Cherokee Nation

NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY IS DEEPLY ROOTED ON THE GROUNDS OF SEQUOYAH NATIONAL GOLF CLUB — AND IN ITS SUPERINTENDENT.

BY STEVEN TINGLE

Jeremy Boone, CGCS, isn't known for his big smile, but he is known for the pride he takes in his course and his Cherokee heritage.

Jeremy Boone, CGCS, guns the accelerator of his John Deere Gator and ascends a steep cart path at a speed quickly approaching ludicrous. He is stone faced, wearing a cap, wraparound sunglasses and a light blue shirt that has a Cherokee syllabary on the chest and "Troon Golf" on the sleeve.

"We've got six and a half miles of paths here with so much elevation change I run through two sets of tires a year," Boone shouts over the engine. "A thousand dollars a year for brakes and tires on this machine alone."

The Gator twists through the woods and continues to climb at an angle usually accompanied by a shoulder harness. "We moved one million cubic yards of dirt on this project, hit no rock and did no blasting. All the rock you see was trucked in."

One last push and the Gator reaches the summit and the final tee. Boone, golf course superintendent at Sequoyah National Golf Club in Whittier, N.C., cuts the engine and takes in the view. He pauses. "Welcome to my office," he says.

Cherokee roots

The 18th tee at Sequoyah National Golf Club is the perfect place for a fire tower. It has an unhindered multistate view of the forests and mountains of western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee and a long-range vista. The course is designed by Robert Trent Jones II, managed by Troon Golf and owned by the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation.

Boone is an enrolled member of the Eastern Band. "The Tribal Council approved this project in October of '06," he says. "I started in January of '08 as the tribe's project manager." With a construction budget of $9 million, Boone worked closely with the architects and with builders Notah Begay III and Landscapes Unlimited.

"When we started this project, diesel

was about $1.50 a gallon. In March of '08 it was $4 a gallon," he says. As costs skyrocketed, the course was forced to make cuts. Cart paths shrunk from eight feet to seven feet and a $2 million clubhouse was scrapped for a smaller, more modest building. "I learned a new term on this project, 'value engineering'," Boone says.

As a teenager, Boone wanted to be a bellhop at a local golf resort. "My friends were making $80 a day in tips," he recalls, "but when I applied I got handed a weed eater."

After a couple of seasons, Boone convinced the course pro to let him work in the golf shop. "At least I was inside with air conditioning," he says. He was cool but bored, and soon found himself longing to be on the course again. His dedication to golf course maintenance has not wavered since. The pride he takes in his work and heritage is evident in a slideshow Boone presents to clubs and organizations across the region.

Signs and symbols

The Gator follows the dogleg and Boone points to an oddly shaped hazard on the left side of the fairway. "That's our bear paw bunker," he says. "It's part of the Cherokee symbolism we worked into the property."

It's not the only nod to Cherokee lore on the course, either. Signs on each tee tell stories of Cherokee legends and history, including Sequoyah, the Cherokee silversmith and course's namesake who created the tribe's written language. "We wanted guests to learn our history, to know about the Cherokee," Boone says.

Seventy-five percent of Boone's crew is enrolled in the Eastern Tribe. His oldest worker's native tongue is Cherokee, a language most people don't know exists.

"This course has introduced golf to the Cherokee," Boone says. "About 20 percent of our play comes from enrolled tribal members, and for the first time ever the high school has a golf team." The course also has provided jobs and recreation for people in the community.

All in a day's work

The Gator passes a green and starts to climb again. "Fourteen of the 18 holes play level or downhill," Boone says. "Most of the elevation change is between green and tee, not tee and green. It's a long 6,600 yards, with its share of challenges. We've got 76 bunkers and 18 microclimates here."

The course also has an eight-inch, mile and a half transfer line pulling irrigation water from the Tuckasegee River. It uses a special vacuum pump that often loses prime. Boone loathes the days he has to break out his wetsuit. "It's freakin' cold in April when I have to jump in the Tuck' and clean out that intake."

The Gator approaches a tee. Boone courteously kills the engine as four men prepare to hit. After watching them tee off Boone asks if they're enjoying the day. They say they are from Tennessee and Georgia, visiting for a little business and a lot of golf.

One player, defying physics with a size 42 waist and size 32 shorts, says he's having a blast. "This is a helluva fun course," he says. "You guys are doing a great job."

Boone thanks him. A smile slowly creeps across his face as he cranks the Gator. "That's what it's all about," he says, and floors it. ■

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Sequoyah National Golf Club plays a long 6,600 yards, Boone says, but most of the elevation changes are from green to tee.