sitting on the tees have been built with the same

kind of wood used in the condominiums.

"Most red ball washers take away the natural beauty of the course," says Hickman. The absence of bright red washers gives the golfer a chance to notice the azaleas around each tee



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and other native plants, such as the India Hawthorne. Texas sage plants are also used, as 150-yard markers. Palmettos dot the perimeter areas and oak and pine trees occasionally come into play near fairways. "It gives the golfer a variety of hazards. In South Florida, they have five traps on a hole. There's nothing else to offer the golfer."

Another of Hickman's innovations is the use of five cedar kegs, each holding two gallons of water, to quench a player's thirst instead of water coolers. This is one move that hasn't worked to well, however. The water looked dirty after some of the paraffin from inside the kegs broke loose. The cedar also gave the water a "woody" taste and the cost of maintaining them has been "astronomical," Hickman says.

One of the 15 employees who works full-time on the golf courses spends about an hour each day gathering up the kegs, taking them back to the maintenance barn in the northwest corner of the resort to refill them, and placing them back on the course. But there are plans to run water lines under some parts of the course so potable water can be pumped in.

Hickman seems to receive enough money to buy top quality equipment and pay his workers well to keep the golf courses in shape. The equipment includes three gang mowers costing about \$14,000 each and six greens mowers at \$4,500 apiece. Overall, the hardware is valued at approximately \$120,000. About \$300,000 has been allocated for course maintenance, equipment repair, and payroll, but Hickman believes this amount can be reduced.

Money can't solve all of his problems, though, including some experienced by the superintendent at any municipal course. The constant play forces Hickman to change cups every two days, but his crew rarely completes the job they begin at 6:30 a.m., only 1½ hours before the golfers start teeing off.

Pro wants changes

Ed Causey is in the process of re-vamping the golf operation after taking over the top post this winter. His 1,200-square-foot pro shop becomes a tight fit for golfers in mornings during

“Pro Ed Causey sells his softgoods with a focus on the Grenelefe logo, believing customers want something to show their friends. ‘Most of it is impulse buying’, he says.”

the season. The shop is also without a front door, easily confusing visitors even after three or four trips there. Causey hopes the new clubhouse to be built for the East course will allot him about 2,500 square feet for the shop.

There is further congestion when golfers want to hit balls off the driving range before beginning their rounds. Causey has plans to separate the range operations from those in the pro shop.

“The range has a good location (a few hundred feet outside the pro shop and the first tee), but the balls need to be kept there. We're going to get a big hopper that holds about 5,000 balls and sell the customer a token in the shop to get the balls at the range. We'll get him in the shop to generate sales, but we don't want to lug the balls in from the range.”

Grenelefe's popularity has also squeezed some space in the locker room. Causey feels that three of four new showers and 125 to 150 new lockers are needed to make the facility more comfortable.

Causey has been hired to make Grenelefe a better-known operation based on his experience. He has been a golf professional for 26 years. He is a former president of the Alabama and Georgia PGA Sections and also served on the PGA's national executive committee from 1975 to 1977.

Causey expects pro shop sales to reach \$125,000 at Grenelefe this year. About 60 percent of his goods are sold from January through April and 60 percent of the annual sales is from softgoods. He carries only three to five lines of clubs, and only major ones

such as Wilson and Hogan. Even these sales are made primarily to the 400 local members who live at Grenelefe. Between 100 and 150 putters and about 100 utility clubs, mostly pitching and sand wedges, are stocked throughout the year. But the clubs probably account for less than 10 percent of pro shop sales. The remaining sales come from balls, gloves, caps and shoes, Causey said.

He is selling his softgoods with a focus on the Grenelefe logo. Like most resorts, they're selling their name so the customers can show something to the people back home. Causey also believes in merchandising the goods so people can easily spot the logo. “Most of it is impulse buying,” he said.

Causey employs about 20 persons during the January-April period. There are four assistant pros who work full-time, two for each course. Besides coordinating the car rental and scheduling tee times, each is given a half-day per week to play golf with members and can give lessons around their other duties.

The pro also believes service is a necessity at a resort facility. Clubs can be cleaned and stored and shoes are dusted off. A collection of new rental clubs that would impress any golf guest is also available.

Hickman and Causey seem ready to handle the number of persons who will visit Grenelefe in the near future as more Americans look to central Florida to establish a new residence. Causey feels satisfied when he thinks about the 122 golf cars that are used twice each day during the season. The customers aren't the only happy people at Grenelefe. □