

Carefree looks to add upscale resorts

By PETER BLAIS

CARMEL, Calif. — The 14th green is 95 yards wide and just 17 yards deep. Over those 95 yards a ball can pass through seven tiers, making approach shots difficult and long putts impossible.

"Pete Dye says he had nothing to do with it," chuckled Carmel Valley Ranch head pro Andy Cude, referring to the architect credited with the course's design.

"Pete was working on PGA West at the same time he was designing Carmel Valley. He didn't get up here a lot, so the construction crew took some things on themselves. Pete says the 14th green is one of several items he never quite intended."

At the urging of the new owners, Carefree Resorts, Dye has returned to Carmel Valley to modify the 14th green as part of the \$1.2 million remodeling about to get underway at the Northern California resort. That's the type of money the recently launched firm is prepared to spend to get its operations up to snuff.

Carefree is upgrading the three facilities in its high-profile resort portfolio — The Boulders in Phoenix, The Peaks at Telluride (Colo.) and Carmel Valley — and actively pursuing additional resorts.

"We're particularly interested in Mexico, Hawaii and the Caribbean," said Vice President of Marketing Michael Surguine. "If we add one property per year, we'll be satisfied. We don't want to be the largest resort operator, just the best."

To be considered for purchase, Surguine explained, a resort must meet three criteria. First, it must have a "magical" setting in a unique environment. Second, every amenity must blend in with the surrounding environment. And third, amenities and services must give guests the chance to interact with the environment.

"If you play golf at Carmel Valley or The Peaks, you're likely to see deer and foxes in the fairway. At The Boulders you'll come across rabbits and coyotes," Surguine said.

Carefree is a spinoff of Westcor — a major owner, developer and manager of retail, office, industrial and hotel properties in Phoenix. Westcor developed The Boulders, which opened in 1985. The Boulders has become one of the best-known resorts in the country. Two Jay Morrish-designed courses are major draws for the 1,300-acre facility in the Sonoran Desert foothills of Carefree.

The Boulders' success prompted Westcor founder Rusty Lyon to create Carefree Resorts. Lyon considered launching Carefree as early as 1989. But he waited, knowing the easily available credit fueling the acquisition boom of the late 1980s would eventually dry up. When banks stopped lending in the early 1990s, a financially healthy Westcor/Carefree was well-positioned to purchase property at more reasonable prices, Surguine said.

Following an unsuccessful acqui-

sition run at Rock Resorts — a group of small, boutique resorts founded by the Rockefeller family — Lyon launched Carefree last fall.

The new company moved quickly. In joint ventures with Morgan Stanley Real Estate Investment Fund, Carefree bought The Peaks at Telluride in September and Carmel Valley in October.

The Peaks is a mountain resort with a nearby championship golf course designed and still owned by the developer of the Telluride Ski Area. The pro shop and clubhouse are located within the Care-

free property and the course is used extensively by hotel guests.

Carefree has made Director of Agronomy Ed Miller — who oversaw renovations to Pebble Beach for the 1992 U.S. Open — available to The Peaks' course. Miller also oversees maintenance at The Boulders and Carmel Valley.

The major renovation at The Boulders involved resurfacing 33 greens with a desert bentgrass developed at the University of Arizona. The grass requires less water and has eliminated any poa annua, Surguine said.

As for Carmel Valley, course modifications are part of an overall \$3 million renovation plan that includes upgrades to the clubhouse, tennis and hotel operations. The main objectives are to eliminate blind shots off tees and improve visibility on approach shots, Cude said.

The major earthmoving work will be done on the mountainous 11th through 14th holes. Work was scheduled to begin in the fall, but may be moved up to summer, Cude said.

Bunkers will be repositioned and green elevations lowered on several holes making them more re-

ceptive to run-up shots. Water features will be added on the 2nd and 3rd holes. A new underground boiler system will circulate warm water under the 2nd green/3rd tee complex, where constant shade makes growing grass difficult.

Removing and transplanting trees along four holes will improve views of Carmel River.

"Just changing mowing patterns will make a difference," Surguine added. "Right now fairways run up to a very penal rough that continues all the way to the green. We'll cut back roughs so it's easier to stay within the fairway up to the greens."

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