

Rising from the waters

Austin's venerable Onion Creek Club is back on track after devastating late-October flood.





By Steve Habel

After enduring several years of drought conditions, October of 2013 was the wettest October on record in Austin, the capital of the Texas and one of the country's most desirable places to live. In fact, a small flash flood on Oct. 12 ripped up several of the greens at the venerable Onion Creek Club, and knocked down some trees and destroyed all the bunkers on the course's low-lying holes.

The original venue for the Liberty Mutual Legends of Golf Tournament and the birthplace of the Senior (now Champions) Tour, Onion Creek Club was designed by Jimmy Demaret in 1974. An additional nine holes, fashioned by Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore, were put into play on higher ground in 1996. It is considered of the state's finest courses but was suffering from the same drier-than-dry conditions as most courses in the region. Through the years, Onion Creek Club also battled an overgrowth of trees and a reduction of the size of its greens after a series of floods and the passing of time had compacted the soil underneath and around the putting surfaces.

Onion Creek Club's original 18 holes were built in the flood plain of the burgeoning neighborhood some 15 minutes southeast of Austin's downtown. The club and the community have endured floods in the past, most notably in 1998 and 2001 when the creek overflowed and destroyed parts of the course.

None of the previous floods came close to reaching the homes that border the course's low-lying holes, many of which are set 150 yards and 20 feet above the usual edges of the creek.

Thusly, no one could have been prepared for the cruel surprise Mother Nature had in store for Onion Creek Club or the residents of the community that surrounds the course. When the rains came on the night of Oct. 30, conditions combined for a recipe for disaster.

PRAYING FOR RAIN

The American Southwest – and especially Texas – has been shackled over the past several years by a continuing drought, and when Ryan Crump decided to move from the Carolinas to

the Lone Star State in 2012 to take a position as the golf course superintendent at the Dominion County Club in San Antonio, his first impression of the course he had signed up to care for was that it was dead.

"It wasn't, but things were just a lighter shade of green," says Crump, who'd worked at Wade Hampton Golf Club and Colleton River Plantation Club. "Having things green as possible was the expected condition of the course I had just left, so the reality of the situation here hit me really hard."

By the following year, Crump moved from the Alamo City to Austin and Onion Creek Club, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2014. For 11 years, beginning in 1978, Onion Creek Club conducted the celebrated Legends tournament, as the course more than held its own before the great golfers of the black-and-white television days, players that eventually brought the sport into the modern world with a dash of charm and savoir-faire.

"My main job was to try to find enough water to keep the course's greens alive," Crump says. "With the water rationing that was put in place here in central Texas because of the drought, even the reclaimed water we were allowed from the neighborhood was not enough. It was a constant battle."

Rain was predicted for overnight on Oct. 30-31 but when the storms came they moved to and then stalled over the southeast corner of the Austin city limits and Hays County, a bit further to the south. From 11 p.m. on Oct. 30 to 6 a.m. on Halloween, 18 inches of rain fell in the already saturated region, making a flash flood a certainty.

At one point during the morning, Onion Creek rose 11 feet in 15 minutes and by a few

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hours before sunrise on Oct. 31 the creek's flow rate was 120,000-cubic feet per second. That's nearly double the average flow rate over Niagara Falls.

"I immediately went down to the corner of the original course where the third green and the fourth tee are set," Crump says. "The water there was already about two feet from a security light on the back wall of a home 10 feet above ground level and 20 feet above the golf courses."

The water would go even higher, completely flooding all the homes on the golf-course side of the street that separates the first hole from the third and finally cresting in the middle of the No. 1 fairway, across that street and into another line of houses some 30 feet above the course and 45 feet from the bottom of the creek bed.

"We were just worried about getting as many people to safety as we could – that was our focus," Crump says.

Onion Creek crested at the highest it has been in 92 years and reached into scores of homes in the neighborhood, including a line of houses across the street from the creek and 80 yards across the fairway of the third hole.

"I was called to the club at about 6:30 (a.m.) and when I got here the water was over some of the road bridges," says Justin Jafarian, Onion Creek Club's general manager. "Some houses had four feet of water in them and people just didn't know what to do or how that happened."

Those families that lived in the houses bordering the course are still not back in their homes, some five months later.

But the amount of water that flowed into the valley that forms the course's signature hole – the downhill par-4 third hole on the North course, with a drop of 50 feet from tee to fairway – was almost incomprehensible. Looking out from the tee box of the par-3 17th, which also rests high above the valley that forms the third, all one could see was a lake of water; the green of the third hole was covered by at least 20 feet of floodwater.

Once the water subsided, a better accounting of the damages could be taken. It was not a pretty picture.

A cement and shell barrier encased in chicken wire and weighing tons that was

“When I got on site, I could feel the ground moving under me and hear the water like it was moving through rapids. It was still pitch dark, but when lightning struck – and it did frequently – I could see the whitecaps as the creek rose toward me.”

– Ryan Crump, Onion Creek Club

built to protect the tee box on the fourth hole was twisted and rolled like a wet dishrag – but it did its job, the fourth tee box remains intact.

A cement dam between the creek and pond that fronts the par-3 second hole on the North course was breeched and left with a huge sinkhole.

A dozen putting surfaces were scraped down to sub-turf level, exposing irrigation pipes and electrical wires. Trees were felled and were swept away – a 70-foot tall oak that once stood to the left of the green at the par-3 sixth hole in the original course was uprooted and rolled down the fairway of the adjacent par-5 seventh hole, tumbling some 700 yards before becoming lodged against another huge oak.

Yes, Mother Nature had provided the club with water, but there were consequences aplenty. Damages, to the course were estimated at about \$7 million. The club also lost its course-maintenance equipment when the building where it is housed was swamped with four feet of water; to get to that building, the rising creek had to cross a huge grass berm constructed to keep water away after the flood of 2001.

ONE STEP AT A TIME

After the water subsided, Crump and his crew spent the next few days evaluating

CONSTRUCTION



Above: Devastating flood damage to Onion Creek Club's golf course. Left: Onion Creek Club's grounds crew. Their hard work and dedication got the course cleaned up and back into shape.

where to start putting the courses back together.

He borrowed some equipment from Onion Creek Club's sister clubs – three of which are within an hour and half's drive from south Austin – and, because all his equipment and tools had been washed away, spent about \$1,000 at the home improvement store up the street for shovels and rakes and anything to help with the cleanup.

"We started out just moving debris so we could just get around the golf course," Crump says. His crew then worked to clear some of the trash and material that was left in the

course's trees by the raging water. The debris pile eventually grew to a massive mound some 15 feet high.

The initial goal was to get at least some of the course ready for play, both to bring some money into the club and to help rebuild the pride and psyche of the battered neighborhood.

"Only three holes on the high side of the course's Crenshaw nine had been affected," Crump says. "We tackled the issues with those holes first because we were determined to get that nine open as soon as we could to show some tangible evidence of recovery."

The crew worked 10 hour

days, through wind and rain and ice and the short days of winter, to get the course back into shape. The Crenshaw nine was open for play by Thanksgiving, just four weeks after the floods.

Then the real work began, with the goal of having all 18 holes on the North course open by the end of the year. Backhoes and grapples were brought in and the crew focused on cleaning up, piling debris away, re-grading, shaping and trying the smooth out the course as much as was possible.

The putting surfaces were seeded with rye in nine days and got a little break from the

weather that allowed the grass to grow in relatively fast.

"We had to play off a temporary green on the 16th hole because the actual green was pretty ripped up by the floods," Crump says. "We used some sod from our nursery green that was hung up in the trees and recovered to form the temporary green. It took about 800 pounds of seed to tack the temp green because the only thing to seed it in was the silt and mud from the flood."

Crump's crew also reworked all 55 bunkers on the north course in two months after all the drainage was ripped out of them by the floods. "We thought if the bunkers and greens are good then it would help deflect some of the problems on the edges of the course that we are still working on," he says.

The North course reopened by Christmas Day. Yes, there were some bare lies and some bumps on the greens, and some plastic bags and tires and trash still hung from trees 40 feet above the level of the now docile creek, but golf was being played.

"The staff and crew took the bull by the horns and went to work, showing their pride for the golf course and their desire to get it back to where it once was," Crump says. He carries a crew of 10-12 workers in the non-growing season and 18 in the spring, summer and early fall. He used as many as 25 workers during the first two months of course cleanup.

Another hurdle had been crossed but there is still plenty of work to be done. Since December, the crew has been focused on general upkeep and maintenance of the 18 holes that are open while continuing

the cleanup of the most damaged parts – the low-lying areas of the original nine.

LIKE A PHOENIX

The club announced in March that reconstruction of the original nine had begun and set a goal on July 1 for there to be golf played on those nine holes again. The plans include rebuilding some greens and reshaping others, sanding and sprigging the grass with Tif Eagle and to replace the Tif-Dwarf Bermuda that has been on the putting surfaces since the course was founded.

When play begins on the reworked holes, the golf experience will be quite different. All

the underbrush that insulated the course from noise is gone, making some of the original course's holes that were once tree-lined look nearly links-like and hundreds of trees were uprooted and have not been replaced.

After the original nine is finished the attention will turn to the course that's currently open, shutting down nine holes at a time to assure there is always 18 holes in play.

To help pay for the renovation, the club, which has about 410 golfers among its membership of just more than 800, is offering a special drive for members. Every current member has been given two

certificates, each with a value of \$5,000 towards the purchase of a new golf membership, to pass along to a friend, neighbor or business associate. The certificate covers the entire initiation fee, allowing the referrals to join Onion Creek Club for free.

The Dominion Golf Group, which operates six clubs including Onion Creek Club, is known for its innovative membership offerings. Its focus is on signing dues-paying members rather than assigning expensive initiation fees. More members paying dues means more money for the clubs for the long haul, and that tack will surely be put to use.

The ultimate goal for Crump

and his crew at Onion Creek Club is to put the course back to where it was and even going a step further by returning the course's putting surfaces returning to their original edges as designed by Demaret and, later, by Crenshaw.

"If there is an upside to what's happened it's that we are going to be able to restore the course to the way it is really supposed to be," Crump says. "Now that the trees have been thinned out it will help us get sunlight to the places where we were having trouble before the flood. Everything that was the golf course at Onion Creek will be the golf course at Onion Creek again." **GC**

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