

By MARK LESLIE

STUART, Fla. — And then there were two...

The Champions Club at Summerfield has become the first public-access facility in the country to be granted Audubon Signature Program status. The Tom Fazio design, which opened Feb. 8, 1994, joins the private Collier's Reserve in Naples as the only Signature facilities in the country.

Riverside Golf operates the course, which was built by Ryan Golf Construction, while Summerfield Stuart Partners (SSP) is building the neighboring housing development.

"Two things are especially important about The Champions," said New York Audubon Society President Ron Dodson, who administers the Signature and Audubon Wildlife Sanctuary programs for golf courses. "First, it is a public facility... Second, unlike other projects, the developers didn't spend a lot of money to qualify as a Signature project. One of the things people have been questioning us about when they see Collier's Reserve (and its very expensive, exclusive living) is whether it takes deep pockets.

"The fact of the matter is, Champions spent \$5 million on the course. And they spent only \$400,000 on their maintenance budget last year — which is unheard of in Florida. We want to showcase Champions as not only a public golf course, but one maintained and built according to our standards and done with minimal expenditures up front. And we're still saving on irrigation, electricity and other things.



Champions the first public-access Audubon Signature course

While the Audubon Sanctuary Program is directed and focused on existing golf courses, the Signature Program is designed for courses, or any development in the planning and development stages, prior to construction.

The 550-acre property belongs to Martin County and is being leased to Riverside Golf. Upland and wetland preserves encompass 275 acres of the land, filled with palmettos, scrub and slash pine, marsh and swamps. The golf course meanders over 100 acres cleared out in a lakes style.

For Rob Kloska, The Champions is his "first head superintendent job, first grow-in — first everything."

Getting the course into Signature status, Kloska said, was "an incredible opportunity for a young superintendent like myself. It was an arduous task, but has worked very well."

SSP, Kloska said, were "the leaders spearheading the effort of the Audubon."

"It begins with the site," said SSP President Joseph B. Fraser, nephew of famed Hilton Head developer Charles Fraser. "It's in Martin County, historically on the cutting edge of protecting the environment in the state of Florida. Second, we had a site that was very environmentally sensitive, with numerous good-quality wetlands... There were already a number of things we were required to do by the county and regulatory agencies. It made sense to us that to sell lots and rounds of golf to people attracted here, we should go the extra mile and do everything else that we could to preserve and enhance that environment and make it a special place for people to live and play."

The major accomplishment in the construction, Kloska said,

was water reclamation, "taking it off roadways and parking lots and channeling it back to the [one large and two small] irrigation lakes. Eighty percent of the water used is reclaimed from the roadways."

Indeed, the entire community — the housing component as well as golf — won Signature status. About 500 houses are projected.

An outgrowth of the project is that in this case, at least, it was shown that a majority of homeowners "will pay the same premium for a good view across protected wetlands — maybe with a fairway in the background — that they will to look across a lake at a fairway," Fraser said.

Kloska said The Champions is deeply dedicated to waste management and recycling at the clubhouse and maintenance building and on the course — things from cans and bottle to

trees and grass clippings.

"In our habitat enhancement the developer instituted a bird box program and we leave the dead trees that are not on the course for birds and other wildlife," said the former assistant superintendent at St. Andrews Country Club in Boca Raton, who was just 23 when ground was broken here in February 1993. "Anything that doesn't need to be cleared for the course was left native for habitat.

"In the design they were not allowed to let water flow from the course to the wetland areas. Retention 'swells,' mounded areas that hold water, were built so that runoff sits and percolates into the ground."

Even the turfgrasses — Bermudagrass tees, greens and fairways and zoysiagrass on bunker faces — were chosen for their low-care characteristics, according to the Ohio State graduate.

"Everything came together," Kloska said. "The most important thing was the way Fazio routed the course. Although it is narrow and has a lot of forced carries, the landing areas are wide and everything presents itself [to the golfer] very well."

"We designed the course to take best advantage of the existing vegetation," said Jan Beljan, Fazio's lead architect on the project. "There was already pretty good wildlife there. The marshes and wetlands are well integrated with the golf. You are with nature on that course — in many places surrounded by wetlands."

"The more people who get into the [Signature] program the better for all of us," Kloska said.

Kapalua/Heritage

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ence in the world of golf, administering Cooperative Wildlife Sanctuary and Signature programs to help preserve and enhance wildlife on golf courses. The Audubon Sanctuary Program is directed and focused on existing golf courses, while the Signature Program is designed for projects in the planning and development stages, prior to construction. More than 1,200 golf courses are involved in Sanctuary Program, and 21 have registered for the Signature Program, which has granted two Signature status.

Resorts are a new horizon and offer a canvas for a broader brush.

"I envision it as a destination resort equivalent to Mobil's 5-star designation for hotels," Dodson said. "Going there as a customer, you would know it is waste- and energy-efficient, habitat- and wildlife-sensitive, etc. We want to make sure that whether it is in Kentucky or Hawaii, there are opportunities to make customers and visitors understand the natural, cultural and human history of the area."

"We have a lot of golf courses at resort facilities," Dodson said. "But it seemed if you have people spending days and weeks, it would be great to take a whole resort property and develop a program that would essentially use our sustainability principles — the approach we use for Signature facilities — but also develop a cultural and environmental



The Village Course is one of three at Kapalua now involved in the Audubon Heritage Program.

education program that would link together the hotels, the golf course if there is one, bike paths, beaches, hotel rooms, even restaurant menus. When you went to these facilities you would have subtle environmental and educational experiences the whole time you were there — not jammed down your throat. You would see in your room that decisions were made for energy-efficient lighting, for water conservation. Interpretive signage along walkways would identify plants. And this would encourage people to do the same types of things around their homes."

At this point, Dodson pointed out, "It's a program concept but not a program yet." He anticipates it will take a year, with the Kapalua Land Co.'s commitment

in finances and labor, to develop a full program for other facilities to join.

Kapalua has three golf courses that are fully certified in the Audubon Cooperative Wildlife Program. The Village Course was first in the country.

Led by President and CEO Gary Gifford, Kapalua officials approached New York Audubon, offering "to donate money and property and to help develop the Heritage Program — the materials, approach and guidelines," Dodson said. "If all goes well, at the end of the year Kapalua will be our flagship resort site just as Collier's Reserve [in Naples, Fla.] is our flagship Signature site."

Kapalua's Don Young is overseeing an effort to draft a resource inventory of the

resort's 1,500-acre property, which includes a pineapple plantation, several miles of beach front, two hotels, seven residential enclaves of more than 700 condominiums, single-family residences and homesites, two tennis complexes, and an array of restaurants and shops.

"Kapalua presents some of the most diverse, unique resources in the world with the area's high mountain rain forest, cultural and archaeological sites, pristine bays preserving abundant marinelife, agriculture... and sweeping vistas of the Pacific," Dodson said.

While Kapalua will have its own Audubon Heritage Steering Committee, New York Audubon is also putting together a National Audubon Heritage Steering Committee, Dodson said.

"I think we're at the beginning of putting together a new, unique and exciting staff [of volunteers]," he said. "We don't want to get bureaucratic and top-heavy with a bunch of employees. We have this group of people I'll call cooperative staff members who may be university professors, business people, golf course superintendents — all top people in their field. We're giving them the opportunity to use their enthusiasm, experience and energy to work with other people who want to do good things for the environment.

"Instead of hiring people we can take most of our money and put it into programs that will benefit our members. The secret is to get everybody educated, enthusiastic and involved... That way you take five people and turn them into 100."