

**GOLF COURSE**  
INDUSTRY  
**2007** **Builder**  
**Excellence**  
**AWARDS**

The GCI staff presented the 2007 *Golf Course Industry* Builder Excellence Awards at the Golf Course Builders Association of America's awards dinner, which occurred in conjunction with the Golf Industry Show in Anaheim, Calif. Four awards were presented. SEMA Golf won the Creative Award for best new construction with Toscana Country Club in Palm Springs, Calif. Landscapes Unlimited won the Heritage Award for best reconstruction with Fiddlesticks Country Club in Fort Myers, Fla. Aspen Corp. won the Legacy Award for best renovation with The Old White Course at The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va. And Heritage Links won the Affinity Award for best environmental project with Liberty National Golf Club in Jersey City, N.J. The following four articles depict these award-winning projects.



The South Course at Toscana Country Club features lakes, streams, waterfalls and palm trees set across newly created rolling terrain. Photo: Joshua Klyne

# A FIRST-CLASS facility

Attention to detail and addressing issues trump weather and tragedy to complete a high-end development project

BY DOUG SAUNDERS

In 2003, William Bone, founder and c.e.o. of Sunrise Co., set the ambitious goal to create the finest private equity golf club in a region that's already home to some of the most prestigious golf addresses in the world: Palm Springs, Calif. Bone owned a prime 640-acre parcel of land in the Coachella Valley since 1985 and, after several tries during the past few decades, he was ready to make that dream come true.

Bone's vision included a luxury residential community, 36 holes of golf (27 of which are complete to date) and all the amenities expected at a first-class facility. He thought obtaining the services of designer Jack Nicklaus would provide the project instant recognition.

That vision became a reality when Toscana Country Club opened for play December 2005 after a 14-month construction process managed by Scottsdale, Ariz.-based SEMA Golf. Not only did SEMA build 18 holes of golf, water features and bridges in 14 months, it completed another nine holes within budget while sharing the site during the creation of the housing infrastructure.

"Many builders in the industry were interested in this project because it was going to be such a high-profile job," says Bob Steele, president of SEMA. "We were fortunate to be awarded the contract and spent three months planning and meeting with various team members before we even began work."

The relatively flat, sandy land actually had a cross slope of 200 feet, and more than six

million cubic yards of dirt were moved during the mass excavation to prepare the site for golf course and home construction during a four-month period.

Nicklaus designed two distinctly different types of golf courses for Toscana. The South Course, which was built first, is a classic Coachella Valley-type course featuring many lakes, streams, waterfalls and palm trees set across newly created rolling terrain. The North Course is more of a desert-type layout featuring numerous rock outcroppings with green fairways as sharp contrasts to the desert terrain that frames each hole.

"These two styles called for carefully following the grading plans to create the proper perspectives," Steele says. "One of the enjoyable things about working on these flat sites is using machines as creative tools to develop interesting landforms. The desert is a palette, and our shapers become the artists."

Building Toscana was the second collaboration between Nicklaus and SEMA, who built the Outlaw course at Desert Mountain in Scottsdale, which won the Creative Builder Excellence Award in 2005 ("Making it happen," March, p. 32). Having worked with the Nicklaus Design team before also was an advantage for SEMA.

## OPEN LINES

The key aspect of such an ambitious project was developing a clear line of communication between the developer, the design team, and all



2007  
Creative  
Award Winner

**AT A GLANCE**  
**Toscana Country Club**

**Location:** Palm Springs, Calif.  
**Type of project:** New construction  
**Cost:** \$11.7 million  
**Construction started:** November 2004  
**Course opened:** December 2005  
**Builder:** SEMA Golf  
**Architect:** Nicklaus Design  
**Golf course superintendent:** Rick Sall  
**Owner:** Sunrise Co.

Original plans for Toscana called for about 160 bunkers, but as Jack Nicklaus and William Bone changed things when visiting on site, the project finished with 223 bunkers.  
Photo: Joshua Klyne

of the subcontractors whose input and commitment were critical for success. Gary Peterson, golf course construction manager for Sunrise Co., oversaw the construction.

"We've done many projects similar to this but not on this grand of a scale," he says. "I had a solid idea of where the numbers should be when we took this project out to bid, and every builder was interested in being a part of the project. We settled on SEMA after several interviews. This was my first experience working with SEMA, and I was impressed with its attention to detail and willingness to address issues as they arose."

It was Peterson's position to formulate a time-line schedule for the project and then focus on keeping things moving along. Because so many facets of the project were dependent on the production of each subcontractor, it was a daunting task. Peterson held daily meetings with Brandon Steele, the construction superintendent for SEMA, and the various subcontractors. He also held regular meetings with Nicklaus site coordinator Tom Soileau, designer Jon Garner and Brandon Steele.

"SEMA Golf's strong point was always be-

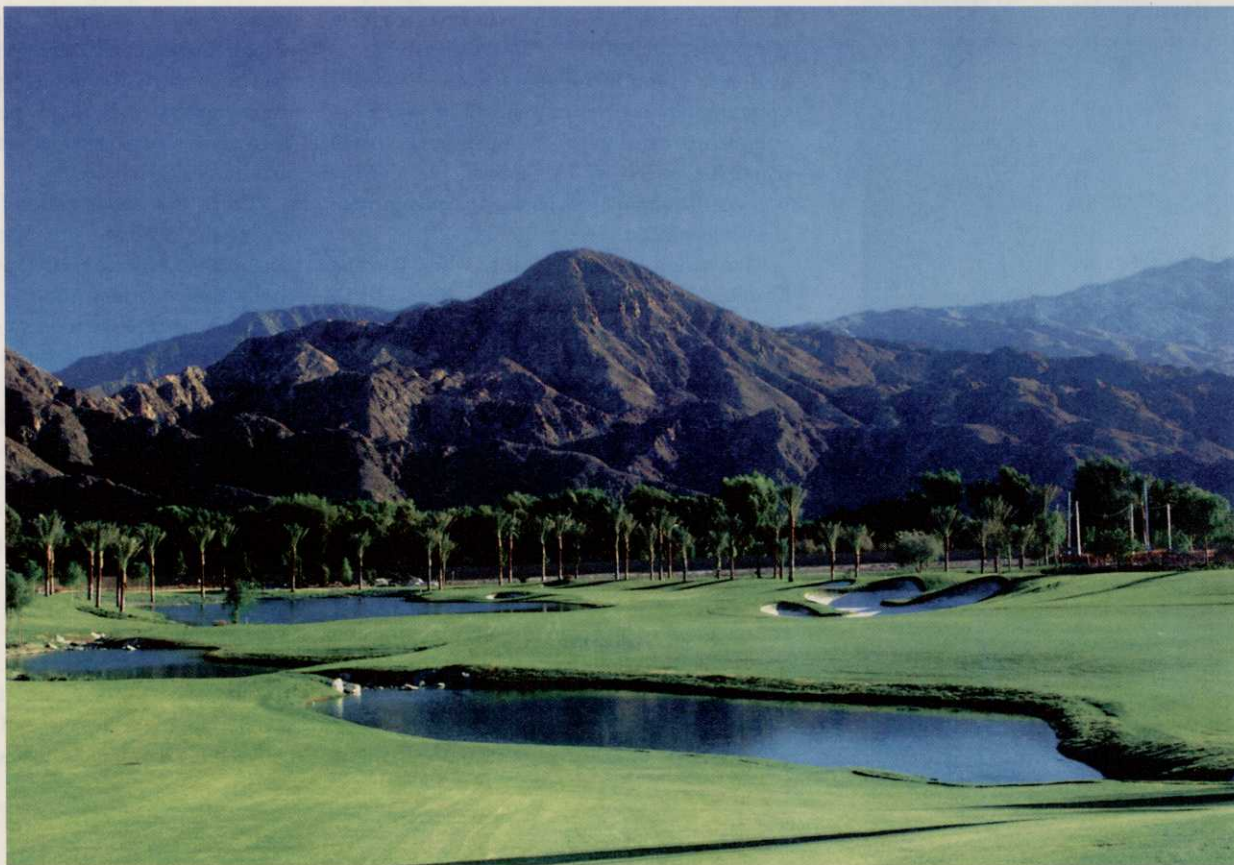
ing able to take care of simple changes as they arose," Peterson says. "For example, the original plans called for about 160 bunkers, but as things changed during on-site visits by Jack and Mr. Bone, we ended up with 223 bunkers. But those changes never slowed down the progress because SEMA took care of these types of changes immediately."

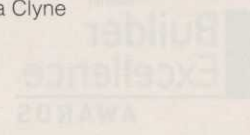
Through a clear line of communication and detailed paperwork, change orders were kept to a minimum, which helped keep the job within the \$11.7 million budget. Progress continued on time despite having almost 1,000 workers on site during the height of construction.

"Having worked with Nicklaus before helped us to understand the process from the designers perspective," Steele says. "We learned what things the on-site designer could deal with and what things would need Jack's input. This helped us have things ready before Jack's visits, which would help him with his task."

**MOTHER NATURE**

Weather can be a factor in any construction project, and in the Palm Springs area, the biggest





SEMA spent almost \$3 million on continuous dust control using water trucks and irrigation lines. Photo: Joshua Clyne

challenge is wind. On a site where one can bore down through 10 feet of pure sand, dust control can become a considerable expense. SEMA spent almost \$3 million on continuous dust control using water trucks and irrigation lines.

Another important feature of Toscana is the separation of the golf courses from the home sites. The course is set down into the terrain, and the home sites sit on top of bluffs, which, while expensive, provide better site lines for the golf holes and home sites.

**A TRAGIC LOSS**

The development of the awarded-winning project didn't go without a tragic loss, however. Tragedy struck the project as a result of the untimely death of Brandon Steele just a few months before the project was completed. Brandon Steele's contagious enthusiasm had inspired hundreds of workers on the site for months. After his passing, every subcontractor involved took the initiative to continue the job as a tribute to his memory. It was this type of commitment that helped carry the project along to the completion of the first 18 holes in November 2005.

**LASTING MEMORIES**

Overall, SEMA did an excellent job throughout the project, says Rick Sall, golf course superintendent at Toscana who worked on the project through the construction and directed the final grow-in.

"We got pressed toward the end of the job to have enough time to establish the Bermudagrass sprigs, and SEMA made extra efforts to get

this process going," Sall says. "We managed to get sprigging done around the end of August and were able to have puttable surfaces by the middle of October."

SEMA completed the South Course and the first nine holes of the North Course on budget and is discussing completing the North Course with Sunrise.

"SEMA Golf performed admirably throughout this project by making sure all of the work was completed as each hole was signed off," Peterson says. "The work was completed in a timely

fashion to allow for sprigging prior to growing season. This is why we are discussing the North Course completion with SEMA."

Since opening, Toscana has established itself as a premier club in the region. It's success can be gauged in several ways, one being that many new members have come from the other established golf clubs in the area.

Looking back on the project, one of Bob Steele's lasting memories always will be coming through the front gates as the project was nearing completion.

"I've been building golf courses for 20 years, and I've never seen one that was so complete at the end," he says. "With the hundreds of mature palm trees and the massive entry, it seemed as though the complex had been there for 10 years. It was a project that holds many memories, both good and bad, and one that I'm proud to say we were a part of." **GCI**

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**What the judges said**

"An excellent job on a very demanding site with a very demanding architect. From all reports from the architect, owner and superintendent, it coordinated the job very well. All parties were happy with the finished project, and the pictures that were provided would attest to the good job it did."

— **Mike Bylen, owner of Pine Trace Golf Club in Rochester Hills, Mich.**

"The builder worked for a very demanding owner and architect. Everything was meticulously done on time and on budget. It had a large design/construction/ownership team, and they all worked well together. The return on investment was very good."

— **Terry Buchen, president of Golf Agronomy International in Williamsburg, Va.**

"This was a good situation in which the owner and architect raised their demands and expectations, and the builder just went ahead and beat those."

— **Jeff Brauer, golf course architect and president of GolfScapes in Arlington, Texas**

"Not only did it have a very particular architect in Nicklaus, it had a very particular owner. The builder completed the job within budget and did it within the time frame, and the owner got a wonderful return on its investment. The builder received excellent reviews from the architect, owner and golf course superintendent."

— **Joe Livingston, CGCS, River Crest Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas**