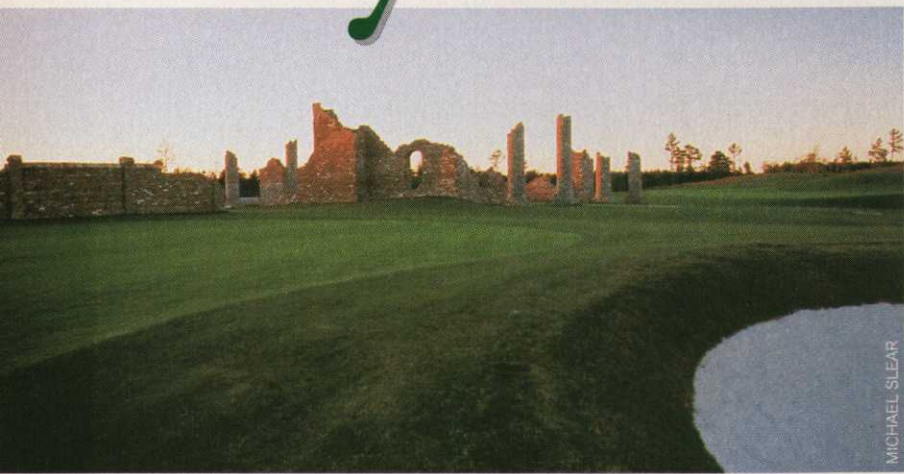
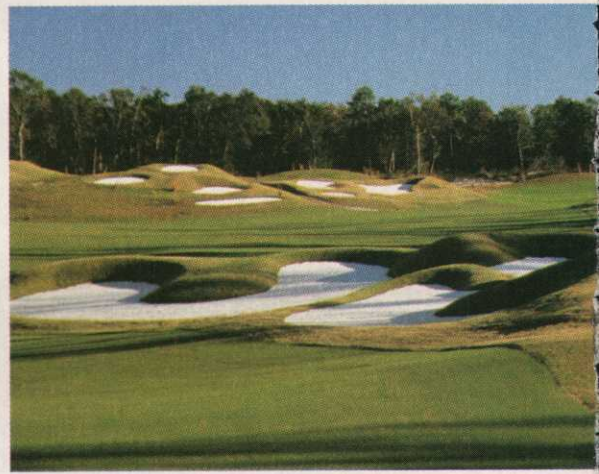


Myrtle Beach's



MICHAEL SLEAR



The competition for golfers just got tougher in this crown jewel of golf resort venues

By Larry Aylward,
Managing Editor

Dave Downing, director of golf course operations for Barefoot Resort and GC, says the resort's four courses may be the best Myrtle Beach has to offer.

Dave Downing surveys the red-brick ruins behind the No. 4 green on the new Davis Love course at Barefoot Resort & GC in North Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Downing explains that Love, an aficionado of the Scottish style, appreciates how old courses there utilize dilapidated, desolate buildings as hazards and conversation pieces.

Then Downing, sporting a deadpan look, explains the history behind the ruins on Love's latest track, one of four topnotch courses comprising the new Barefoot Resort, of which Downing is director of golf course operations.



"It was discovered the ruins here date back to the late 1990s," Downing says, following with a burst of laughter.

He's not joking, but his quip is comical. Then again, Downing is in such good spirits these days that even a silly knock-knock joke will get him guffawing. The reason for his bliss is simple.

"We might have the four best golf courses in Myrtle Beach," Downing says of the 2,300-acre Barefoot property that also includes new designs by Pete Dye, Greg Norman and Tom Fazio.

That's saying a lot, considering that golf courses are to Myrtle Beach what skyscrapers are to New York. Known for its bustling Grand Strand, which extends nearly 60 miles from Georgetown, S.C., into Brunswick County, N.C., the Myrtle Beach area is home to more than 110 golf courses, including the prestigious Tidewater Golf Club & Plantation, the Dunes Golf and Beach Club, TPC of Myrtle Beach, Wild Wing Plantation and The Surf Club.

Besides Barefoot Resort, which opens this month, more upscale golf courses have opened and are due to open along the Grand Strand, including the Tim Cate-designed Tiger's Eye in Sunset Beach, N.C.; Arnold Palmer's Rivers Edge

Battle Royal



in Shallotte, N.C.; and International World Tour Golf Links, a 27-hole replica course in Myrtle Beach.

The quest for golfers' dollars along the Grand Strand is getting as competitive as baseball in the American League East. Within that arena, golf marketers there are trying to rid the resort of its golf factory image and attract more high-end players with lots of disposable income.

Shane Sharp, who covers the Grand Strand golf scene for Tucson, Ariz.-based Travel Golf Media, says the area is striving to be an upscale daily-fee golf destination like Scottsdale, Ariz., and Palm Springs, Calif. Who cares if green fees range from \$120 to \$160?

"There has always been a backbone of top-shelf layouts here," Sharp says. "But for a while, there was a lot of middle-of-the-road golf courses being built, which weren't geared toward high-end golfers.

"At some point, the collective golf consciousness of Myrtle Beach woke up and said, 'We don't want to be the K-mart of the U.S. golfing scene anymore,'" Sharp observes.

Downing, a CGCS, has worked in the Myrtle Beach area for 10 years and was previously director of golf course operations at Wild Wing Plantation, has noticed a more upscale and competitive atmosphere.

"It's making everyone step up the ante,"

Downing says of the area's tug-of-war for golfers.

Chuck Eade, Tidewater's facility manager, says the Grand Strand now offers golf for most every pocketbook. "We're all fighting for that piece of the pie, and how big a piece of the pie you get depends on what you're able to offer," he says.

If you're building a new course in Myrtle Beach, as Massachusetts-based architect Roger Rulewich is, you know what you're up against.

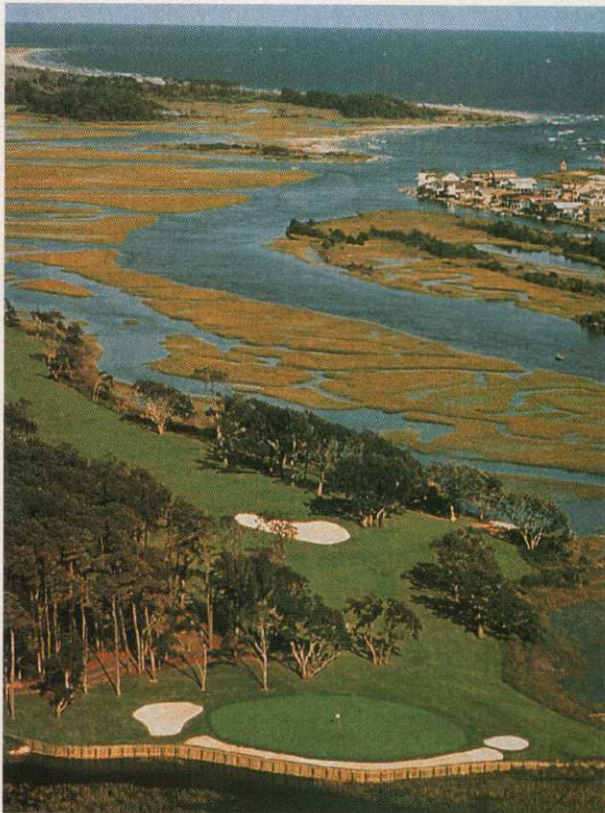
"It's a competitive atmosphere and everyone is trying to do something special," says Rulewich, whose Grand Dunes is scheduled to open in March 2001. "I don't think there's any place in the world that has a golf mecca like Myrtle Beach."

Perhaps Barefoot Resort and Tidewater are the best indicators that the Myrtle Beach area is as dedicated to offering first-class golf courses as Las Vegas is to erecting luxurious casinos and hotels. Some say Barefoot is the area's pre-eminent golf setup. Tidewater, once regarded as the Grand Strand's *crème de la crème*, recently reopened after a four-month renovation in an attempt to regain its leading status.

The four golf courses at Barefoot Resort, which took less than two years to build, all have their own personalities for a range of golfing talents:

The tug of war for golfers is getting tougher with the growth of high-end courses, including (from left to right) the Davis Love course at Barefoot Resort and GC, with its Scottish-style ruins; the Pete Dye course at Barefoot, with its distinct elevation changes; and the Grand Dunes, a Roger Rulewich-designed course scheduled to open next year.

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- The Love course features wide landing areas and run-up approaches to most greens.
- The Norman course features seven holes along the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway. Bunkers have sloping white faces and some feature sod walls.
- The Fazio course is wide and features extensive tree cover and landscaping, as well as many lakes.
- The Dye course, the only semi-private course at Barefoot, is a good walking course because there are no homes or streets on it.

It's a wonder Barefoot Resort is opening at all. Last summer, it endured about \$8 million in damage from Hurricane Floyd. Twenty inches of rain fell in two days, and 140 of the 160 transplanted trees on the property were toppled.

"There were areas that were totally eroded," Downing says, adding that drainage pipes were blown out and roads were wiped out. "It set us back about eight weeks."

Blue skies abound overhead as Downing maneuvers his sport utility vehicle up and down makeshift roads throughout the compound. He explains that Barefoot Resort's owner,

◀ Tidewater GC & Plantation recently reopened after a four-month renovation.

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furniture entrepreneur Sammy Puglia, wanted to build the four courses simultaneously because he wanted each course designer to see what the other was up to.

"They had to keep up with each other," Downing says.

Downing helped build and manage the four courses at Wild Wing Plantation. "We built one course at a time there, though," Downing says, "and it was a little more relaxed."

Downing heard about the plans for Barefoot Landing and pursued employment. His friends said he was crazy for taking a job that would have him helping to build four golf courses at one time.

"I thought it would be fun," the upbeat Downing says, adding that Barefoot Resort is his dream job. "I like the challenge of people saying, 'You're never going to be able to do that.' Well, watch us."

Tidewater is in

Rulewich couldn't believe Tidewater needed a renovation.

"I thought Tidewater was set," Rulewich says of the course, which was named Best New Public Golf Course by *Golf Digest* when it opened in 1990. "Everybody told me that Tidewater was one of the best facilities in the area. It's amazing that a course as highly regarded as that was even thinking it had to do something to keep up."

Rulewich chalks it up to the increased competition for golf in Myrtle Beach. Bob Graunke, CGCS of Tidewater, concurs and says the course needed enhancements to keep up with its competitors.

"If we were going to keep up Tidewater's reputation, we needed to do something," Graunke says.

The Ken Tomlinson-designed course closed last September for a four-month renovation soon after it hired Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Troon Golf to manage the facility. Troon promoted Graunke, its former superintendent of Eagle Ridge Resort in Galena, Ill., to the same position at Tidewater. Graunke headed up the greens and bunker restoration project and landscaping effort. Tidewater reopened in January to celebrate its 10th anniversary and revamped look, including newly reshaped A-1 bentgrass greens.

Eade says Troon was brought in for its agronomic expertise. He says the course was losing its reputation as one of the Grand Strand's top tracks. People were still coming out to the course, but they were leaving as dissatisfied customers, Eade says.

"That's the worst thing in the world you can have," Eade notes, "because those customers won't come back."

Last summer, three of Tidewater's greens succumbed to

heat stress and wet wilt, and temporary greens had to be implemented. Then in August, Tidewater took another shot to the ribs — The PGA moved the Carolinas Open, scheduled at Tidewater, to Panther's Run GC in Sunset Beach.

"We supported the PGA's decision," Eade says. "We knew we had problems and had to fix them."

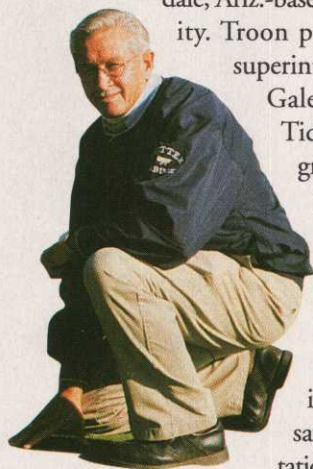
When Graunke arrived, he says his first order of business was to rebuild and reseed the greens. The bottom-line, Graunke says, is to make golfers feel like they're getting their \$135 worth after playing Tidewater.

"We never want Tidewater to get to the point where we have to shut it down and do a major renovation again," Graunke says. "The course wasn't mismanaged. There just wasn't a long-range plan in place to continually upgrade it."

With all of the new upscale daily-fee courses being built, Tidewater can't afford to fall behind. Sharp expects high-end golf to remain steady in Myrtle Beach for years to come.

"Even though a lot of the courses are opening with higher rates, there's some deep discounting going on through golf packages," Sharp says. "The stock market and the economy can't stay as robust as they've been, but there's still a lot of disposable income out there."

Developers are banking on golfers to bring that cash to Myrtle Beach. ■



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