Let it rain

Brian Almony and MacCurrach Golf Construction overcame record rainfall and a gushing underground spring to restore Ocala Golf Club to its original "Golden Age" design.

By Jason Stahl

Brian Almony fondly remembers when he used to play Ocala Golf Club alongside his grandfather, who lived in Ocala. Remembering himself as a boy with his bag slung on his shoulder and his grandfather trundling his clubs behind him on a pull cart, it was hard not to get sentimental when he bid on the Ocala Golf Club restoration project. But when he ultimately won the bid, it was all business.

Perhaps it was that special connection that allowed Almony and his team at MacCurrach Golf Construction Inc., to overcome record rainfall to complete the project on time, under budget and spot-on as far as restoring the course to its original classic feel from the golden age of golf design.

Almony probably half-expected to see a long-haired man building an ark near the course during the month of May, when Ocala recorded more than 20 inches of rain.

"Engineers design stormwater drainage based on 100-year storms, but I think we had two 100-year storms in one week," Almony says. "We really got hammered, but stepped it up by adding more people and equipment and working longer hours to keep on schedule."

And there was a lot to keep on schedule for. New USGA greens, tees, bunkers, irrigation, drainage and cart paths were all on MacCurrach's to-do list. The company mobilized its big iron early at the city's request to generate excitement during the club's last big tournament before closing the course for the renovation. But the public was able to keep tabs on the construction via numerous walking tours, which architect Mike Beebe says were instrumental in increasing people's understanding of the golf course renovation process. "They gave us a chance to talk through the vision we had for the course and what we were trying to accomplish and some of the pitfalls you sometimes encounter during construction," he says.

At least there was plenty of water, not from the copious rain but from a natural spring the construction crew ran into that ranked as the second biggest challenge to overcome. It was located underneath where the clubhouse had formerly been located but where there is now a condominium complex, appropriately called Marion Springs.

"Reshaping one of the greens, we were going through layers of old pipes people had put in, peeling off their attempts to solve this problem," Almony says. "There was just water flowing everywhere out of the side of this hill."

The grass MacCurrach planted on the greens was shipped from Texas in refrigerated trucks.

MACCURRACH GOLF CONSTRUCTION

Almony says they installed pipes from the subgrade up the hill, around the green and in the bunkers and used "everything else in the book" to direct the seepage from the underground spring to creeks they constructed. Those creeks featured native boulders that were supposed to be hauled off site but instead were incorporated into their design.

Water wasn't the only liquid that posed problems for MacCurrach. Try black slop about five-feet deep that they scraped out of the lake with a long-stick excavator after draining it. The goal was to solve a recurring flood problem by lowering the outfall for better lake elevation. The crew was fortunate to have accomplished this in April prior to the heavy rains, and local residents got thrills from some of the prizes they found in the lake bottom. "I heard people found arrowheads," Almony says. "Of course, the whole bottom of the lake was solid golf balls. I took a picture because there must have been 20,000 of them."

Prior to the construction, the club made a commitment to minimize water usage by installing an automated irrigation system with more sprinkler heads. The decision was also made to eliminate overseeding, use a different type of Bermudagrass for the greens and mulch more to reduce turf acreage.

"Minimizing water has to be there," Beebe says. "I don't think we can survive and continue with the old model. There is so much pressure from an environmental standpoint to be more conscious of those things. As an industry, we're always searching for ways to lessen that footprint and use less water, chemicals and energy. And that's why we tried to push that from the very beginning on this project."

The grass MacCurrach planted on the greens was shipped from Texas in refrigerated trucks. When the last of three shipments came, the last green wasn't finished being built yet due to a setback from the rain. But improvisation is a wonderful skill to have. Since the green wasn't going to be ready for another few days, and the grass was perishable, the club let MacCurrach store the sprigs in their two walk-in coolers in the clubhouse restaurant – which wasn't too big of a deal since the cluhouse was closed anyway.

"We put them in there and a few days later, they were just like the day they came, fresh as could be and ready for planting," Almony says.

Overall, Beebe was impressed with how MacCurrach handled the untimely downpours that threatened the project at every phase. "We had a site that drained well, and we had a contractor that had the equipment, manpower and resources to work around those kind of events and, if they lost a little time, was ready to jump back on it and hit it twice as hard," he says. "MacCurrach is a Florida contractor and has dealt with these situations before and knew how to manage the site and the conditions and when to push the envelope and when to pull back to make sure the site dried out a little."

Assistant City Manager John Zobler lauded MacCurrach for its level of communication throughout the project. "Brian Almony worked on the job site a minimum of three days a week, so we really had hands-on assistance from MacCurrach at the highest levels," he says. "Mike Beebe and MacCurrach had worked together in the past, so they had an excellent working relationship, and anything that came up in terms of conflicts between the plans and the architect's vision and the city's budget requirements were able to be worked out. MacCurrach was extremely gracious many times, ceding to design changes and working within our budget."

Almony is especially proud of the work his company did given the poor economy and his decision to stay strong and keep his valued human resources.

"We knew going into 2009 that it was going to be a bad year," he says. "We invested a lot of years in getting the people we have, and even though a lot of people were getting laid off, we didn't want to go that route. We thought we could build a bridge from 2009 to 2010 by working at basically cost and keeping our people employed. So we went into the Ocala project with a pretty good number and maintained our staff of people, and Ocala got a great deal.

"We've built some pretty fine new high-end golf courses and worked for the greatest architects in the world, but renovations are where we really shine." ▲

2010 legacy award winner

OCALA GOLF CLUB

Location: Ocala, Fla. **website:** www.ocalagolfcourses.com **Type of project:** Renovation **Cost:** More than $1.3 million **Construction started:** March 30, 2009 **Construction ended:** Oct. 21, 2009 **Architectural firm:** Beebe & Associates, Inc. **Builder:** MacCurrach Golf Construction, Inc. **Superintendent:** Jason Regan **Owner representatives:** City of Ocala

What the JUDGES *said...*

"Golf course construction always presents some unknown challenges but to have 26 inches of rainfall in one month is above and beyond what is considered extreme. To still meet the project budget and construction deadline under those conditions and deliver an outstanding product is an extreme feat in its own right."

"An existing golf course has 'existing' conditions to deal with in a renovation process including underground springs and old infrastructure. Combine this with excessive rains during the construction process and chances of a successful project can be greatly reduced. Not in this case. An excellent representation of legacy work."

"The project just seemed to have so many challenges from working with the city budget to sink holes. Any time you are trying to save certain parts of the course and make them blend in as if they were always there is tough."