

Workers had so much confidence in their erosion and sediment controls, they used the existing Spring House for drinking water.

Leave nothing to chance

A well-prepared Aspen Corp. overcomes environmental restrictions and withstands bad weather to complete a renovation project at Wisp Resort

BY JOHN WALSH

'09 Affinity
Award Winner

Wisp Resort Course

Location: McHenry, Md.
Web site: wispgolf.com
Type of project: Renovation
Cost: \$1.5 million
Construction start: July 17, 2006
Course opened: June 2008
Architectural firm: Design Workshop
Builder: Aspen Corp.
Grow-in superintendent: Scott McMillion
Owner: DC Development

Even though Steve Richards and his two partners in DC Development saw a tired property, they purchased Wisp Resort in McHenry, Md., in 2001. They began to improve it right away – so much so they've spent \$30 million in 8 years. Improvements and expansions were made in areas such as the snow-making operation, facility infrastructure, and ski and golf course terrain.

One project (named Fantasy Valley), the renovation of the daily-fee, 18-hole Wisp Resort Course, turned out to be challenging from an environmental perspective. A daunting task for DC Development, which previously hadn't been involved in a golf course construction project.

No problem, though. Aspen Corp., a certified builder member of the Golf Course Builders Association of America, used its experience and resources to overcome inclement weather and numerous environmental hurdles to renovate a portion of the course on schedule without disturbing the environmentally sensitive and protected trout stream that runs adjacent to the course, which generates, on average 18,000 to 20,000 rounds a year.

The renovation included moving four of the most difficult, steep-sloped holes, which backed up to the base of Marsh Mountain, while not disturbing Hoyes Run Creek, which is one of the state's few Class Tier II trout streams.

"The original Wisp Resort Course was difficult to play for the average golfer," Richards says. "There were four difficult holes, so we closed them and moved them. We will put ski-in/ski-out condos in their place. The renovation was done to make the golf course easier for golfers, speed up play and maximize real estate opportunities."

The project went so well, the same builder (Aspen), architect (Todd Schoeder) and management company (OB Sports Golf Management) are building a private course, called Lodestone, at the top of the mountain for DC Development. Nine holes will open in July, followed by another nine the following summer.

"We bring the same intensity to all projects," says Donnie Adkins, president of Aspen. "We take the best way to protect the environment."

EROSION CONTROL

The Fantasy Valley project was the first golf course work applied for and permitted in Garrett County, Md., with the Department of Environmental Protection. The whole process was new to Garrett County, which resulted in delays and abundant erosion and sediment measures. More than 22 sediment basins were built on four holes. Many were placed in landing areas and feature locations. Extensive supersilt fences were installed, too.

"The amount of erosion control and protect-

ing the trout stream below was challenging," says Scott McMillion, director of golf maintenance for Wisp Resort. "The state of Maryland has the most stringent erosion control regulations that need to be in place before building a golf course."

Many of the sediment basins and diversion ditches were expected to function at finished subgrade by the Maryland Department of the Environment. This expectation created situations in which the erosion and sediment controls wouldn't function until the earthwork was finished. So, Aspen worked with the MDE and DC Development to come up with a workable solution that would satisfy compliance and function using the most common-sense or practical approach. This strategy often required installing and adjusting grades on sediment basins multiple times.

"The workers had so much confidence in the results of their erosion and sediment controls they regularly used the existing Spring House, which was located in the middle of the project, for their drinking water," Adkins says.

Aspen worked well with all the environmental agencies.

"Donnie developed a good relationship with the MDE," Richards says. "He showed them the things we could do that are less impactful to the environment than the design itself."

Architect Todd Schoeder, principal of Denver-based Design Workshop, views the environmental groups as necessary partners in the construction process.

"We needed to involve them from day one," he says. "They're essential to make the project work. The same agencies are reviewing the golf course on the top of the mountain because of the job we did on the base of the mountain. The environmental groups trust us and aren't on site as often for the course on the top."

"Aspen helped enhance the environment, not just protect it," adds Schoeder, who hadn't worked with Aspen before.

TROUT STREAM AND WETLANDS

Several permits were delayed, which extended the project. Multiple regulatory agencies – the MDE, the DEP and Trout Unlimited – were involved in the permit process. For example, it took one year to receive a permit

to remove a pond from the property.

"Trout Unlimited was the watchdog down there," Richards says. "Hoyes Run Creek is a highly protected stream. The toughest thing was keeping the tree canopies, which covered the stream. We needed to remove the trees but had to leave some. Removing too many trees would warm the stream. So this limited our design in some areas. We took a minimalistic approach."

The site's wetlands required protection, so those areas received special care during the project. Bridges had to be installed to avoid negative impact to the area by using free-span bridges and having them at an elevation that wouldn't harm the wetland. Clearing required a lot of hand work and special equipment that couldn't remove the woody materials without the equipment encroaching on the actual wetland.

"We had zero wetland impact," Richards says. "Once we got into the project, it became difficult, especially the pond removal, but it worked out better than expected."

INCLEMENT WEATHER

During construction and throughout grassing, the area experienced record rainfall. Aspen reworked several features extensively, added erosion and sediment controls, and added sod to counter the rain's effects.

"Heavy and frequent rains hammered the project site, making it even more difficult for Aspen," Schoeder says. "However, they never complained or asked for schedule extensions and cheerfully completed the project on time."

"The thunderstorms up here in the mountains will kick our butt," McMillion says. "We can get 4 inches of rain in one hour. It's a difficult site as far as weather conditions. For example, Aspen teamed up with us to repair a hole after a heavy rain even though it wasn't their job. We couldn't have done it without them."

CAREFUL WITH THE UTILITIES

Underground septic tanks were discovered during construction, which required properly pumping and disposing the contents before removal. Aspen worked closely with DC Development and subcontractors, which was critical because utilities crossed almost every hole. Neighboring properties needed

The new four holes were built on soil, which forces a greater dependency on erosion control than sand does.



to retain utilities, so Aspen coordinated removing some, but not all, of the overhead utilities until new services could be extended to the affected properties.

"I liked their team approach," Schoeder says about Aspen. "They weren't afraid to offer opinions and disagree at times. They listened, provided ideas, ran a clean job site, shaped innovatively and had a professional attitude."

AN UPDATED LOOK

Schoeder started working on the project about six years ago when he was asked to look at a parcel of land, called Fantasy Valley, adjacent to the Wisp Resort Course with the intent of expanding it. There was a lot of analysis, planning, financing, funding and waiting for approval. Schoeder ranks the project as one of the three most challenging he's ever worked on.

Originally, the owners planned to add nine holes, but because of the environmental concerns and restrictions, the project was scaled back. There were about 12 different routing plans, everything from three holes and a practice facility to nine holes, Schoeder says.

Even though DC Development had never been involved in a golf course construction project before, the lack of experience didn't hinder the project in any way.

"We took Steve to other projects we did in the past and explained the process to him," Schoeder says. "We educated him. It's common for us to work with first-time developers."

Dominic Palombo was the original architect of the Wisp Resort Course, and because he wasn't a famous architect, there was less pressure on Schoeder when redesigning the course. Schoeder was matching a style, which was a mix of old and new school, not a strategic design.

"The bottom line is that I had to complement and match the character of the existing course, which was outdated," he says. "DC let us do our job, yet they offered us opinions from a golfer's perspective. They let us do what was best for the project and the environment. DC didn't balk at the environmental costs, either, which added about a half million dollars to the cost of the project."

LET IT GROW

McMillion, who has been at Wisp since July of last year, was brought in to work on the project about two months before the seed hit the ground. When he arrived, two greens were complete, but two holes hadn't been started yet.

"Everyone got together to make decisions about where the water went and the steepness of greens," he says. "No reasonable request was denied."

Before McMillion's arrival on the scene, superintendent Mark Halsig was – and still is – maintaining the Wisp Resort Course. But because he had never managed a grow-in, DC hired OB Sports Management – which brought in McMillion – to manage the property and the one under construction on the top of the mountain. Now that the Fantasy Valley project is complete, Halsig focuses on maintaining the course, and McMillion is focused on growing in Lodestone.

The four new holes were built on soil, which forces a greater dependency on erosion control, making it more difficult than sand, which was used on the USGA-sped greens and tees. During the project, the native top soil was removed, the golf course was shaped and then the soil was replaced.

"Aspen had superintendents on site who bend over backward to make sure things were done right the first time," McMillion says. "There were many sets of eyes. They were proactive in the process. They made some good changes, such as softening the swales on the greens and adding drainage in some areas. They did the right thing. If any reseeding needed to be done, you didn't have to look for them."

AFTER CONSTRUCTION

After the project was finished, a few drainage tweaks needed to be made, McMillion says. But overall, the project was successful.

"We opened in the summer to rave reviews," he says. "Golfers were happy. The course looked great. We didn't have to redo anything. It was just a matter of seeding, growing in and turning it into turf. The contractors were the big difference between this project and others I've worked on, which were smaller in scope. They had all the resources."

Aspen attacked the project with a full

WHAT THE JUDGES SAID

"Aspen endured tremendous rain events and renovated four holes successfully. It worked with multiple state and environmental regulatory agencies in the presence of a Tier II trout stream."

– Craig Felton, golf course superintendent, Oak Hills Country Club, San Antonio

"Aspen had a challenging project, even though it was only four holes. It paved the way with some regulatory agencies. This was a sensitive site. It has a Class Tier II trout stream adjacent to it, making it difficult to permit. The project was monitored closely, even to the point of having a project engineer from the regulatory agencies on site regularly. Aspen was innovative in finding solutions to satisfy the agencies. It dealt with record rainfall and still was able to deliver the project on time, albeit some delays with permitting were beyond their control."

– Mike Bylen, owner, Shepherd's Hollow Golf Club, Clarkston, Mich., and Pine Trace Golf Club, Rochester Hills, Mich.

"This golf course is the first one in Garrett County, Md., to have a project like this, and Aspen had to deal with two environmental agencies. It installed 22 sediment basins and used buffer strips of vegetation to protect a Class Tier II trout stream. It took one year to get a permit to remove a pond. It did this all during a record rainfall. It set up many silt fences and cleaned up a lot of silt. It had excellent erosion and sediment control, and responded to design changes and met all deadlines."

– Terry Buchen, CGCS, MG, president and consulting agronomist, Golf Agronomy International, Williamsburg, Va.

contingent of personnel, including a job superintendent, assistant superintendent, irrigation superintendent, two shapers, a finishing superintendent and all support labor, plus all of the iron (on site) necessary, Schoeder says.

"I appreciate Aspen's attention to detail, from the immaculate job yard to the red polo shirt uniform each employee wore while on the job," he says. "They left nothing to chance." GCI