

First Audubon Int'l course ready

By MARK LESLIE

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — It was a different process but the same result: The first Audubon International Golf Course will open here this fall — the Jack Nicklaus-designed Spring Creek Ranch.

"This is not how we thought we'd get there," said Audubon International (AI) President Ron Dodson, "but it is truly the first Audubon International Golf Course."

AI courses, thought for the last year to be on the verge of reality, have been

stalled for one reason or another — to a great extent because Dodson and AI-affiliated scientists are writing the "rules book" as they go. In fall 1997, the AI Golf and the Environment Land Trust was formed to develop courses that would also serve as environmental research and demonstration centers. In September 1997, with a reported \$300 million to \$500 million in pledges from its principles, The Golf Co. was formed to partner with AI and identify and build AI Golf Courses across the country.



Spring Creek Ranch. J. Kerns Heigle photo

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But that first project, Dodson said, had to be "a home run," and, for one reason or another, none lived up to that billing.

That is, until Dr. David Meyer came along. Meyer and Dodson had been in discussions for a year about a 900-acre property Meyer owns east of Memphis. Meyer had signed Spring Creek Ranch on to the Audubon Signature Program, meaning AI's involvement would begin in construction.

Then, in another surprise, Dr. Meyer and his son Robb, who is project manager for Spring Creek Ranch, decided in February to build an Audubon Community on the 500 acres not consumed by the golf course.

Dodson had not envisioned the Spring Creek Ranch property — and a family like Meyer's — as the answer to his dreams.

Last summer, Dodson decided that he could accomplish his goals without actually acquiring, building and managing golf courses. He only needed "a venue on which Audubon International can't be tossed off; where we can develop environmentally friendly research, with control of that research, in different eco-regions. Why, then, own it?"

Meyer's plan made any decision easy for Dodson. He was to give AI a "conservation easement" on the entire 400-acre golf course.

"I want you to have control," Meyer told Dodson.

A conservation easement is "a deeded, fee-simple ownership," Dodson explained. "We own any future development rights on that 400 acres. And they are telling me that if they do other things on the rest of the 900 acres, they will give us an easement on that, too."

The easement, he added, "seriously gives us a hammer. If anybody wants to do anything on this course, they must get our permission. It outlives Dr. Meyer and me."

AI is still looking at lands that individuals and agencies have offered under the original process, including a couple of "dream properties," Dodson said. "But it has taken so long because there is no recipe guide to do this; we are writing it as we go."

Does Spring Creek Ranch meet the "home run" criteria?

"The property will be a home run. There's no doubt about that," Dodson said. "What we originally envisioned was being involved in the selection of the land and doing an ecological design for the property, and so forth and so on. In this case, we weren't involved in that. They already owned the land, had retained a golf course architect and had a preliminary routing before they joined the Audubon Signature Program. But they are in the program and we have been working for them a couple of years."

"What I really want to do is document the process of selecting the right kind of land on which to build a golf course. We did not participate in that part of this project. Other than that, yes, this is a home run."

Indeed, according Robb Meyer: "This land is rare. When people think of Memphis they think delta flat. But this property has a lot of rolling hills and elevation changes, and the mature trees — sycamore and willows — are amazing."



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