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Photo by Daniel Zelazek



Renaissance Vinoy Resort

A Landmark in Time

BY JOEL JACKSON, CGCS

Little did I know, when Cary Lewis became president of the FGCSA, that his course, the Renaissance Vinoy Golf Club, was part of one of our national treasures of historic places. I only knew that the course had been called the Stouffer Vinoy before Marriott's Renaissance Hotel Group bought it, and I didn't know much more than that. But then, that's what I like this job. It's full of interesting surprises.

Located on Snell Island in St. Petersburg, which is really just a peninsula on the west coast of Tampa Bay, the Renaissance Vinoy Resort and Golf Club is celebrating 75 years as a downtown landmark. The hotel is one of only 77 hotel properties on the National Register of Historic Places and is a member of the Historic Hotels of America Program of the National



Architect Ron Garl created two sets of double greens on the Vinoy course paying homage to the Old Course at St. Andrews. This view across the #12 and #15 complex shows the ornate clubhouse in the background. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

The hotel was built as the Vinoy Park Hotel in 1925 by Pennsylvania oil man Aymer Vinoy Laughner and was considered the grandest of the boom-era hotels for the world's most rich and famous.

Trust for Historic Preservation — an accolade bestowed on the nation's best-preserved historic properties. The Mediterranean Revival-style architecture of the hotel and golf clubhouse continues to dominate the St. Pete waterfront with style and grace.

The hotel was built as the Vinoy Park Hotel in 1925 by Pennsylvania oil man Aymer Vinoy Laughner and was considered the grandest of the boom-era hotels for the world's most rich and famous. According to the Laughner family archives, some of the country's wealthiest and most influential people of the times frequented the hotel: Calvin Coolidge; Herbert Hoover; Alf Landon; Babe Ruth; Admiral Robert Byrd; F. Scott Fitzgerald; the Pillsburys; the Fleischmanns; the Biddles of Philadelphia and the Smiths of Smith Corona.

The hotel survived the Depression of the 30s; the World War of the 40s and the Cold War of the 50s. However, lack of air conditioning and necessary repairs led to a slow decline of the once-opulent hotel and it finally closed its doors in 1974.

While the the hotel lay dormant for 18 years, the golf course remained open. The golf course opened in 1926 and, while some say Donald Ross had a hand in the original design, no proof exists to substantiate the claim. Over the years the course — built originally at sea level — was prone to flooding from storm surges.

In 1992 when Renaissance Hotels International under the Marriott flag purchased the resort. The hotel underwent a \$93 million renovation which focused

on preservation of the historic architecture while modernizing the infrastructure.

At the same time, golf course architect Ron Garl redesigned and rebuilt the old course. Using fill from seven manmade lakes on the property, Garl raised the course three feet above sea level. Two double greens salute old-style architecture and creation of waste bunkers, natural areas and improved wetlands give the course a distinctive Florida coastal course look and feel. Lewis came on board in 1992 to grow in the renovated golf course.

A native Floridian, who claims to be a fourth generation Florida Cracker from LaBelle, Lewis brought nearly 20 years of Florida golf course experience, including several grow-ins, to the project. No less colorful than his newly renovated resort home, I learned Lewis is a former rock-and-roll drummer and former high school football quarterback. Those facts have absolutely nothing to do with golf but help define his personality: outgoing and understanding of the responsibilities of leadership.

Anybody who knows Lewis will not be surprised to learn that I burned up two rolls of film and two and a half micro cassette tapes trying to capture the thoughts, ideas and stories from this good-natured professional who now takes the helm of our association. I have had the pleasure of knowing Lewis for nearly 15 years.

Wherever he is, he gets involved.

It is just part of his nature to take a deep interest in his profession and the industry. He has been the president of the Everglades and West Coast chapters and would have added the presidency of the Central Florida chapter to his resume had he not moved to St. Petersburg to take the Vinoy position.

Coming to the Vinoy and being part of the corporate environment was a new experience for Lewis, who was more accustomed to private club operations. But his willingness to learn and ability to communicate helped him rise to the position of director of grounds, responsible not only for the golf course but the hotel landscape as well. It is important to

note that the golf club and the hotel are over a mile apart, which means Lewis has had to rely on the people who work with him to make the whole operation successful.

On my tour of the golf course and hotel, Lewis proudly introduced the members of his staff from the greenskeeper sculpting the hedges to his assistant superintendent Dave Kane and landscape supervisor Tom Daley.

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The first and ninth holes are captured here in a birds-eye view from the clubhouse tower. Photographers are always looking for elevation. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

The hotel underwent a \$93 million renovation which focused on preservation of the historic architecture while modernizing the infrastructure.

“Dave is my barometer and my compass,” he said. “Sometimes when I get too involved in number-crunching projects, meetings and find myself looking only at the big picture, Dave will get me back on course with attention to the details of our daily mission and the needs of our staff.

“I think we make a good team. I tend to be free-wheeling, cheerleader type who gets excited about new projects and changes while Dave is the steady hand who likes to follow a plan methodically to its conclusion and then move on to the next project.

“The same goes for my landscape supervisor Tom Daley, an excellent young

man with good common sense, a love of landscaping, and a good leader. Since the hotel and golf course are separated, I rely on him to keep the hotel landscape in order. We are responsible for the interior plants as well as the exterior grounds. Tom has created a finely manicured tea garden and arboretum area on the grounds which is a popular natural area for the guests.”

“My goal is to be a good resource for Tom and keep him supplied with manpower and needed materials to get the job done. I have enjoyed the additional responsibility of the director of grounds position because it has given me the challenge to learn more about trees, orna-

mentals and annuals. Both Tom and I look for ways to incorporate as much low maintenance but colorful and interesting plant material into the hotel landscape to keep it unique and distinctive, befitting its historical significance.”

Another key member of Lewis’s staff is Christy Cordanio, his administrative assistant.

“Besides keeping the paperwork flowing smoothly, Christy has boosted morale tremendously by making our work environment just a little nicer. She spearheaded a clean-up campaign that resulted in repainting the office and break room areas and the addition of some curtains to give it that little extra touch.

“She also organized a baby shower for one of our employees and his wife, a Bosnian couple. They were overwhelmed by the donated baby stroller, car seat and all the other supplies new babies require. They were quite taken with the American generosity.”

Lewis said the clean-up bug quickly spread to the shop where painted floors and organized tool bins and walls helped improve not only appearances but efficiency and productivity as well. All of this, says Lewis, just goes to emphasize the need to stay in touch with your people and to create a good work environment.

Speaking of the environment, Lewis and his staff are currently in pursuit of attaining certification in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program. On our ride through of the course, Lewis pointed out several environmentally friendly features built into the course design.

“The course drainage system is designed to contain all runoff on the course and will hold the first 12 inches of rainfall. Around each of our seven manmade lakes we have an interceptor drain or filter. When the water levels rise, they feed into these drains first. This may make the course drain a little slower than we’d like, but I like the additional safety factor to contain our storm runoff.”

“On the site that is now the 17th hole, we used to have a stagnant, brackish area. During construction we created a salt water wetland complete with orange, red and black mangroves, salt-tolerant cordgrass and paspalum. The wa-

Cary Lewis

Originally from: Labelle. Fourth generation “cracker.” Family: Marla, wife of 25 years. Sons: Clayton (24) and Justin (16).

Education: 1978 Lake City Community College Golf Course Operations.

Employment history: 1978 San Carlos Park G.C.; 1978-81 Farington G&TC, Atlanta, Ga.; 1982-84 Grow-in of Windstar G.C., Naples; 1985 Grow in of The Vines G.C., Bonita Springs; 1986 Fiddlesticks G.C.; 1987-88 Self-employed Remote Sensing (Infrared Aerial Photography Service); 1988-91 Rebuilt C. C. of Orlando; 1992-present Renaissance Vinoy rebuild and grow-in. Purchased by Marriott in 1998.

Professional affiliations and awards: Member of FGCSA, FTGA, GCSAA. Past president of Everglades GCSA and West Coast GCSA. Rose to vice president of Central Florida GCSA before moving to West Coast Chapter. GCSAA committee work. USGA Greens Section Committee 1993-99. Chapter Director for the Gull Wing Road Riders Association (Honda motorcycle club).

Mentors: My mom; Al Frenette, Peachtree G.C., Atlanta; Bob Sanderson, retired superintendent and co-founder of Everglades GCSA; Clint Smallridge, CGCS, Banyan G.C.; Dan Jones, CGCS, South Florida Grassing, Inc., retired superintendent and former editor of *The Florida Green*; and Dale Reash, CGCS, Countryside C.C.

Memorable moments: My first grow-in. Being involved in the development of a golf course. Feeling like you’re leaving a permanent mark on this earth. To experience how positive a golf course can be on the environment.

Goals: To be the best that I can be, but to learn that life is short and have some fun along the way. Travel the back roads of this great country and meet the real people.

Advice and Philosophy: Treat all people like you want to be treated. Never forget the basics. These are the things that will get you through the tough times. Stay close to your staff. They are your arms and legs.

Hobbies and interests: Involvement in the future of our great business. Golf. Traveling on my Honda Gull Wing with Marla and really experiencing the environment.



Cary and Marla Lewis on their Honda Gull Wing.



Renaissance Vinoy GC

Name: The Renaissance Vinoy Resort and Golf Club

Location: Snell Island, St. Petersburg

Ownership: Renaissance International & Marriott International.

Playing Policy: Private Resort, 18 holes.

Yardage: 6,378; par 70. Course Rating/Slope Rating: 70.2/118

Designed by: Original designer in 1926 unknown; redesigned by Ron Garl and reopened in 1992.

Management Team: General Manager Russell Bond; Director of Golf Randy Mosley; Head Golf Professional Matthew Barnes; Director of Grounds Cary Lewis, CGCS.

Total acreage under maintenance: 110 acres with 94 acres of turf.

Greens: Average size: 8,700, total 4 acres; turf - Tifdwarf; HOC: 0.125 year round except 0.145 at aerification and overseeding. Overseed: Mariner creeping bentgrass (salt tolerant) @ 4 lbs./1000 sq. ft. with Darkhorse Poa trivialis @ 14 lbs/1,000. Green Speed goal: 9.0 - 9.5

Tees: 3.8 acres of Tifway 419; HOC: 0.5; overseeded with Signature Blend Perennial Rye @ 8 lbs./1000 sq.ft.

Fairways: 26 acres of Tifway 419; HOC: 0.5; overseeded with Signature Blend Perennial Rye @ 500 lbs./acre.

Experimenting with less heat-tolerant variety called Transist Intermediate Rye to expedite transition in the spring.

Bunkers: 39 with Standard M sand. Mechanically rake all bunkers with two Smithco Super Rakes. Four waste areas covering six acres. Originally in bunker sand. Converting to concrete washings (crushed shell).

Waterways/Ponds: Nine lakes covering 15 acres — 11 fresh water, 4 tidal and brackish water. Seven manmade 35-40 ft. deep for construction fill, two natural tidal marshes 3-4 ft. deep.

Irrigation: Reclaimed water; Carroll Childers pumps @ 1500 gpm. Toro Varitime II controllers. 800 hydraulic normally open heads; fertigate fall and winter with calcium nitrate and sulfate sources using dual head pump to offset high sodium content of reclaimed water.

Staff: 18 full time golf including superintendent and 5 landscape associates.

Key Personnel: Assistant Supt. Dave Kane; Landscape Supervisor Tom Daley; Shop Manager Eric Kulaas; Assist. Shop Manager, Danny Hiatt; Pest Control Technician Richard Orr; Irrigation Technician John Graffis; Administrative Assistant Christy Cordanio. The Vinoy G.C. employs OJT student interns from Lake City Community College, University of Florida and Pinellas Tech.

Major Renovations/Ongoing Projects: Capital equipment replacement program; renovation of waste bunkers with concrete screenings; ongoing drainage improvements; ongoing exotic plant control and removal; irrigation system upgrade in the planning stages.

Special circumstances: Low elevation. Only 3-4 ft. above sea level. High sodium content in soil and irrigation water. Construction with soil from old golf course with high weed seed and nematode counts. Minimal course closings for aerifications only. Balancing private member needs with resort play.

Communications: Daily pre-shift meetings with crew; weekly managers/supervisors staff meeting; monthly department meetings on safety and operational issues; monthly article in club newsletter; quarterly Ambassadors meeting with private club members.

Environment/IPM: Chipco Choice application for mole crickets with its low rate of product and effectiveness. Subsurface injection or slit injection of Namacur and other products to make product more effective and reduce surface contact. Selective post-emergent herbicide treatments as needed. Preemergent herbicide programs for weed control. Spray buffers around waterways. Wildlife log in pro shop. Working on ACSP certification. Site for annual St. Petersburg Audubon Society Bird Count.