

Not just another hole-in-the-wall

Ryangolf and Ron Forse team up to restore a Florida course to its original charm.

By Rob Thomas

While a fine wine ages well, this is not always the case with classic golf courses. While Hole-in-the-Wall Golf Course in Naples, Fla., was far from blighted, the layout had lost luster and much of the original charm from its 1957 opening.

Ryangolf and architect Ron Forse were tasked with bringing this layout – about which Gene Sarazen once said, “If I only had one golf course to play, it would be Hole-in-the-Wall” – back to life.

“Having experienced the ‘winning’ side already in 2005 and 2006, the joy of winning is already something we know, have relished, and built upon,”

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– Ron Forse, architect

says Ryangolf president Fidel J. Garcia, of his firm’s third award. “Therefore, this one means more than that. Getting this award means that we have succeeded in creating a culture at Ryangolf that goes beyond just getting the work done in accordance with the contract. It corroborates our belief that if you do your best at every level, the combined effort of the team will always reach the highest level of performance.”

For Hole-in-the-Wall and this major overhaul, the “highest level of perfor-

mance” was more than 50 years in the making.

Originally designed by Dick Wilson and opened in 1958, Hole-in-the-Wall had been touched by many architects through renovation efforts over the years. Everyone from Sarazen and Robert Trent Jones to Arthur Hills and Ron Garl placed their fingerprints on various aspects of the design. This time, however, the project would call for less of a “renovation” and more of a “redo.”

Drainage, irrigation, new greens, modern grasses on the tees and fairways, and landscaped perimeter... it all had to be done, and more.

When it came time to pick the architect, one name kept popping up – Forse. The Pennsylvania-based architect’s name was dropped to the search committee by a member of the club, who also belongs to Bald Creek Colony Club (N.H.), where Forse redesigned the Donald Ross course, as well as by superintendent Russell Geiger, CGCS, who had attended a seminar taught by the designer. Forse has a reputation of being knowledgeable and working well on Dick Wilson courses, which is

exactly what this called for.

As for the builder, Ryangolf had the impressive resume and familiarity with the area.

“We have a very strong presence in the Florida market and, much more than that, within the high-profile country club major-renovation market, as we have been involved in similar total reconstructions for many years for clients like Hole-in-the-Wall,” Garcia says. “We have been working in the area for years and knew of their plans to restore and update their facility for more than a year before it came to fruition. Since we had been renovating the adjacent 36-hole Royal Poinciana Golf Club in phases of 9 holes each for several years, we were very familiar with the club, and members of both clubs knew of our reputation and performance on these type of projects. The opportunity to work with this club and with architect Ron Forse was very important for us.”

Conceived as a 6,800-yard, Par 71 golf-only facility, the course had settled over the years and became unplayable without any significant rainfall. Beyond that, the course was actually built at only 6,200 yards – rendering it vulnerable to today’s golfer with enhanced equipment.

Geiger, who has been at Hole-in-the-Wall since 1997, is a self-proclaimed optimist, but he had his doubts – mostly stemming from the short project window, which began in May 2009 with a January or February 2010 scheduled opening.

“It was a very, very large project,” Geiger says. “So much had to be done, I had my reservations.”

Drainage and water quality

To begin, the team needed to get the property dried out. The region has a very shallow water table as the course is located in close proximity to the Gulf of Mexico. For this reason, the fairways remained wet. In addition, the lakes were not very deep and pipe connections between them were failing, which



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created a stagnant, non-circulating water-management system.

"The project was drainage driven," Forse says. "The property was settling, while the water table was rising.

"Our goal was to make it drain better, but not change the character of the property," he says. "Don't stop looking like Dick Wilson's work."

To improve water quality and storage, lakes were deepened and an 8.5-acre lake was constructed. The excavated fill from these lakes was used as fill required to raise the elevation on each hole. By raising the relative grades throughout the project and expanding the acreage of available water storage, the course can now retain an additional 25 acre-feet of water.

The new drainage infrastructure also has improved the circulation of water

within the project. With these improvements, the course can now retain all storm water runoff within the property, which prevents any turbid water from entering the adjacent environmentally sensitive river basin.

The creation of a new lake, as well as deepening of two others, generated the fill material used to elevate the course out of the floodplain, while restoring the landforms and character of the original design. The state-of-the-art storm water drainage system incorporates the creation of separate drainage basins which stage the water elevations to maintain and improve the extensive cypress wetland preserves found throughout the golf course.

Interconnecting culverts were installed to prevent localized flooding and control structures were built to

hold water in storage for treatment prior to eventual discharge into the adjacent Gordon River. A network of secondary drainage was installed to collect water from greens, bunkers and fairway depressions, with disposal into the lake system.

Greens and bunkers

Because the course played at only 6,200 yards, the small, crowned, "push-up" greens originally designed by Wilson worked well – adding difficulty to a short course. The restoration was stretching the layout to 6,800 yards, though, so there was a need for larger green surfaces on some of the holes.

Forse's artistic expression came into play while otherwise adhering to Wilson's routing and feature design criteria, creating more receptive contours and

pin placements on USGA Greens. Champion Bermudagrass was installed, which allows Geiger's staff to maintain greens height to PGA tournament speeds if members so desire.

Bunkers are an important aspect of a Wilson design. He believed that golf in the United States was an aerial game and if you wanted a ground game "you could go bowling." Over the years, changes in maintenance practices, as well as the many adjustments made by different architects, led to the bunkers losing their appeal, shape and proper positioning. Restoration was a key objective in the project.

Studying old plans and photographic information, the team returned Wilson's signature design of numerous, well-placed, highly visible bunkers that create challenges off the tee and demanding shots to each green. All of the greenside bunkers were rebuilt and repositioned using his distinct "flushed" faces, while irregular sand edges were created to make the bunkers distinct.

Again, artistic expression gave the bunkering a different look and feel than was in place prior to the redo. Forse used a more ornate bunker style from Wilson's later work, like that seen at Pine Tree Golf Club in Boynton Beach, Fla.

A perforated drainage system was installed and premium bunker liner materials were used to protect the expensive pure, white, angular bunker sand. In addition the bunker edges were meticulously carved by hand to bring back the look of a Wilson design.

Landscaping

Turfgrass growth and maintenance were hindered by a multitude of non-native, exotic plant species found throughout the course. To improve air circulation and sunlight, this had to be removed, which led to undesirable views of the nearby, busy roadway.

When Hole-in-the-Wall was originally built, the adjacent road was a two-lane shell surface in a very rural area. Today, it is a major, six-lane urban road. A great deal of the fill generated from the lake construction and deepening was used to create a well-landscaped, 6-to-8-foot-tall berm with an additional 6-foot wall above it to block out any views and buffer noise from the roadway.

Removal of all exotics and the relocation of many mature trees improved the aesthetics and provided major strategy for Forse's redesign. According to Geiger, more than 500 "high-character" Sable palm trees and 30 oak trees found new homes during this process.

"The value of this material is priceless," Geiger says. "It was a win-win deal from a cost and preservation standpoint. And it was almost instant gratification from a landscaping point of view. With the exception of braces, it looked very natural right out of the chute."

Finished Product

In today's environment, coming in below budget and ahead of schedule is rare, but that's exactly what Ryangolf managed at Hole-in-the-Wall. While the project was optimistically scheduled to be unveiled in early 2010, the first tee

2010 heritage award winner

HOLE-IN-THE-WALL

Location: Naples, Fla. **Type of project:** Renovation **Cost:** \$4.9 million **Construction started:** June 1, 2009 **Construction ended:** Oct. 1, 2009 **Architectural firm:** Forse Design **Builder:** Ryangolf Corp. **Superintendent:** Russell Geiger, CGCS

shot on the "new course" was struck Dec. 16, 2009. Favorable weather played a major factor in that.

"In south Florida, you can find yourself underwater in a hurry," Geiger says "The good Lord smiled upon us as far as weather conditions.

"I can't say enough about Ron Forse and Ryangolf," he added. "A lot of things had to come together and they had to work as a team. Ryangolf made sure that whatever it took, they'd provide to get the job done."

Forse, a longtime fan of Dick Wilson's work, appreciates being selected to restore Hole-in-the-Wall to its former glory. "To have the opportunity to make it better than how it was built is a great honor," he says. "I'm very thankful."

Through all the hard work, months of painstaking execution and applying the finishing touches, Garcia was confident the outcome would match the team's effort. "We felt that due to the complexity of the scope, the restoration aspect of the total reconstruction and the amazing history of the club, it had all the ingredients to be a great project," he says. "Well, it did not disappoint, obviously. As it developed, it was evident that the final product was going to be exceptional in aesthetics as well as having a state-of-the-art infrastructure to go with it."

While the ravages of time aren't always kind to classic golf courses, with help from Ryangolf and Forse Design, Hole-in-the-Wall is back to aging like a fine wine, one round at a time. ▲

What the JUDGES said...

"Seven months from course closing to reopening? With very difficult existing site conditions, that is a renovation schedule. With the quality of the renovation, Hole-in-the-Wall has a new meaning."

"Ryangolf hit the nail on the head when they worked to restore Hole-in-the-Wall back to its original glory, while still modernizing the maintenance capabilities using many state-of-the-art technologies. Further, their ability to work through a whole new permit process in Southwest Florida a few days before they were to start construction, have the project delayed one month, but yet still deliver the project on time and under budget is, frankly, an incredible feat."