

Six men and a golf course — Pilgrim's Run comes to life for armchair architects

By MARK LESLIE

PIERSON, Mich. — Give a half dozen arm-chair golf course architects free reign over 800 prime golf-terrain acres, and you could have a recipe for disaster. Put at their disposal a couple of golf industry veterans to polish and execute, and you could have Pilgrim's Run Golf Club, which is earning excellent reviews even though only the front nine has opened.

"If I said Arthur Hills or Tom Fazio designed it you'd have a feel for it. When you know the design story of this course, that doesn't really help you. But the end product is nicer than I ever envisioned," said Glenn Karsten, one of the golf lovers and six fledging designers who each drew out of a hat three holes on the course to design.

Five months after the front nine of the daily-fee course opened — and as work continued on the last remaining unfinished hole on the back nine — Pilgrim's Run stood in December as a testament to teamwork. That team includes:

- The owner: venture capitalist Robert van Campen of The van Campen Group in Chicago.
- The six arm-chair architects: David Wisen, Scott Pierre, Fred Croft, Jerry Trannel, Bill Duham and Karsten, all executives with The van Campen Group.
- The two veterans who prevented problems and kept the project flowing: Kris Shumaker, who left a post as superintendent at Clearbrook Golf Club in Saugatuck to be project director, and golf course architect Mike DeVries of Traverse City.

It all started when van Campen, who enjoys golf and the outdoors, discovered 830 acres for sale in this town a half hour due north of downtown Grand Rapids.

Known for involving his employees in his endeavors, van Campen enlisted The Six to have some fun designing a golf course on that land. The project was first envisioned as a private club, perhaps for van Campen Group employees and their families. "But the way it evolved, it's too good for that," said Karsten. "We saw it needed to be open to the public."

They also saw they needed a professional on board.

They hired Shumaker, and for months he walked the huge property before drawing a routing. "The property is ideal: gently rolling golf terrain," Shumaker said. "The contour is more in some spots and similar to seaside links terrain in others. We wanted it to flow naturally, and since we had so much land to work with, we weren't hindered. We used 500 acres. We didn't have to force the

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— Glenn Karsten

land into the design.

"We moved less than 100,000 cubic yards of dirt. It has nice sandy soils that drain very well — ideal for a golf course."

Once the routing was complete and the front nine holes cleared, The Six drew their holes from a hat, did some "trading," and walked the site before starting their designs. None had design experience, just what they had observed as golfers.

"It could have been a disaster," Shumaker said. "But it went really, really well. They were very good to work with."

Working in-house — Shumaker manning a dozer to shape the layout, along with excavator and loader operators — the superintendent realized he couldn't commit the time to creating the intricate design of greens complexes.

Enter DeVries, who had worked with Fazio, Tom Doak and William Newcomb Associates and had formed DeVries Designs, Inc. in 1994.

"Essentially, I was there to build and design greens complexes," DeVries said. "That evolved into more complex involvement — eventually building bunkers and advising on the entire process. We made some alterations to the routing and design. Their emphasis has always been on doing a quality job. There was no timeline because it was a golf course just for them. That has allowed flexibility to develop things in a comfortable atmosphere."

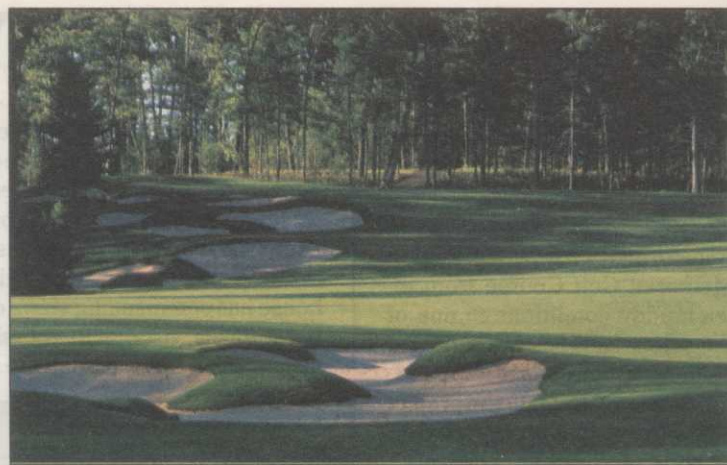
The result, he said, is "a sequencing of holes — a series of short par-4s and then longer, stronger 4s connected together, so there are swings within the round that provide balance and continuity. It can have a big psychological effect on people."

Karsten, who is also handling the business end of the project for van Campen, said he drew all three par-3s from the hat. But he traded two of them for a par-4 and par-5.

Is the finished product close to his designs?

"A couple of them are very much like I originally thought in talking them through with Kris and Mike. But we reversed directions on the par-3," said the low-teens handicapper. "It's been exciting. Overseeing the project, I've been involved a lot in the design process."

Besides the property, which "is ideal for golf," Karsten attributed the success to the continuity between Shumaker, DeVries and The Six.



Bunkering sets the tone, and the challenge on Pilgrim's Run's 6th hole.

Shumaker hopes to have the back nine ready for an Aug. 1 opening, saying he has gotten complete grow-in of his Dominant bentgrass greens, tees and fairways in eight to 10 weeks.

"The great thing about the land," DeVries said, "is that the rolls and contours are just the right size. They are small and gentle enough that they make walking comfortable, but still lend a lot of character to the land for setting up greens in places like hollows and across the skirts of wetlands. There is tremendous variety throughout the golf course."

A small pond fronts the 2nd green and an irrigation pond was excavated around the 16th, giving that hole two bodies of water. A property also encompasses a large wetland system.

The par-73 course will play from 5,000 to 7,000 yards from four sets of tees.

DeVries is especially proud of the course's par-4s.

"A lot of lip service is given to short 4s," he said "We've built

good short-to medium-length 4s at Pilgrim's Run, as well as a really good 4-1/2 par at 483 yards. It's a real challenge to design short par-4s and do it properly. Growing up working and playing at Crystal Downs taught me that. People think it's a short par-4, so it's a give-me birdie, or it's a driveable short-4. I look at it as, you still have to have a lot of options to play it — not just from the perspective of the single-digit handicapper but the high-handicapper as well. You have to demand everybody to play to their strengths. It can still be a wide-open green that you can hit from a driver to a 6-iron off the tee, depending on how you want to attack the hole."

A clubhouse is planned, Karsten said, and a range and practice area will be included.

The property's remaining 200-plus acres will remain undeveloped in a family trust, he said, left to the deer and wild turkeys that roam the site and the hawks and eagles that soar above it.



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