

golf

BEST NEW COURSE IN SOUTH CAROLINA 2005

South Carolina golf gave birth in 2005 to three new courses as rich and varied in personality as any human siblings. Imagine Jack Nicklaus, Michelle Wie and Peter Jacobsen as triplets. Nicklaus, all class and composure, is the May River Club he designed outside Bluffton. Wie, the exceptional talent shy only in maturity, is The Members Club at Grande Dunes in Myrtle Beach. And Jacobsen, the ebullient and all embracing, is Canongate at Pinecrest, also in Bluffton. The single most obvious trait these newcomers share is that they are private, member-only, facilities. Beyond

that the gene pools diverge, a fact that makes choosing a favorite difficult, perhaps even a little unfair.

But a primary charge of the South Carolina Golf Course Ratings Panel is to name the best new course in the state each year. And if the judges at Crufts somehow discern the better between a slobbering St. Bernard and a yipping shih tzu, then who are we to dodge a tough decision. With all that in mind, the Best New Course in South Carolina for 2005 is the May River Club, narrowly, but not without good reason. Perhaps most striking among them is the setting.



BY TRENT BOUTS

MAY RIVER

The golf course consists of just 90 acres of maintained turf on a spectacular 22,000-acre property known as Palmetto Bluff, abutting the May River. Beyond the gated entrance you encounter a meandering forest drive that is long, slow, and deliberately so. The four miles and 10 minutes it takes to reach the clubhouse work like yoga on wheels. Tension peels away, breathing deepens, your mood lifts. If

first timers to Augusta National experience chills along Magnolia Lane, the message in the approach to May River is “chill out.”

Panelist Melissa Wingate thought, “the setting of the course and ambience was just incredible.” Mike Bright said, “the owners are right on target with the design and the surrounding area.” “Breathtaking beauty,” was Johnette Jeffcoat’s summation. It says something for the nature of the

property, and for Nicklaus’ final routing, that the setting proved so impressive when only a handful of holes actually approach the river itself.

The developers worked closely with local authorities and land agencies to ensure the impact of the course was more tiptoe than footprint. The spectacular par-three sixth hole is a case in point. Featuring more wetland than playing surface, the hole might be what Donald Ross would have done had he grown up in the Lowcountry rather than the Scottish seaside. It fits as if all it took to create was a mower and a bag of seed.

Indeed, there is more than a touch of Ross at May River. Expansive fairways are easy enough to hit but unless you find the choicest strip, it requires skill and at times some nerve to put an approach near the pin. Poor strategy or flawed execution brings myriad chipping areas into play.

Asked during grow-in whether the green on the par-five fourth was too shallow, angled such as it was, Nicklaus scoffed. “What do you expect if you’re only hitting a wedge in here,” he said, or words to that effect. Presumably the Golden Bear would be just as gruff with several panelists who also felt some green complexes “did

not support the shots required into the green.” The par-four seventh was cited more than once. The green sits low behind a creek and apart from being difficult to see from the fairway, it runs perpendicular to the approach. It can be an exacting shot in, no doubt, but at just 339 yards from the tips, many will be approaching with that wedge Nicklaus referred to.

On the seventh, as with the fourth, members will find

that the further back they are with their approach, the more green they will have to hit. That option to weigh power against precision is one that will long entertain the membership at May River.

Three other features warrant specific mention.

One, is the use of a new heat, drought, and salt-tolerant, paspalum grass covering everything except the Champion bermudagrass greens.

Consider the reaction

of Daryl Boe, who also serves on Golf Digest’s ratings panel and has seen more courses than most amateurs dream of. “I was blown away by the paspalum,” he said. “A great playing surface...a deep emerald green that striped up with mowing just like rye grass.” “The grass of the future,” said Happ Lathrop, a former state champion and executive director of the South Carolina Golf Association. George Frye, a single-digit handicapper and former superintendent at The Ocean Course, lauded the paspalum’s “superb playability.”

Two, is the bunker sand. Shipped at Nicklaus’ recommendation from his native Ohio, this sand has a natural angular grain that provides a degree of adhesion between individual grains. The result is the very consistency many golfers grumble is missing from the bunkers on their home course. It also holds its place better through heavy rain, reducing clean-up time after storms.

Three, is the clubhouse. Built of wood in natural tones, it is understated inside and out and entirely in keeping with the developers’ vision to preserve the beauty and sense of place that preceded it. Class and composure are timeless, as Nicklaus himself has shown for more than 40 years.



Opposite page: Hole #7 at May River. Above: Hole #10 at May River. Photos by Trent Bouts.



THE MEMBERS CLUB AT GRANDE DUNES

Time and the maturity it brings were the only things missing from The Members Club at Grande Dunes when most golf panel members visited in August. Open for just over two months at that point, many of the plantings, berms, and mounding that will lend tone and character to many holes were in their youth and will be for some time yet. But like Michelle Wie, it doesn't require much imagination to be excited about what lies ahead, particularly for the members who will play this course time and time again.

ture in itself and one that goes to the heart of their design philosophy. They wanted to create a course, that above all else, was fun to play. It says something about where golf wandered off to through the booming '90s that the concept of enjoying the game needs resurrecting today, but that's another story. The story for now is that Price and Schreiner hit their target dead center.

Wide fairways, some as much as 60 yards across, help build confidence off the tee. By comparison some fairways at this year's U.S. Open at Pinehurst No. 2 were as narrow as 24 yards in the landing zone. That is not to say poor drives at The Members Course don't come without penalty. Hannon was one of several panelists who observed the fairways were flattest down the spine. Drives too far adrift of center were more than likely to leave a sloping stance for the second shot.

In concert with the goal of keeping you in the game off the tee, most green surrounds feature large run-off, or chipping, areas that are testing without being too penal. Overall bunkering is lighter than many modern courses. Many holes have just one sand trap at the green meaning members who miss will often retain the chance to scramble par with an astute chip, bump and run or even putt off a closely mown surface. It will be possible for a 10-handicapper to shoot a score to be proud of every now and then but he or she will not be unduly roughed up on an off day. This "hard par, easy bogey" trait is sound policy for a members' course. Few people pay to endure something they don't enjoy, and golf needs to be mindful that most of us are little more than optimistic hackers, no matter how much technology sits in our bag.

If the clubhouse is a muted presence at the May River Club, the "grande" Italianate 19th hole at The Members Course is toward the other end of the scale. Towering over the ninth and 18th greens, it is lavishly appointed and impressed many panelists. "Gorgeous," "top notch" and "second to none" were some of the comments. The developers should be happy to hear panelist Jill Gainer's overall summary, "beautiful course, excellent service, knowledgeable staff," because it probably reads a lot like their mission from day one.



Top of page: Hole #10 at The Members Club. Above: Hole #18 and the clubhouse. Photos provided by Cotton and Company

Unlike many daily fee facilities in Myrtle Beach that strive for a wow factor to attract visiting play, the course at The Members Club can afford to pursue a far more subtle appeal. If bells and whistles tend to ring an all too familiar tune after a while, the best of The Members Club will reveal itself over time and repeated play. The greens are a prime case in point. As panelist Vic Hannon, state senior champion, noted, "The putting surfaces were excellent and contained many subtle breaks not detected on the initial read."

That architects Nick Price and Craig Schreiner eschewed dramatic signatures to brand this course is a fea-

Peter Jacobsen is sometimes touted as a candidate to be the next commissioner of the PGA Tour. Now a Champions Tour regular, he comes with decades of experience on the PGA Tour, is smart, and can handle himself in any company. Less spoken about but no less a factor in his chances, is his ability to relate to all golfers, regardless of ability, status or income. And one of the concerns golf is grappling with right now – as a counter weight to the work of current commissioner, Tim Finchem, and the record purses he has negotiated – is the perception that it is essentially a rich man’s game. If Jacobsen is golf’s everyman then Canongate at Pinecrest is the equivalent among the new courses of 2005.

While it is another private club, Pinecrest is among the most affordable member experiences available. You could say the proof is in the parking lot. “You can find a \$60,000 sports car as easily as you can a van from a plumbing company,” says Kelly Minasi, general manager and head golf professional. “We make membership golf avail-

able to all demographics in an area where typical initiation fees can range from \$10,000 to \$50,000 or more.” Indeed, affordability is part of the mission for the Canongate company that now has 14 courses across 11 locations, with most in Georgia.

Pinecrest is the company’s first venture in South Carolina and the opportunity to present “an alternative, something new,” excited Minasi, who has spent the best part of 20 years in golf in the Hilton Head area. To gauge just how novel the concept is, consider the membership of Roy Rossbauer. Rossbauer has been diving for balls in golf course ponds and lakes in the area for years but it took the arrival of the Pinecrest facility before he joined a club. Minasi says Rossbauer liked what he saw during one diving expedition and signed on as soon as he heard the fees, which run at \$99 a month after the \$750 joining fee.

The course itself reminds Minasi of The Orchards Golf Club, a Donald Ross design and site of the 2004 U.S. Open in Massachusetts. Unlike most of Ross’s work though,

architect Rocky Roquemore moved a considerable amount of earth crafting the Pinecrest course. The result is a layout with variety and greens complexes that are large and undulating. Panelist Allen Allnoch says Roquemore built, “plenty of character into an essentially flat piece of pine forest.” The course also abuts wetlands that provide an intriguing passage of bird life even if the birdies fail to present themselves on the course itself.

In an area known for outstanding courses and no small amount of exclusivity Canongate at Pinecrest has no pretensions. It is a player friendly course with an emphasis on getting people engaged in the game. Already the club has a relationship with nearby Bluffton High School that means golf is part of the curriculum. And the club also runs regular programs with the neighboring Boys and Girls Club. “It’s like watching the Pied Piper in a golf cart,” Minasi says of excursions from the pro shop to lead juniors back to the course for lessons. But the gains for golf and the community from exercises like that are no fairytale.

CANONGATE AT PINECREST



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Above: Pinecrest is Canongate’s first venture in South Carolina.