



A Second Life

New owners are trying to put the fun back into a Phoenix golf course beset by a series of setbacks when known as the Thunderbirds Golf Club

**STORY AND PHOTOS
BY REBECCA LARSEN**

Rock music is piped in to set the mood for golfers practicing on the driving range. Enthusiastic valets gather at the bag drop. Golf cars line up at the first tee box on a sunny winter afternoon.

The bustle and sense of fun seem a long way from about a year ago when Vistal Golf Club, then known as the Thunderbirds Golf Club, was on the auction block at law offices in Phoenix, only about 18 months after the course had opened. Part of the newfound success results from a golf club returning to its core support — the local customer.

“We have refocused — not on the destina-

tion golfer but on the local residents,” says Del Cochran, one of the new owners of the club, along with Phoenix businessmen Ernie Garcia and Arte Moreno.

“We’re starting to get a golfers back here again,” adds Drew Hazen, Vistal’s head pro. “We’re getting a lot of repeat business. We try to keep the rates reasonable, and the venue is still at a championship level.”

The story of the Thunderbirds Golf Club is a sad one, but one that says a lot about what happened to the tourist industry after Sept. 11, 2001. But besides being affected by a downturn in travel caused by 9/11, the club

Continued on page 88

“We’re starting to get a lot of golfers back here again, and we’re getting a lot of repeat business.”

DREW HAZEN
HEAD PROFESSIONAL
VISTAL GOLF CLUB

Continued from page 86

was also the victim of an unexpected misfortune that had an impact on golf courses throughout the state.

The golf club is located in south Phoenix, a low- and moderate-income area that has been trying to shed its economic doldrums for several years. The cost of land is cheap there, and new subdivisions are being built nearby. Some other lush golf courses had also been developed in the area, including the Legacy Golf Resort and the Raven at South Mountain. The site of Thunderbirds/Vistal backs up to the rugged slopes of South Mountain, an impressive and scenic landmark.

Thunderbirds/Vistal was developed by a nonprofit business leaders’ group, known as the Thunderbirds, on the site of an old and deteriorating golf club that still had many loyal local players because of its low prices.

The 50-some members of the Thunderbirds are best known for sponsoring the FBR (formerly Phoenix) Open. Through the Open, the group has raised more than \$20 million for charities in the past 15 years. The group’s aim in redeveloping the golf course site was to use profits from green fees to support youth charities. Among the good causes that received money was a First Tee nine-hole course built next door to the new golf club.

With a lot of media attention, the Thunderbirds Golf Club had a splashy opening in the fall of 2001. Some \$12 million had gone into building a target-style desert course, laid out by PGA Tour Design Services with consulting by PGA players Billy Mayfair, Howard Twitty and Tom Lehman. Opening of the First Tee course, designed by Tom Fazio, was marked by a dedication featuring such golf celebrities as PGA Tour head Tim Finchem and Dan Quayle, the former vice president and avid golfer. The 18-hole course was quickly named No. 5 among the top 10 new public courses by *Sports Illustrated*.

After the 9/11 attacks, however, tourism and play dropped

off throughout Phoenix, including at the Thunderbirds’ course. The club’s winter-season green fees — set at about \$100 on weekends and \$80 on weekdays — seemed a bit out of line with the neighborhood, although there were discounts for locals. And it was tough to draw tourists who were staying at Scottsdale resorts, about a 45-minute drive through some confusing highway interchanges.

But the most serious blow came in July 2002 after about 80 teen-agers and others attending a junior tournament at the course came down with a stomach bug, the Norwalk virus. Although the virus is a common ailment from which most victims recovered quickly, one young golfer from that tournament died from it.

After an investigation, health department officials blamed the illnesses on contaminated water or ice dispensed at the course. “It’s a



Organic Nematode Control Kit



DRAGONFIRE-CPP
ORGANIC NEMATICIDE
No REI - 100% Natural
Effective - Sprayable
EPA Exempted



RUTOPIA
Liquid Biostimulant
With Trichoderma and specific
bacteria that prohibit the growth
of nematodes

Each Kit Covers ½ Acre

Includes .5 Gallons 7509 Emulsifier for **DRAGONFIRE-CPP**



POULENGER USA, Inc.
Science in Sync with Nature

1-866-709-8102 or 863-709-8102
www.poulengerusa.com



common-variety virus that we believe was transmitted through the water at the course,” said Doug Hough, public information officer for the Maricopa County Department of Public Health.

As a result, county inspectors visited all the 157 golf courses in the area and required 96 to change how they supplied water and ice to golfers. Changes ranged from sanitizing water containers at least once every 24 hours to cleaning up ice machines.

The crisis proved devastating, and business dropped to a near standstill at Thunderbirds/Vistal. It was also the heat of summer when rounds normally decrease.

In mid-September 2002, less than a year after opening, Bank One, the lender for the project, had a court appoint a receiver to run the course. Scott Henderson, the Big Chief of the Thunderbirds, acknowledged then

that the project might have been a mistake.

“We are first of all a charitable group, and it’s hard for us to continue to fund the losses,” he said. “If we were a for-profit group, we might have tried harder to make a turnaround in four, five or six years. But it’s time for us to get back to our nonprofit function. It’s not part of our goals to fund a daily-fee golf course.”

So in early 2003, the course was sold to three Phoenix-area investors for about \$4.8 million, a bargain in terms of the usual prices for courses. “When we bought it, it was really at the bottom of the market in terms of play,” says Cochran, who was one of the founders of the Grayhawk Golf Club in north Scottsdale.

But Vistal seems to be headed toward a happy ending. The new owners have concentrated on improving service and luring locals even in the high season, although they

Continued on page 90

Golfers are returning to the former Thunderbirds Golf Club after management refocused on attracting local players.

MERIT® GRUB CONTROL or SLEEP AID?

What things do you "put up with" because you feel you can't do anything about them? The weather? Your in-laws? Scott Witte of Cantigny Golf & Tennis used to put up with grubs until "they got out of hand and I felt I had to do something. I'd shied away from grub products because they weren't environmentally friendly.

"Heavy damage in roughs from animals feeding on grubs and fairway decline from black turfgrass *ataenius* forced me to use knockdown treatments on the affected areas," says this seasoned Wheaton, Ill., superintendent. "But I realized I needed to do more in 1996 when Cantigny hosted the Illinois Amateur Championship. Though I wasn't using a preventative, I knew I needed a more proactive solution. That's why I started using Merit."

He says Merit took a big weight off his shoulders. "After I put it down, I don't think about grubs for the rest of the season. I sleep a lot easier at night."

Witte also appreciates the effective control at low use rates. "I'm able to maintain quality turf indefinitely because I know those grubs are not getting through," he adds. "My turf stays healthy and green with Merit. I know other grub-control products have entered the market, but I'm not going to fix what isn't broken."

To learn more, call 1-800-331-2867 or visit BayerProCentral.com.



**BACKED
by BAYER.**

Bayer Environmental Science, a business group of Bayer CropScience, 195 Chestnut Ridge Road, Montvale, NJ 07645
Backed by Bayer and Merit are trademarks of Bayer. Always read and follow label directions carefully. © 2004 Bayer CropScience

A Second Life

Continued from page 89

still seem to want to attract tourists who stay at resorts in south Phoenix. Lower prices are part of the equation — as low as \$35 at midweek during the high season in midwinter.

One of the investors, Moreno, is a nearly a billionaire who made his money with a billboard company called Outdoor Systems. He and his partner sold their conglomerate in 1999, and Moreno ended up on the *Forbes* list of the 400 richest Americans. He was also part owner of the Arizona Diamondbacks, an interest he has since sold. According to staff members, Moreno plays frequently at the course.

A few months after buying the course, Moreno made a more stunning purchase — the Anaheim Angels. He became the first Latino to acquire a Major League Baseball team when he bought the Angels from the Walt Disney Co. for \$184 million. Among his first moves with the Angels was to cut beer prices and ticket prices for children.

So not surprisingly, green fees at the golf club have dropped as well. The name of the course was also changed. The word "Vistal" is a loose translation of the words "view of the village" in Spanish. That's a tribute to the fact that you can see the skyscrapers of downtown Phoenix from Vistal on clear days. In addition to offering cut-rate green fees, Vistal also reduced prices on merchandise, beverages and food, Cochran says.

There has been some obvious cost cutting at Vistal the past few months to make for those lower fees. The GPS units were removed from the golf cars. The tee boxes dropped from five sets to four. The clubhouse is still a temporary mobile unit.

During the fall, Vistal waited as long as possible to spread its ryegrass so that it could lure more players while other courses were already closed for overseeding. As a result, the winter rye sprouted in spotty fashion. But extra watering brought it back. Overall, one can feel the optimism and camaraderie among the Vistal staff members about the course's new life.

"We try to have fun here," says Hazen, who came to Vistal from the Desert Mountain Club complex in north Scottsdale.

The future looks a lot brighter at Vistal, says Ben Keilholtz, marketing director for Intrawest, the firm that briefly served as the receiver for Bank One.

"It seems to be reinvigorating its roots as a hometown local course where people in the area can play golf," he says. ■

**"It seems to be
reinvigorating
its roots as a
hometown local
course where
people in the
area can play
golf."**

BEN KEILHOLTZ
INTRAWEST GOLF