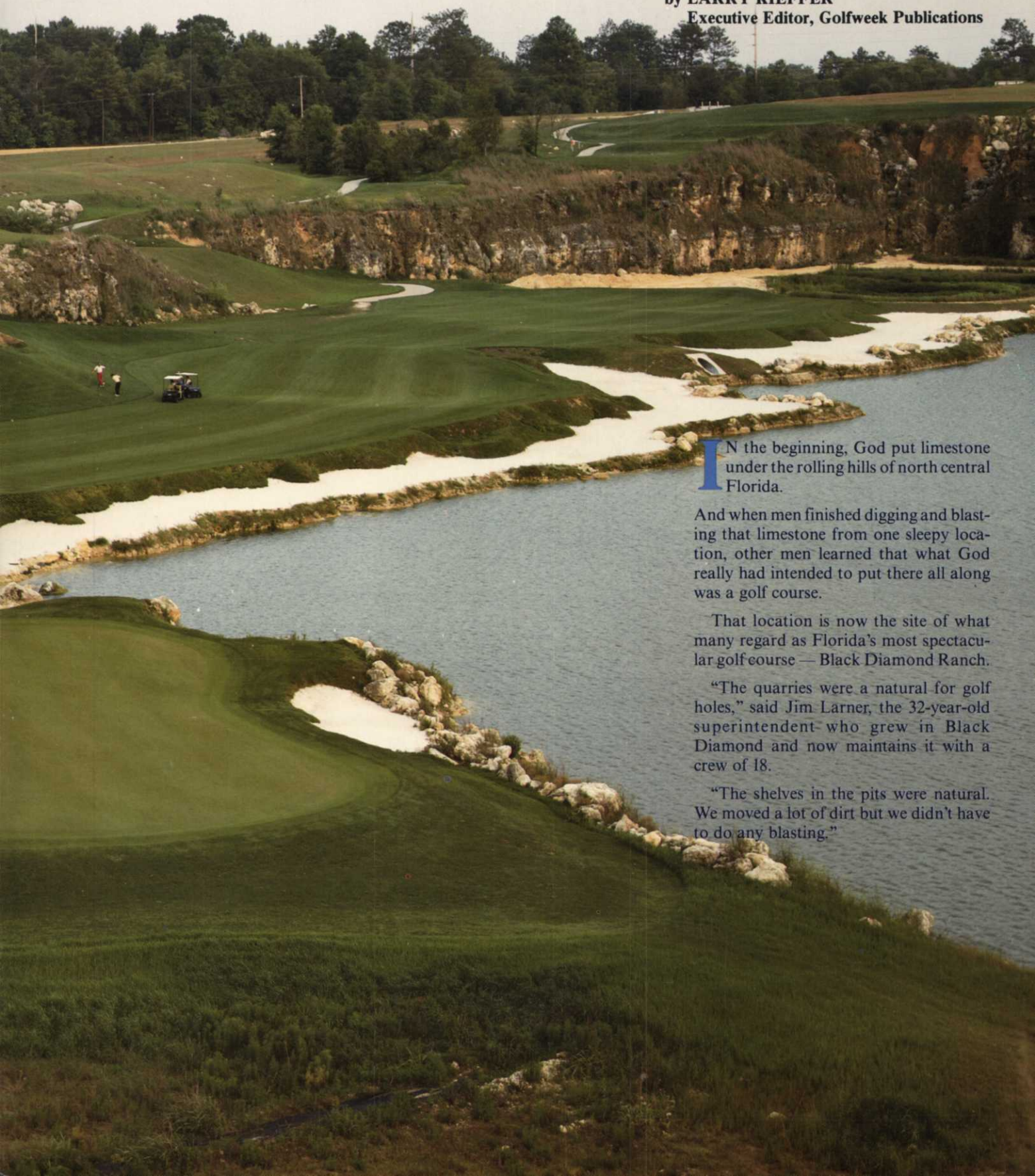


Black Diamond Ranch God Provided The Rough

Man Carved Out A Diamond

by LARRY KIEFFER
Executive Editor, Golfweek Publications



IN the beginning, God put limestone under the rolling hills of north central Florida.

And when men finished digging and blasting that limestone from one sleepy location, other men learned that what God really had intended to put there all along was a golf course.

That location is now the site of what many regard as Florida's most spectacular golf course — Black Diamond Ranch.

“The quarries were a natural for golf holes,” said Jim Larner, the 32-year-old superintendent who grew in Black Diamond and now maintains it with a crew of 18.

“The shelves in the pits were natural. We moved a lot of dirt but we didn't have to do any blasting.”



Good luck at the chasm between tee and green on No. 13.

Mounting the stairs to the 177-yard pro tees of No. 13, the first of five Quarry Holes.

“The key to the whole project was the quarries,” said Geoff Greene, president of Gulf to Lakes Corporation, which will develop Black Diamond’s 1200 acres of rolling timberland and sand scrub into 599 homesites and two golf courses over the next 10 years.

“The quarries were very spectacular before we ever started so they had to be done in such a way that the course wasn’t gimmicky. We wanted it to be a very top-rated golf course and it is possible to over-kill with one feature.

“Finding the right architect to do the right thing with those quarries was the key.”

After interviewing nearly a dozen — the list of candidates reads like a “Who’s Who of Golf Course Architecture” — Greene and his boss, Gulf to Lakes owner Stan Olsen, settled on Tom Fazio.

“Tom is a true architect with a tremendous respect for nature,” Greene said. “Too many so called architects are really players or developers at heart but Tom Fazio is a true architect. He’s done a miraculous job in utilizing the quarries but keeping the overall effect natural.” Fazio worked five holes — Nos. 13 through 17 — in and around the two quarries.

“Vertical drops of up to 100 feet, large boulders, wild flowers, cliffs and crystal

BLACK DIAMOND RANCH GC

FACTS & FIGURES

LOCATION:	40 miles southwest of Ocala. On Route 491, about a mile north of Lecanto, which is on SR 44 between Inverness and Crystal River.
DEVELOPER:	Gulf to Lakes Corporation, Crystal River, Fla.
MANAGEMENT:	Stan Olsen, principal; Geoff Greene, president; Terry LaGree, general manager; Jim Larnar, superintendent.
SIZE & SCOPE:	120 acres comprising 599 single-family homesites and two golf courses, clubhouse and full package of country club amenities when built out in 10 years.
PLAYING POLICIES:	Strictly private; members must be resident property-owners; course will be turned over to members when community is completely built out.
COURSE ARCHITECT:	Tom Fazio
CONTRACTORS:	Fazio Associates did major earth moving; Central Florida Turf did irrigation, final grading and planting.
TERRAIN:	Rolling to moderately hilly. Five holes built around two retired limestone quarries offering elevation changes of more than 100 feet.
SOIL:	Sand and clay
CHRONOLOGY:	First dirt moved January 1987; sprigging completed August 27, 1987; course opened Dec. 5, 1987.

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Hole No. 15, 371 yard, par 4, looking from behind the green down the fairway toward the tee. Inset, No. 15 from the pro tee.



clear Black Diamond Lake make these holes some of the most exciting golf to be found," writes Fazio in the course's yardage book.

"This unique piece of land offers spectacular, panoramic views unheard of in the Southeast."

Strong words for a man who lives not far from the Blue Ridge Parkway in the North Carolina mountains.

Although they are spectacular, the five Quarry Holes are not the most difficult on the course. They offer long carries over water and unplayable wasteland from the back tees, but the less venturesome can play all five on the ground all the way.

First and foremost, Black Diamond Ranch is a members' course.

The quarries were not the only developmental challenges presented by the site.

"This golf course is one of the biggest challenges any superintendent could face," says Larner, who started as a golf course mechanic in his native Sarasota while still a student at Riverview High School.

"We sit right on top of the Floridian Aquifer. Except for the quarry pond (Black Diamond Lake) and a small irrigation pond, there is no water on the course."

Because there is no place to put storm runoff, each hole had to be built to retain its own water, Larner said. The percula-

COURSE LENGTH:	5321-7159 yards. Course rating and Slope not yet available.
TEES:	At least four and as many as seven tees available for each hole. Turf: 328 bermudagrass cut to 3/8 inch; overseeded in winter with fiesta.
FAIRWAYS:	Rolling and severely banked and undulated. Turf: 419 bermudagrass cut to 1/2 inch; overseeded in winter with derby.
GREENS:	Average 8,800 square feet (range 3,000-10,000). Stimpmeter reading not available. Turf: Tifdwarf bermudagrass cut to 5/32 inch; overseeded in winter with a mixture of Pennncross bentgrass and saber.
ROUGHS:	Bermudagrass within coverage area of twin-row irrigation system is cut to about 1-1/4 inches; remainder is native sand scrub, predominantly wiregrass.
WATER:	Only two bodies of water come into play: an irrigation pond on No. 9 and Black Diamond Lake (quarry pond Nos. 14 and 15).
OTHER HAZARDS:	96 bunkers filled with DOT sand; transitional grasses are centipede and zoysia. Mounds sodded with zoysia.
DRAINAGE:	Each hole, some with drainage retention areas, must hold 100 percent of its own water at a percolation rate of 1/2-inch per hour or slower.
MAINTENANCE STAFF:	18 on golf course, including one assistant superintendent and two mechanics.
EQUIPMENT:	Toro Varitime, irrigation control, Toro 450D fairway mower, Toro greensmower, John Deere 856 4-wheel drive with 5-gang pull unit, 4 John Deere tractors, 10 Flymos built from spare parts.

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Hole No. 16, 218 yard par 3.



Hole No. 13, 183 yard par 3.

tion rate is limited to an inch every two hours, meaning several holes acquired drainage retention areas just off the fairway.


The DRAs, however, do not look out of place. Except for the playing areas, all of Black of Diamond has been left pretty much in its natural state.

“That’s a big thing with Fazio,” Lerner said. “If it’s not a tee box, a fairway or a green, then leave it alone. He likes things natural.”

Bermudagrass extends to the coverage area of the twin-row irrigation system, often defined by rows of trees. Beyond that, the dominant vegetation is wiregrass and palmetto scrub. Except on one hole, at least 100 feet of natural wasteland separates the fairways from the rear lot lines.

Drainage is not the only problem at Black Diamond caused by water. Particularly in the quarries, the fairways are severely banked and undulated. Torrential downpours during the grow-in period caused considerable erosion.

“But on the whole, I would have predicted that we would have had more problems here than we did,” Lerner said. “I thought sure we would have a problem with air circulation and fungus on those

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- A stylized illustration of a green gator, shown from the side, with its head at the top left and its body curving downwards towards the bottom right. The gator is rendered in a bright green color with black outlines for its scales and features.
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No. 14, 529 yard, par 5 from green back to tees. Pro tee is at extreme right.

greens down in the pits and I thought maybe the limestone and clay would interfere with turf growth but so far nothing has developed.”

One problem he didn't expect was with the zoysiagrass planted on several mounds and around the bunkers.

“It isn't doing well at all,” Lerner said, “But that might be because it's a slow grower and we really poured on the nitrogen last fall during the grow-in period, which was very short.”

Sprigging was completed Aug. 27, 1987 and the course opened for play Dec. 5.

Still the course hasn't really been under much stress since it opened. Play is limited strictly to the 50-some members who have bought lots at Black Diamond.

“When they pay \$50,000 to \$100,000 for a lot, those members deserve their privacy,” says Greene.

“We knew from the beginning that this project either had to be a wide open resort or strictly private. You can't do both. It's not fair to make somebody who's paid a lot of money for his membership share his golf course with a weekend warrior.

“And we decided very early on to make this a private course.”



Jim Lerner inspects the zoysia-sodded banks behind No. 14 green. Zoysia didn't do too well in first season because of high fertilization during grow-in of playing areas.

The decision to go private was one factor which led to the hiring of Lerner.

“We interviewed a lot of superintendents and looked at their courses and most of them had outstanding maintenance programs but in addition to being bright, young and aggressive — all qualities we were looking for — Jim had three things going for him: stability, grow-in experience and he survived the transition at his last golf course from the developer to the equity members.”

Before his move to Black Diamond in March of 1987, Lerner had spent the last 10 years at Palm Aire CC in Sarasota, the last seven as superintendent. He grew in the club's second 18 holes and saw it through the transition in ownership.

“Ordinarily, when the members take over, the first thing that happens is the pro and the superintendent lose their jobs,” Greene said. “Jim survived. That was impressive.”

“It was a very difficult decision,” said Lerner of the move to Black Diamond. But a heady weekend in February 1987 convinced the two-time president of the Suncoast GCSA to leave culturally refined Sarasota — his lifelong hometown — for the wilds of tiny Lecanto, 45 miles southwest of Ocala between Inverness and Crystal River.

“Here I was, settled in as the superintendent at an established, 36-hole private club. I didn't think there was any way I would move.”

Lerner consented to the initial interview out of respect for Black Diamond General Manager Terry LaGree, whom Lerner had known from LaGree's days as a landscape architect with Palm Aire.

“I went up on a Friday and interviewed

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with Terry and Geoff Greene and once I saw the project, I knew I'd have to consider it," he said. "I told them I'd have to talk it over with my wife but the next day, Saturday, they called and asked if (wife) Terri and I could come up and have lunch with the owner, Stan Olsen. We came up, did the interview, took a quick look around and came home. Monday morning, they called and asked if they could fly in that afternoon to look at my golf courses. They did and when I put them on the plane to go home, I said I'd take the job if they offered it to me.

"They called the next morning to ask when I could start."

"Starting" meant starting from scratch, including the hiring of a crew of 18 to maintain the golf course plus six more to handle the landscaping throughout the rest of Black Diamond.

His assistant, Stuart Bozeman, came from the maintenance staff at Meadowcrest, Gulf to Lakes Corporation's nearby swimming and tennis community.

"Your crew is what makes you," Larner says. And he said it's much easier to recruit and retain a good crew at a place like Black Diamond because "every time something gets written about this place, I make sure they know about it and that they know I think they are responsible for keeping this place as spectacular as it is.

"The hardest thing is to get them to see things the way you see them, which should be the way the golfer sees them."

Larner also had to start from scratch with his equipment.

"I demonstrated every piece of equip-



Jim Larner, superintendent.

ment that I felt would handle the hills and undulations. I found I had to take pieces from different companies to get the job done."

Larner ended up with Toro 450D fairway mowers and Toro greensmowers, a John Deere 856 4-wheel-drive with a 5-gang pull unit for steep slopes and four John Deere tractors.

He also built 10 Flymos from spare parts.

"We live and die with the Flymos," Larner said. "You can't buy them anymore but at least the parts are still available."

Because of the steep banks at Black Diamond, three workers spend three and half days a week on them.

While his crew is mowing, Larner says he spends "about 25 hours a week" in the office and the rest inspecting the golf course and supervising the crew. In his

spare time, he likes to fish, swim and play golf.

"I live on the water over the Crystal River and I have two boats — a pontoon boat for the family and a 19-foot open fisherman for me."

He plays golf whenever he can ("I can play anywhere from a 10 to an 18, depending on how I'm swinging it"), which is not as often as he would like. He has unlimited playing privileges at Black Diamond and the rest of his crew gets to play on Thursdays, which is employee day.

When Black Diamond begins the transition to equity members, he looks forward to playing golf with the members of the greens committee.

"But not too often unless I am sure they can beat me," he says with an easy laugh.

"Actually, it's not as important to play with the committee members as it is to listen to them and never argue with them. If you disagree with something they want to do, don't tell them they're wrong, take them out on the course and show them why they're wrong. If you can't do that, then maybe they're not wrong."

After a pause, he adds:

"The nicest thing about this job is that I can do things the way I want to do them so long as I stay within my budget and get the job done. I can't describe the feeling I get when I walk out on the golf course two days after I've fertilized and it's greener.

"That's what the golf course superintendent is all about. If you don't have pride in your work, you're not going to make it." ■

BLACK DIAMOND RANCH GC

SUPERINTENDENT PROFILE

NAME: Jim Larner

AGE: 32

EXPERIENCE: Forest Lakes CC, Sarasota Fla. (18 holes, semi-private) began as mechanic in 1972 and switched to greenskeeper after six months; Sunrise CC, Sarasota, (18 semi-private) greenskeeper 1973-75; Bent Tree G&RC, Sarasota, (18, private) greenskeeper and heavy equipment operator 1975-77; Palm Aire CC, Sarasota (36, private equity), started as assistant superintendent in 1977 and became superintendent in 1979. Black Diamond Ranch GC, Lecanto, Fla. (18, private) superintendent 1987.

RESPONSIBILITIES: Golf course, Grounds maintenance and landscaping, and security. Total staff of 30.

PERSONAL: Married (Terri 1984) with one daughter (Tara 2); graduated from Sarasota Riverview High School in 1972.

PROFESSIONAL: Member of GCSAA since 1981; president of Suncoast Chapter 1985-87. Working on certification.

PHILOSOPHY: Don't argue with your staff or with the members of your greens committee. Listen very carefully to what they have to say. If you don't agree with them, take them out on the golf course and show them why they are wrong. If you can't do that, then maybe they're not wrong.