

GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE

The global journal of
golf design and development

ISSUE 55 JANUARY 2019

Golf course architect Drew Rogers has completed course refinements at Valencia Golf and Country Club in Naples, Florida.

Valencia is a public access golf facility in the private golf dominated market of Naples.

“It’s funny that some folks don’t even realise that there are any daily fee courses in Naples,” said Rogers. “That’s part of what makes this project so special and why I was eager to take on the work with my client there. Definitely a new challenge for me.”

Course renovations were originally motivated by the owner’s desire to convert turf from 419 to Celebration bermuda. Rogers began work in April 2018 with south west Florida contractor GCID and the project manager Rob Corbett, with substantial involvement from golf course superintendent Dominic Wanchena and director of golf Nick Stokke.

“Because the turf was to be replaced, the door was really open at that point to make some really beneficial adjustments, and for minimal additional investment,” said Rogers. “We added work on the tees – enlarging and laser-levelling – as well as significant bunker refinements and removals, and adjustments to soften the green contouring, without rebuilding.”

“The greens had very active contouring and poor tie-ins, so our focus was to effectively ‘melt’ those contours down as more manageable surfaces with expanded cupping areas and more flowing transitions along the perimeter edges, for increased short grass recovery opportunities – while retaining the primary characteristics that had always made the greens so identifiable.”

Stokke added: “the softened green contours and the cleared vegetation has really had a positive impact on the pace of play and an improved experience for all skills levels.”

Rogers said that he took a simple and practical approach to bunkering – reducing the overall number from 70 to 43. “The bunker style is more manageable with no fly-mowing or the need for bunker lining as well as being positioned for more strategic playing options on every hole.

“We employed a ‘less is more’ philosophy with the bunkers. Now, even with fewer bunkers, their strategic placement is more thoughtful and impacting. Visual scale is greatly enhanced, angles and options are now reinforced, and the physical style and details of the bunkers now render them very straightforward and efficient to manage.”

Stokke said: “Even with fewer bunkers, Drew managed to enhance the visuals from the tees as well as the approach shots into the greens – and the new bunkering is so much more part of the course, requiring players to strategically think their way around the course to set up their next shot.”

According to Wanchena, the loss of bunkers has decreased daily maintenance to upwards of 90 minutes, without impacting shot values.

“There are unusually wide playing corridors for a public course – especially one that is situated within a residential community,” said Rogers. “The fairway alignments are aimed to complement the strategic options.”

“The width is a real strength of this golf course. There’s room to play, and players enjoy that quality – and it keeps play moving along. Frankly, it’s wider than many of the well-known private courses in the area.

“To compliment that desirable width and scale, we were very specific with the placement and proportion of bunkers, as well as the fairway alignments and other subtle enhancements.

“Those elements, along with some selective clearing of vegetation, now reveals very clear, sensible strategies and shot values that were not apparent or in existence before.”

According to Rogers, holes with particular improvement include the par-five sixth, “now more of a cape hole that now relates to an existing lake that was entirely ignored as a feature previously; and the par-four ninth, with its deceptive centreline bunkering and optional angles of play.

“We see far too many public access courses that frankly possess uninspired architectural character and qualities,” added Rogers. “That has always perplexed me. Why should a public access course be void of solid architecture or be any less strategically developed than a private club experience? It really has little to do with the ability to deliver lush, pristine conditions or to have dramatic bunkering and landscaping, common to many private clubs.

“Rather, it has more to do with the course having strong architectural substance – its backbone and guts. Valencia deserved to have a more provoking design and playing experience because it already possessed a solid framework. Our goal, therefore, was not to create a tougher test of golf or make it any more elaborate and ornate – it was simply to reveal the course as a more thoughtfully developed experience.”

Other renovations include the enlarging of tees, practice tees and the practice putting green, as well as the development of target greens.

“Players are going to be treated to a more inspired architectural presentation,” said Rogers. “Not just a standard, run-of-the-mill experience. They’ll continue to enjoy the wide playing corridors, the spacious fairways and the playfully contoured greens, but now it will all be nicely tied together as a whole.

“Valencia, like so many other facilities in South Florida is a great example of how a well-conceived design approach can be employed to address the wide-reaching demands of today’s stressed golf operations. In most markets today, player expectations and demands are still upward trending, but spending and operational capabilities are disproportionately stagnant or leaking. As course infrastructures must be addressed, too can many simple improvements be made in concert that will fit most budgets, and more importantly, provide a stronger platform from which courses can operate moving forward.”

