

Home *on the* Range

Doug Petersan left the posh Baltimore CC for a new Bill Coore-Ben Crenshaw project in Austin, Texas, and the veteran superintendent couldn't be happier

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

Austin GC is designed to play fast and firm. Superintendent Doug Petersan selected zoysiagrass fairways and green surrounds with putting surfaces a combination of Crenshaw and L93 bentgrasses.

If you've ever been to Baltimore CC, you know the 36-hole club features a landmark A.W. Tillinghast course, world-class facilities and is set in one of the country's most picturesque neighborhoods. Sure, the superintendent position there entails dealing with swimming pool, tennis and croquet committees, but it's still one of the most ideal jobs in the industry.

About nine years ago, the Timonium, Md.-based club was able to lure Nebraska native Doug Petersan from another classic course, Kansas' Prairie Dunes CC in Hutchinson, Kan., to become its superintendent. Petersan's eight-year run at Baltimore included an upgrade in course conditioning and what many architec-



tural fanatics consider to be the best bunker restoration work ever undertaken.

But during early 1999, Petersan's friend and golf architect, Bill Coore, mentioned the new Austin GC to be designed and built in Austin, Texas, by Coore and Ben Crenshaw. In an offhand conversation, Coore asked Petersan if he would be interested in taking the job as superintendent, not expecting serious interest. Initially, Petersan was mildly intrigued. But after mulling the offer — and considering that his son was already attending graduate school at the University of Texas in Austin and that he felt his work at Baltimore was complete — Petersan agreed to take the Austin job that July.

The Nebraska Golf Hall of Fame member and respected industry veteran left behind job security and one of America's finest clubs for the uncertainty of a new course, all at the age of 58. Why?

"First, I knew who I'd be working with and what kind of golf course they wanted," Petersan says of Coore and Crenshaw. "These guys are interested in growing turf for playing golf instead of growing turf to look pretty. Second, I thought it'd be fun."

For Crenshaw, an admirer of Petersan's work at Prairie Dunes CC and Baltimore CC and a long-time friend, the chance to bring Petersan to Austin was something he "never imagined." The two have worked well together.

In October, Crenshaw said he had spent more than 100 days on the site, monitoring each phase of construction and consulting with

Petersan on all aspects of the club. Their discussions ranged from grass selection to finding the correct bunker sand, to less likely subjects such as the clubhouse's layout and look.

Petersan and Crenshaw also laid out a distinctive plan for the aesthetic style of the course. With an emphasis on a natural look for the bunkers, native areas and even the main-



For Ben Crenshaw (left), the chance to bring in superintendent Doug Petersan, who previously worked at Prairie Dunes CC and Baltimore CC, was something Crenshaw "never imagined." The two are good friends and work well together.

tained turf areas, the plan led to many intriguing grassing decisions by Petersan.

"We want the course to look like we placed it on someone's ranch," Crenshaw says of its rustic look, a break from the Texas custom of wall-to-wall turf and large, cleanly groomed bunker edges.

Austin GC is designed to play fast and firm, with no pressure from Crenshaw on Petersan for perfect greenery. Thus, Petersan selected zoysiagrass fairways and green surrounds with putting surfaces a rare-for-Texas combination of Crenshaw and L93 bentgrasses. With the lowest recorded rain total this summer in the state's history and not a drop during July and August, how did the grow-in go? In a nutshell, not good for the fairways but great for the greens.

The first green was seeded in May, and the final surface sowed in mid-July when temperatures were more than 100 degrees daily — so it's hard to imagine that any aspect of the grow-in went smoothly. Yet the quality and health of the green surfaces appeared almost perfect as the course neared its late-November opening. But in early October, Petersan said there was still work to be done on the greens.

"We lightly topdress and then water them for an hour on Saturdays, and maybe spot water them on Thursdays or Fridays only if need be," Petersan says of his maintenance program, which might turn a few heads but is in line with the USGA Green Construction recommendations.

Also unique to Austin GC is Petersan's innovative use of Diamond zoysiagrass in the green collars to better handle green mowers' turns, which can damage sensitive bentgrass. The Diamond zoysiagrass sodded on tees and collars grew in well despite Petersan's disappointment with the quality of the sod he received.

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“We want the course to look like we placed it on someone’s ranch,” says Ben Crenshaw of Austin GC’s rustic look.

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But the sprigged fairways didn’t take as well.

Even after several months and Petersan’s deft touch, the Texas drought combined with oppressive heat to prevent enough zoysiagrass fairway growth for the course to open in November without the aid of ryegrass overseeding. But because the greens, tees and surrounds grew in so well and because he has an understanding client, Petersan wasn’t fazed by the setback.

“When you’re growing in a golf course, you don’t select grasses because they’ll give you instant cover and a fast grow in,” he says. “The key is not what we have in November, it’s what we have in five years. We wanted a traditional playing surface, so we went with zoysiagrass.”

Petersan was cognizant of the troubles many superintendents have with the sensitive nature of growing in a course, especially one for the seasoned clientele that will be at Austin GC.

“You have to know who you’re working for and know what kind of playing surface they want,” Petersan says. “A lot of people think their

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job is to grow grass, and everything is sound if it’s green. But that’s [not all of] it. You’re there to provide a quality playing surface.”

The other distinguishing aspect of the Austin GC job is one that would give many less-patient or less-experienced superintendents nightmares. But that aspect — the constant fine-tuning of the design — is the element of the design and construction process that will make the course stand out. Crenshaw, who lives only 30 minutes from the course, is passionately involved in the playing strategy and look of the layout. The two-time Masters champion was making subtle changes to the layout in the final days before the opening.

“It’s a dynamic process,” says Petersan, who relishes the chance to work with Crenshaw and favors course adjustments for the long-term good of the club. Petersan did have to prioritize which adjustments needed to be made and which could wait until after the course opened, a fact Crenshaw was well aware of when voicing thoughts about the shape of various bunkers, fairway widths and tee locations.

Has it been worth it for Petersan? Despite success with the greens and frustration with the weather hampering fairway growth, Petersan is pleased with life and work in Austin.

“The real hero in this is Rae Jean,” Petersan says of his wife, who worked in the Baltimore CC office while Doug was superintendent. While Petersan has worked many 80-hour, seven-day weeks, he says his wife has patiently made the transition to life in Austin because she knows how much the project means to Petersan. Rae Jean will also work at the Austin GC maintenance facility.

The results of Petersan’s hard work and the devotion of his talented staff already shows in the look and character of the golf course. Texas has never seen anything like it architecturally, not only in the maintenance style of the bunkering and native areas but in Crenshaw’s green complexes. The greens combine the traditional Texas back-to-front pitch, but contain numerous subtle bumps and contours that will lend long-term playing interest.

The “long term” best defines Austin GC. It’s refreshing to witness a golf project that entails a solid grasp for the present and the future. ■

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