

Black Bear Opens in Cloquet

Choice of Organics Are Important in Construction

By Warren Strandell

Although it only opened for play in July, the new Black Bear Golf Course at Cloquet, Minn., could already be among the finest golf courses in Minnesota.

Owned by the Fond Du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa as a part of its Black Bear Casino complex, the 18-hole championship course was built on what was once 160 acres of swampland. It features 11 lakes on the course, a spring-fed irrigation pond, 95 acres of lush turf and what course superintendent Bill Lewis says are "from what I've heard, probably the finest bent grass greens in the state."

A 27-year veteran in the golf industry, Lewis notes, "No corners whatsoever were cut in the construction of the course. It's absolutely beautiful. It's a tight course. There are hazards on every hole."

Designed by golf course architects Jack Gilmore and Robert Graves of Gilmore Graves Golf, Inc., which has offices in Spring Green, Wis., and Phoenix, AZ, the course is largely built on top of some 1.5 million cubic yards of material that was hauled to elevate the course above the high water table. In the process of establishing a stable, sub-layer for some of the golf holes, several large peat bogs had to be removed.

The association between Gilmore-Graves Golf and the Fond Du Lac Band originated when one of the council members "came by and suggested that I come up and see them. That's how it started. That was in the fall of 1998," Graves relates.

The decision not to cut corners in construction was reached early on in the discussions that followed. Lewis, who was brought into the project to supervise construction of the course - as he regularly is on Gilmore-Graves projects - was a part of the planning. "When we explained to the tribal leaders what could happen in a few years by going with less than the best materials and construction practices, they agreed with us to go with quality," Lewis says. "No corners were cut. They wanted an elite course and they took the extra steps to get one."

Before its construction, much of the 160 acres had water on it. The permitting process with the Corps of Engineers and Environmental Protection Agency took two years as provisions were made to replace each acre of wetland that was impacted or disturbed with 1.5 acres of new wetlands. Approval of the final plan required that 60 acres of new wetlands would have to be created but that expense didn't faze tribal leaders. "They are highly protective of the environment and they happily complied," Lewis says.

Originally, some 40 acres were to have been impacted in the plans, but that amount was reduced to only about 25



acres by making adjustments to the design during the rough-in work. Still, the construction required the biggest fill of any wetland that the Corps of Engineers has ever approved, Lewis notes. "We've kept a lot of wetlands on the course," Graves relates. "We really had to stay on our toes relative to following the whole permitting process. It is a beautiful area."

"We always try to be good stewards of the land," Dennis Olson, a tribal member and project manager for the Fond Du Lac Band, says of meeting all the environmental concerns during construction. "These guys really did a great job of building it. It has become a great course. It is going to be one of the top-end courses in the state."

A native of Warroad, Minn., Lewis started his career in the golf course industry in 1976 during construction of the Warroad Estates Golf Course in his hometown. He became superintendent of the Apache Wells Country Club at Mesa, Ariz., in 1983 and then returned to golf course construction in 1992 to do a Lee Trevino course at Green Valley, Ariz. He later rebuilt the Links Golf Course at Queen Creek, Ariz, and then constructed the River Run Golf Course at Eagar, Ariz.

"It was while I was finishing River Run that a tribal member from Fond Du Lac came down to Arizona to visit me and see if I would be interested in doing a course for them," Lewis says.

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Construction of the driving range at Black Bear began in April 2001 with work on the golf course started two months later. The fairways, which were hydro-seeded with Dakota Peat and the seed in the hydro mulch, are 70 percent bluegrass and 30 percent rye. The course has nine different varieties of grasses. The Dakota-certified greens are L-93 creeping bent grass. The top six inches of the tee boxes were built with a 90-10 mix of sand and Dakota Peat.

"The fill that we hauled in for construction of the course was pure sand," Lewis says. "Its silt-clay content was only 1.3 percent. That's great for turf grass. We got 10 inches of root growth on the bluegrass from the time we seeded it last July until fall. Having clean sand with no clay allows the roots to really go down and the Dakota Peat holds the moisture in place. We could have opened nine holes last fall. It was just like a carpet out there." Top-dressing of the fairways with an 85-15 sand and Dakota Peat mix was done this spring to get more organics into the root zone.

Lewis is a strong advocate of the highly decomposed Dakota Peat and of the agronomic support, lab testing, blending and quality control measures that go into the construction of Dakota-certified greens and tees. "We use the best of the USGA specifications, which when coupled the even more stringent specifications and controls developed by Dakota provides the ultimate in results," Lewis says. "Dakota-certified greens are constructed for each location's different terrain, humidity and all the other factors to be considered. The program starts with testing the sand and determining the sand to peat mix that is needed. Everything is tested and monitored throughout the blending process by Dakota or a

Dakota-approved agronomist. There is never a question about the quality of the materials that are being used.

"This is a course to really be proud of. It was built by tribal enrollees. The whole project was done in-house by their construction company. I trained their operators and the whole construction crew and am in the process of training the maintenance crew," Lewis says. "Bob Oelke, Dakota's agronomist, is assisting us. The course will have 14 employees plus the superintendent and his assistant and a mechanic."

Besides the golf course, which is its own separate entity, and the casino, the Black Bear complex could soon also include a convention center and hotel. Those additions are in the early planning stages. Black Bear has a two-year golf course management contract with Gilmore-Graves. The arrangement calls for Lewis to serve as a consultant and work with fertilizer programs, supervise the superintendent, assist in training the staff, and to be involved with other issues having to do with the golf course.

When opened, Black Bear will be set to host major tournaments, like LPGA and pro-am events, Lewis says. "They've already pretty much got this year all booked up as far as leagues and tournaments. Green fees this year will be



in the \$40 range including a cart, which is really competitive."

Next for Gilmore Graves and Lewis, a team that has been working together on a regular basis for the past four years, are golf course projects currently in planning in Minnesota, South Dakota, Wisconsin and possibly in Nevada. "The architect puts the course on paper and they hire me as an independent contractor to put it into the dirt, to make field changes, train the crews and things like that," Lewis says of the arrangement.

"I've been in the golf business since 1976 and Dakota is the only peat program I will use on a green. If the owners don't want to use Dakota, I won't do the job. For me, a Dakota green has never failed. Every green I've ever built with Dakota, whether it was 15 years ago, 20 years ago or more, they're still great greens. That's the same when I work with Gilmore-Graves. We don't bid projects. When the bidding war starts, the first thing that goes is the quality of the peat and when an inferior product is substituted, it shows up in three to five years when the greens have to be redone. For that reason, we won't bid a project. We believe that building Dakota-certified greens is the only insurance that we as the architect and the contractor have. Dakota backs their product. They do all the sand testing, monitor the blending and provide all the technical control. everything is there and in place from day one. There is no chance of an inferior material being substituted."

Using inferior organics or mixes has been the biggest problem in golf course construction, Lewis says. "I've seen it all over the Southwest. The architect specifies Dakota Peat but later it gets cut out for cheaper stuff to stay within the construction budget. Then when the greens fail three years later everybody involved starts pointing fingers and the lawsuits begin. Dakota-certified greens and tees are a little more expensive initially, but in three to five years they've more than paid for themselves. With others, you could end up paying for them three-fold down the road. It will all show up in the quality of the turf. The turf never lies."