

Creating an identity

Royal Poinciana, one of the strongest and best clubs in the golf hotspot of Naples, Florida, now has a golf course to match, reports Adam Lawrence

One of the most important, but also the most difficult jobs for golf course architects is to figure out what the identity of the course they are building or renovating is. This may sound a little obscure – isn't it the routing or the greens that defines a course? – but for any project to be a success, the course that results must have some sort of individual identity.

The clearest and simplest way to create that sense of identity is for the architect to figure out what about the property with which he has been presented is unique, and then to emphasise that characteristic. At Cypress Point in California, for example, Dr Alister MacKenzie was able to create a routing that takes the player through a number of different environments – fields and dunes – before culminating in the famous run down the coastline. If the property is distinctive, then for the

architect to ignore its characteristics is almost always a mistake.

But what, then, should an architect do if the property is less distinctive? There are hundreds, thousands of courses that have been built on land that is not only relatively ill-suited for golf, but is basically featureless. In these circumstances, identity has to be found, or created, somewhere else. It might be through water hazards, or a particular style of bunkering, or through greens of a certain type. Or the course's identity may be rooted in the landscape style which the architect deploys.

This question of identity is why, for example, so many golf courses in Florida feel largely indistinguishable. Built as part of a housing development, on flat, swampy ground, with homes down many of the holes and lakes elsewhere, excavated to create fill material from which to build golf features, how could they be otherwise?

At the Royal Poinciana Golf Club, in the golfing hotbed of Naples in the southwest of the Sunshine State, identity isn't a problem. Naples, a city with a permanent resident population of only around 20,000, has more than 80 golf courses, built to service the population of affluent 'snowbirds' that descend on the area every winter, giving it the reputation of one of the richest cities in America. Almost all these golf courses, though, are of the housing subdivision type, with holes spread out among homes. Not to dismiss such courses, but it is inevitably a compromised environment in which to play golf.

Royal Poinciana, though, is one of only a handful of clubs in the area without housing. In fact, the club has 36 holes of core golf without a single home on the property. This gives it a very clear identity, and one that cannot easily be replicated by any other courses in the area, given that the Naples

district is basically fully built. Built by architect David Wallace in 1969-70, the club's two courses, the Cypress and the Pines, have something that money – which is not in short supply in Naples – cannot buy.

Notwithstanding this priceless asset, it had become clear to the club's leadership over the past decade or so that its courses needed some work. Built at the height of what some refer to as the golf architectural 'Dark Ages', neither course really took advantage of its site, and both were rather tired. In 2004, the club hired the firm of Arthur Hills to do a minor renovation on the Cypress course, and then, four years later, brought in the same firm to do a more comprehensive job on the Pines. Hills architect Drew Rogers led that project, which was completed in two phases by 2010, involving rebuilding green and tee complexes – including moving some of them – as well as rebunkering the course

and converting the turf from 419 bermuda to the newer Celebration (with Champion ultradwarf bermuda on the greens). That project also included a new irrigation system and, in alignment with them, made a start on reducing the area of maintained and irrigated turf on the golf course, and increasing the area devoted to wetlands.

"Following this project, the club internally developed a plan for the Cypress course in 2011, involving much of the same work, but also digging a little deeper to examine the identity of the golf course," Rogers told *GCA*.

Rogers, by now on his own, came back into the club in 2013 to help with this process, working alongside the golf course superintendent Matt Taylor. "All the good things that had been done on the Pines – new grasses, new irrigation, reworking of greens, tees and bunkers – were on the table, but, along with the club, we came up with a more ambitious plan to give the Cypress course a

Photos: Drew Rogers

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Sandy waste areas are part of the landscape treatment to create an 'Old Florida' feel on Royal Poinciana's Cypress course, making it more natural and environmentally sensitive



Photos: Drew Rogers

clearer identity and make better use of the property on which it sits," says Rogers. "Turf reduction was a key part of that, with sandy wastes becoming an important part of the landscape treatment, but the overall concept was to create an 'Old Florida' feel that would make the Cypress course feel significantly more natural and environmentally sensitive."

That meant, for example, that the Gordon River, which flows across the site but which the old design basically ignored, should become a more important part of the golf course – which it is; players now encounter the river right at the start of their round. "The plan called for lagoons, wetlands and native vegetation to be integrated into the golf experience, both to improve the environmental qualities of the course and also to help reduce the area of maintained turf and thus cut water bills," Rogers explains.

Where the Cypress previously had wall to wall bermuda grass, with fairly typical ovoid bunkers, there is now pine straw, native scrubland, much larger and more freeform areas of sand and more contour in the ground. This can be seen clearly, for example, at the fourth hole, which previously required a drive into acres of relatively

featureless grass, with the most striking visual image from the tee being the concrete cart path. Rogers has moved the path – another gain from the sandy waste areas being that they can also serve as highways for cart traffic – and built a large diagonal sand hazard threatening the tee shot and asking golfers to bite off as much as they dare. At the green, a pond has been brought closer to the play and re-edged attractively with stonework, a recurring theme on the new-look Cypress – there is, for example, another extremely pleasing stone edge to the pond that flanks the seventh green.

Playability was a central aspect of the works. Rogers and his team redeveloped many of the green surrounds to accommodate short turf and more varied recoveries, as well as reducing the reliance on fairway bunkering, reconsidering the positioning of tees and expanding fairway widths.

The par three holes on the Cypress have received particular attention and now, as a group, form a visually pleasing, challenging and varied set, in a way that they hardly did before. There is now a reverse Redan at the eighth, a dramatic Cape green at the twelfth and a modified punchbowl

at the fourteenth. The use of classical features doesn't end there: Rogers has built a Biarritz green on the thirteenth hole, a bunkerless par five. Water is commonplace – this is Florida after all – but Rogers has built his water hazards in a way that makes them look, if not quite natural, at least much less engineered. The removal of so many of the cart paths, and their replacement with hard-packed sandy waste areas is a huge boon for the course as a whole – golf architects around the world know only too well the visual impact of those ribbons of concrete.

All in all, the Cypress course is now a beacon for what golf in Florida should be. Golfing in the state, mostly, comes with inevitable compromises, to deal with water levels during rain, drainage from surrounding development and the like. And, let us face it, the kind of affluent retirees who populate these courses are rarely by instinct radicals. As such, Royal Poinciana deserves a lot of credit for embracing a more natural and authentic look and feel for its golf course, and Drew Rogers equally deserves applause for helping the club find its way to such a positive solution. **GCA**