

Going all in

Members take a risk after a hurricane and rebuild their course to revitalize their club *By Michael Coleman*

Just a few years ago, you could have bought swamp land in Pensacola, Fla., a few years ago – along with a golf course on it – for very little.

But now Pensacola Country Club members wouldn't sell their club if they were threatened by a hurricane. They've been there and survived that. In the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan in 2004, the club was faced with a decision: wade back into business by just rebuilding the smashed clubhouse or jump in with a major splash to rebuild the course, clubhouse and membership base.

"That's when the leadership said, 'We've got to do something,'" says Steve Dana, an architect with Jerry Pate Golf Design.

Club members, including U.S. Open champion Jerry Pate and his brother Scott, decided to take the risk and go all in. It's paid off in terms of a revitalized club.

Pensacola Country Club lost 4,000 trees after Hurricane Ivan ripped through the area, leaving the course more open.

Photos: Seaside Golf Development

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Off-site water runoff is contained in 11 on-property lakes and pumped right back on the golf course, solving a runoff issue. Photo: Seaside Golf Development

“The nicest thing is the membership loves it,” Dana says. “Everybody is excited to be here.”

The club, declining for years as the membership base aged, went from struggling to bustling as the reconstruction took off. From a low point of 275 members to 540 now, the club has grown with passionate, loyal believers. A number of doubtful members left the club after the hurricane rather than pay the \$8,000 assessment to invest in its future. The assessment was added to insurance proceeds and bond revenue to pay for the improvements. The \$3.8-million golf course redesign and reconstruction was part of an overall project. With a new clubhouse, which recently opened in January, and new maintenance facilities, the total cost was about \$16 million.

HURRICANE DAMAGE

In September 2004, Hurricane Ivan ripped through Pensacola, destroying homes and businesses, tourist stops and infrastructure. The only thing it didn't take out was the soggy, flat land the club was built on in 1902. Ivan tore out 4,000 trees, leaving just enough weakened long-leaf pines behind to ignite a deadly pine beetle infestation in the spring of 2006.

“To be honest, losing the trees was the best thing that ever happened,” Jerry Pate says, adding it was previously one big agronomic challenge because of a lack of air movement and sunlight. “When we lost the trees, we had all the sunlight we never had, and we had the wind.”

Member Terry Scruggs joined the board as liaison for the membership right before the hurricane hit. Ivan was brutal, wiping out many homes in the surrounding community, but the members were resilient.

“Having been totally decimated, having the membership living in trailers, and the fact membership hung together was amazing,” Scruggs says.

GETTING BACK ON TRACK

By early 2005, board members were working



on budgets. By mid-year, Scott Pate's company, Seaside Golf Development, was working on the design phase with Jerry Pate and Dana. Rebuilding began in October 2005. As the construction continued on time through 2006, the community came alive with interest.

“It was the buzz of the town,” says Scott Pate, president of Seaside.

When the club was wrestling with the challenge of rebuilding, many wondered if it could be done affordably yet with enough prestige to reinvigorate the membership and add value to the community.

“The best thing about the project is the story it tells for other clubs doing something like that,”

Scott Pate says.

The course is now more open, with trees lining some fairways but with many more open spaces that facilitate a strategy affected by wind.

“The golf course plays different every day because of the wind,” Dana says.

Early on, Scott Pate knew he wanted to win the bid on the project. He bid aggressively because he sought to give something back to the course he grew up playing.

“I thought it would be something nice to leave my kids,” he says, noting his 6-year-old son is proud of his ‘dad’s golf course.’ “We took a lot smaller margin. Stuff that became legitimate change orders, we ended up just doing.”

Club members are happy with the reconstructed course.

“Jerry and Scott did a tremendous job, and, of course, Steve did, too,” Scruggs says. “The routing, everything has gotten rave reviews from the members.”

The fact Jerry Pate donated the design fee wasn't the only boost to the project's economics. The teams were able to work well together because of the number of projects they worked on in the past.

“The beauty about Scott is he knows exactly what I think because he's worked with me,” Jerry Pate says.

AT A GLANCE

Pensacola Country Club

Web site: www.pensacolacountryclub.com

Location: Pensacola, Fla.

Type of project: Reconstruction

Cost: \$3.8 million

Project started: October 2005

Course opened: November 2006

Architectural firm: Jerry Pate Golf Design

Builder: Seaside Golf Development

Superintendent: Jason Mills

Owners: Club members

That synergy made construction efficient, and it didn't hurt that both live nearby.

"He could shape it that day and get it confirmed and didn't have to wait for another architect to sleep on it for two weeks," Jerry Pate says.

WATER CONTROL

While the plan was coming together, one challenge threatened to drench the future of the club. The course didn't drain well because it was too flat for water to runoff and it wouldn't percolate through the soil.

"Before it was renovated, this course was just

The natural look of the course, which sits next to the Pensacola Bay, fits in with the surrounding terrain, from the native sandy areas created with white sand excavated from the site, to the native grasses. Photo: Seaside Golf Development





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a swamp every day of the year," superintendent Jason Mills says. "A two-inch rain would close the course for days."

The Pensacola Country Club once sat on a swampy section of land surrounded by a community and highway that funneled every drop of rainwater runoff its way. All the highway runoff and all the subdivision runoff from the north ran through the club's property before the reconstruction.

"So every time it rained before this project, the golf course would turn into a lake because it was all elevation nine," Jerry Pate says.

Jerry Pate knew his first lesson in architecture from Pete Dye in the 1970s was going to be crucial to the success of the project. Drainage is priority one, two and three, Dye told Pate then. Still, a course can be made to drain well, but the slopes can seem contrived if you're not careful.

"That's the challenge when you take a flat piece of property and you add movement to it," Scott Pate says. "You don't want it to look like it dropped out of the sky."

Federal regulators prohibited runoff from leaving the golf course, so a plausible solution seemed impossible. But not to Jerry Pate and his team.

"Life is a balancing act," he says. "You can take any negative and turn it into a positive. We

like to look at life like the glass is half full, and we're gonna take a challenge, a negative, and turn it into a positive."

That philosophy helped the design/build team work toward a solution that helped the club and surrounding areas. The runoff had been traveling through the golf property and into Pensacola Bay adjacent to it. But by creating 11 lakes covering 10 surface acres and capturing the water, they solved the runoff issue.

"We were able to pick up all this off-site water that potentially could contaminate the bay," Jerry Pate says. "We contained it in these lakes and pumped it right back on the golf course. It percolates through the sand and filters itself. We collect it again through the groundwater, and it goes right back into the lake. It's a created cycle of reusing the same water."

With the runoff redirected to irrigate the course, the county's plan to spend \$340,000 on new storm sewers in the community was scrapped.

"The golf course has become a blessing to the community and not just a liability because of the runoff," Jerry Pate says. "We used the lakes to strategically enhance the golf course. They also enhance the golf course aesthetically and enhance the community environmentally. Water control was our No. 1 challenge. It was

our greatest liability in our construction and our greatest asset when we finished the job."

REROUTING

The reconstruction rerouted all but a few holes. The original course layout wasn't planned well because the driving range and the maintenance building were in the middle of the course, and semitrucks had to drive through the course for deliveries.

"We had to rescrumble all these eggs to get the maintenance building where it should have been and the driving range and tennis located right," Dana says. "But we tried to respect the Donald Ross and Seth Raynor designs of the early 1900s."

The natural look of the course, which sits right on the bay, fits in with the surrounding terrain, from the native sandy areas created with white sand excavated from the site, to the native grasses. The Pates also replanted long-leaf pines and live oaks along with cabbage palms, Florida's state tree.

"Those were the trees that we came back and replanted to try to create the natural look this land would have had 200 years ago," Jerry Pate says.

The routing of the course took an interesting turn one day while Jerry Pate was at the club. A member asked Jerry to walk outside, and the two watched the final demolition of the old clubhouse near the bay. The member asked if a par-3 finishing hole would work. The team considered that, so the pair talked about the possibility of putting the green right where the old clubhouse was. While the design was complete, including a traditional finishing hole, Jerry Pate decided to approach the membership board with the idea. The forward-thinking board gave him the latitude to do whatever he wanted within the budget.

"To their credit, they delegated the authority to us," Jerry Pate says. "The board had enough confidence in us, and I was humbled by that and also elated."

While Scott and Jerry's father couldn't have foreseen the forces that would come together to level and rebuild the country club his grandchildren call home, his boys are glad father doesn't always know best.

"It was always our dream to renovate the golf course, and dad said, 'Son, it will never happen,'" Scott Pate says.

But it did. GCI

What the judges said

"They took a golf course that had deteriorated throughout the years and was totally destroyed by a hurricane and brought it back to life. They did many creative things on the job. They stripped a couple feet of bad soil and found sand they used to cap the entire property. They not only rebuilt, but they rerouted and relocated the clubhouse and worked extremely well with the community to complete a great project. The results look fantastic."

– Walt Lankau, president, Stow Acres Country Club in Stow, Mass.

"The club was destroyed by a hurricane and lost more than 4,000 trees. They found support through local donations to regain the feel of the classic 100-year-old golf club. The club has made a turnaround and is in a better situation as a result, gaining 75 new members since the project finished."

– Jim Roney, director of golf courses and grounds, Saucon Valley Country Club in Bethlehem, Pa.

"They had serious drainage problems and a one- to two-foot organic layer they had to remove and bury. There were challenges with doing that and managing all of that material on sight. They had to do a series of dewatering and couldn't allow the water to discharge off site, so they had to be creative and work diligently to manage the dewatering process to be able to expand lakes and build new lakes. It was a project that had a lot of passion within the community as well as with the contractor, who was a member of the club."

– Rex VanHoose, senior v.p./managing architect, Jacobsen Hardy Golf Course Design