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Meet the New Tree

Cypress is a fine replacement for famed pine on 18th hole at Pebble Beach Golf Links

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

Problem

The famous tree on the 18th hole at Pebble Beach Golf Links died and had to be taken down. But without the tree, the hole played much easier.

Solution

Put a new tree in to put some bite back into the hole. But the *real* solution was finding the perfect tree. R.J. Harper, Pebble Beach's vice president of golf course operations, found it during a round of golf.

Crack! With a nasty lightning bolt and a booming crash, Mother Nature scarred the distinguished face of the 18th hole at Pebble Beach Golf Links.

It happened during a winter thunderstorm in January 1999, when lightning struck the prized 80-foot pine tree adorning the front of the 18th green. Less than two years later, the spectacular tree — which had thrived on the acclaimed course since its opening in 1919 — was dead.

The lightning strike weakened the tree's immune system. So when the tree contracted pitch canker disease three months later, it couldn't recover.

A fungus called *Fusarium circinatum* that affects pine trees mainly in central

coastal California causes pitch canker disease. The pine at Pebble degenerated quickly when bark beetles spread the disease throughout the tree. Its needles began to yellow and wilt. When the disease spread to its canopy, the tree's end was near.

The pine fought the disease for about 20 months before succumbing to it in 2000.

The problem

The 545-yard 18th hole at Pebble Beach is arguably the greatest finishing hole in golf. Waves crash along the hole's left edge and seagulls soar above the rocky coast. The hole and its view are for the ages — and the towering pine provided an important hazard to the hole and comprised a vivid part of the view.

It's understandable why *anyone* would be nervous about tampering with *anything* on the famed hole that might affect its playability and panorama. But the dead tree, with its brittle branches and decaying trunk, had become a danger to golfers. In

August 2001, Pebble Beach course officials decided to remove the tree.

"It was a beautiful pine tree with historical significance," says R.J. Harper, Pebble Beach's vice president of golf course operations. "It deflected a lot of shots for many years. We hated to see it go."

But Harper and his staff, including superintendent Tom Huesgen, had no choice.

"Golf courses are evolutionary, particularly old courses with trees that can die from old age, disease and storms," Harper says. "You have to be prepared for these things."

The pine was removed piece by piece. "We couldn't just drop it because it was so close to the green and the fairway," Huesgen says.

The tree's absence left more than a gaping hole near the green. Experts evaluated the playability of the hole after the pine was gone and agreed there was a problem: The hole played much easier without the tree.

Over the years, the tree caused havoc for many players, from pros to hacks. The tree could get in their heads and make them think about

hitting left, which brought the ocean and its crashing waves into play. With the tree not looming in the distance, golfers third and second shots were duck soup.

"The tree was a formidable obstacle and affected how you played the hole," Harper says. "Without the tree, you could bang your ball anywhere and not have to think about it."

The solution

Harper, Huesgen and the other experts gathered to discuss what to do to put the bite back into the hole. They talked about replacing the tree with a grove of smaller trees. They considered building bunkers on the right side of the green and tightening the fairway. They even spoke of using an artificial tree to replace the pine.

But most everyone involved in the decision agreed that a real tree — similar in size and presence to the old tree — was the best solution to the problem. They just had to find it.

Pebble Beach hired Environmental Design, a Houston-based company specializing in large tree relocation

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The Honors Course is a private golf club owned by Jack Lupton. Mr. Lupton is a member of several of the most famous clubs in the country.

In the mid-1990s, many clubs were beginning to ban metal spikes. Although Mr. Lupton started wearing plastic cleats early on, he was reluctant to tell members at The Honors Course what they could or could not wear.

One Sunday morning, Mr. Lupton, his wife, Alice (both were wearing Softspikes cleats that day) and a woman friend wearing metal spikes, teed off early. They were the first golfers on every green.

Mr. Lupton said the woman could not have weighed more than 100 pounds, yet she left spike marks every place she stepped. She saw how badly she was tracking up the greens and made a special effort to pick up her feet as she walked. Still, she still left spike marks everywhere.

Mr. Lupton called me the next morning to tell me he had just written a letter to the members banning metal spikes.

He said that since he seldom played so early he had no idea that the problems associated with metal spikes were so bad. The letter was sent and we have never looked back.

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The move required some heavy-duty equipment, including this truck to haul wood so workers could create a road for the vehicles transporting the tree.

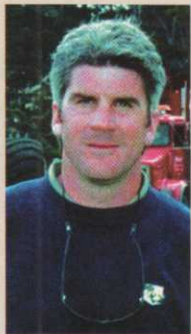
Real-Life Solutions

Continued from page 39 and preservation, to help with the project. A few things were certain:

- The old tree wouldn't be replaced with another pine tree because it would also be susceptible to pitch canker disease, for which there's no known cure, Harper says.

- The replacement tree should come from nearby, preferably the course, because trees should never be replanted far from their original locations. That way the tree would have a better chance for survival.

One morning a few months ago, Harper was playing the course, and he shanked his ball far right and out of play on the first hole. When he went to look for his ball, he saw it — a big, beautiful cypress tree that he was cer-



It was Tom Huesgen's job to make sure the course wouldn't be damaged during the tree's move.

tain would be the perfect replacement. Harper was right. The tree wouldn't have to be moved far and would have a strong chance for survival.

In early May, the cypress was removed and prepared for moving. Environmental Design used the "round-ball" method to relocate the tree. The tree's 30-foot wide and 4-foot deep root system was encapsulated in cloth.

"The move required some heavy-duty equipment," Harper says, noting that three cranes, an 80-foot-long flatbed truck, hydraulic lifts and other machinery were used for the moving project, held May 16 and 17.

It was Huesgen's job to ensure the course wouldn't be significantly damaged during the move of the 80-foot and 400,000-pound tree.

"Routing was key," Huesgen says. "We had to determine the best routes to get the equipment and the tree through the golf course without stopping play and damaging the course."

The area the tree traveled was not watered for a week before the move to firm up the turf. Workers created a road from 1-inch thick plywood so the three vehicles transporting the tree — two front loaders and the flatbed truck — could move safely without tearing up the course and damaging the irrigation system's main line, which the caravan crossed five times.

A lifting platform was created, and the tree was hoisted by crane and placed on the flatbed truck, which had 80 wheels and 10 axles. When the truck moved over the slightest uneven terrain, its hydraulics functioned to level the flatbed. "The tree moved to whatever surface it was traveling," Harper says.

IN A PERFECT WORLD
THERE'D BE NO
BROWN
PATCH.



Arnold Palmer, one of the owners of Pebble Beach, checks out the new tree.

It was a slow procedure, taking two days to move the tree about 1.25 miles to its new location. The tree traveled about 1 mph to 2 mph across fairways on holes one, two, 17

and 18. The wooden road was created as the vehicles traveled. Nearly 100 people helped with the project.

A 100-foot hole in diameter awaited the cypress at the 18th hole. Cranes and cables were used to carefully lift the tree into its new home. Soil from the tree's original spot was used in the replanting to ease the shock of the switch, Harper says.

Huesgen, Pebble Beach's arborist and Environmental Design officials will keep close tabs on the tree for about year to ensure a healthy transition, Harper adds.

The outlook

Meet the new tree, which is nearly the same as the old tree. The cypress is as big and bad as the pine, Harper and Huesgen agree. "The tree looks like it's been here forever," Harper says. "There's no visible shock to it."

It also fits in well. Groves of cy-

press trees sit behind the green and near the lodge. "They are indigenous to the area," Harper adds.

The project wasn't cheap — costing about \$300,000 — but Harper says replacing the tree with a similar hardwood was the right decision. He says the "new" tree will play the way the old tree did 30 years ago.

Back then, the old pine was in its prime as a hazard. It featured a full canopy with lower limbs hanging close the ground. Most golfers didn't want to mess with it.

Well, it's back to the old days on the 18th at Pebble. ■

You can reach Aylward, the author of this story, at lajlward@advanstar.com

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Real-Life Solutions
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