

The FLORIDA Green

HOME RENOVATION DAVIDSON NURTURES NEW LOOK FOR COUNTRY CLUB OF NAPLES

DAVIDSON HELPS RETURN NAPLES TO GOLDEN ERA

By Trent Bosts

Back in May, Bill Davidson, CGCS was practically playing in the dirt of a comprehensive renovation at the Country Club of Naples. He'd gotten out way ahead of permitting and potential supply chain issues, machinery was running all over the place, and he could eye a time of piecing it all back together.

It wasn't just the moving parts that were synching up. So were the players. Golf course architect, Drew Rogers, brought "great ideas," and, moreover, Rogers was "great to work with and super personable." The club itself was similarly in tune. "It's a wonderful club," Davidson said. "The board is awesome, and so is our great general manager."

Surveying the buzz of activity from behind the wheel of his Carryall in the middle of a bare dirt fairway, he made no attempt to hide his excitement: "This is a lot of fun."

But there was more to his joy. Davidson, a Florida GCSA past president, grew up with the salt and pepper sands of Southwest Florida between his toes. He remembers a time when Naples was "an absolute vegetable and farming community with a little bit of hunting and fishing." "There was nothing in town then," he says. Those of modest means were the clear majority.

Davidson's father was a firefighter, his mother worked government jobs. And there were three older sisters. "We didn't have a whole ton of money," he says. "If you wanted to renovate the kitchen, you did it yourselves. Back then, you didn't just pick up the phone and pay somebody to do it."

Thus, overseeing an \$8-million reinvention of one of the area's oldest courses – at the club named for his hometown - wasn't just a prized professional project, it was personal too, almost a matter of heritage. And things were going well.

"I've got a great crew, and the board has supported all of the extra things we are trying to accomplish. So, that part has been fun," he said. "Dealing with the dust and the dirt in your ears when you go home...that hasn't been any fun! But we're almost done with that nonsense."

Not quite.

Soon after, someone turned off the spigot. While parts of the east coast experienced record summer rainfall, Naples and nearby areas plunged into drought. Without relief from showers and storms typical of rainy season afternoons, the heat compounded. One punishingly hot and dry week ran into the next, and soon into months.

Hardly ideal when you're trying to grass a golf course.

Now, in early October, while Davidson remains typically upbeat, it is clear the fun part has met its counter.

"It was an all-round brutal summer," he says. "The intense heat and lack of rain touched everybody, from the sheer misery of it, dealing with dehydration and fatigue, to the financial side. We saw it in things like our electric bills and even how many bottles

of water we bought. I've never bought so many icicle pops for the break room. We were going through bags and bags and bags of them. Things got pretty precarious there for a while."

With much of the city's population up north and no rain, there was nothing to replenish the reuse water supply the course uses. "There were very few people washing dishes and doing laundry and all that," Davidson says. "The amount of reuse water available was cut by about 75 percent."

As restrictions kicked in, some of Davidson's grass dried out and died off.

"We just couldn't keep it all alive," he says. "I tried to delay grassing the greens for a couple of weeks. But the club made the decision that if we needed to sacrifice, then we would sacrifice some fairways, so that's what we did."

"Eventually, it started raining a little bit and our irrigation water supply picked up. We were able to do a bunch of extra sprigging. But we didn't really finish grassing the golf course until about mid-September, which is about a month late. Now, we're clawing our way back."

What was first known as Big Cypress Golf and Country Club opened in 1962 with a course designed by William "Bill" Diddel, the mid-Westerner who helped found the American Society of Golf Course Architects in 1947. Four years later, members

Bill Davidson, CGCS is dwarfed by mountains of virgin soil that came out of bury-pits created to accept about 20,000 cubic yards of fraze mowing material



bought the club and renamed it the Country Club of Naples. The course underwent various treatments over the years, including a significant renovation soon after Davidson's arrival in 2007.

But the current project is by far the most comprehensive the course has seen. "It's a complete rebuild, nothing even closely resembling the old golf course other than the routing," Davidson says. And even that has been tweaked little.

Thanks to some considerable forethought and planning, the club had "80 percent" of the money required "sitting in the bank," Davidson says. "Knowing there would be a renovation coming up, the board very strategically began putting away money every year. There was a real small – about \$6,000 – assessment to make up for some price rises coming out of the pandemic, but the vote for the project passed with about 90 percent support."

What is on the ground now stems in part from a desire to create a new practice facility. Bound by residential properties, creating space for that practice facility would have entailed moving five greens. A second stage of work would have seen the remaining greens renovated in 2024.

"Really, it didn't make any sense to tear into the golf course and then come back and do it again so soon afterwards," Davidson says. "So, we decided to do it all congruently and make a seamless transition from old to new."

After contacting Rogers about the project, Davidson says the club made an inspired decision.

"Drew asked us, 'What should I know and what do you guys want?'" Davidson says. "But we said, 'We want to know what you think first. We're not going to tell you what we think you should find. You go out and tell us what you see.' I'm very proud of our board of directors for that.

"Drew had a great reputation around town as someone who knows the Naples market and was great to work with. One of the other things that set him apart was that he had already worked on a Bill Diddel golf course up north."

Rogers came back with a vision to accentuate an "old Florida" look on what is a small footprint golf course dotted with wonderful cypress hammocks. He saw a 1930s-style course, with square greens and corrugated perimeters on bunkers. He wanted to do away with perfect lines and ellipses. "Which was exactly what the club was thinking," Davidson says.

Better still, Rogers found an alternate and far better site for the new practice facility. Instead of using the club's original choice, which would have entailed passage through the golf course, he suggested repurposing the site of the club's original maintenance facility, which had been used for storage for many years.



One of the many family photos in the office of Bill Davidson, CGCS, shows him wheeling son, Trace, about the yard in a spreader. Trace is now on scholarship playing lacrosse at the University of Maryland

"He came up with this ingenious idea of a slight rerouting, so now we will play to that old maintenance site as a par three," Davidson says, and the new practice facility is far more accessible. "It really ties everything together. It was a simple solution, but we just couldn't see the forest for the trees with everything that was there. It was one of those lightning bolt moments."

The new course features Platinum paspalum on fairways and TifEagle bermudagrass on greens, in place of Celebration and MiniVerde. In addition to spraying out the Celebration, Davidson fraze mowed the top inch of his fairways, where he could, which amounted to about 50 of 70 acres. The remainder – slopes and hillsides – he stripped with earth movers. He admits he was "caught off guard" by the amount of material the fraze mowing generated.

"It was bury-pit city out here," he says. "I had to go rent an extra front-end loader just to keep up. Fraze mowing generated about 20,000 cubic yards of material. It wasn't just the amount of it but the speed with which we had to deal with it." Davidson used the "virgin soil with no organics in it" that came out those bury pits to rebuild the golf course.



Bill Davidson, CGCS salvaged aquatic plants during to the earth moving phase to reintroduce at a later date

“The golf course itself turned out spectacularly,” he says. “Now we are busy figuring out how we are going to mow it and take care of it most effectively. It’s one thing to do the grow-in because you could care less if it takes 25 hours to mow all the fairways. But as you get closer to opening, you’ve got to start doing time trials and figuring out how much of your labor resources you need to put toward each activity to be sure you can get it done in time.

“That’s what we’re going through now, developing mow schedules and patterns. Learning if we need to send out two fairway mowers or do we need to send out three, or even four. All that kind of stuff. Instead of putting out ball washers and sand trap rakes right now, we’re still out doing drainage projects and fertilizing like a grow-in, trying to completely fill in the voids and create density.”

“We’re close, we’re real close. I just need it to stay nice and warm for the next month or so and we’ll be in good shape.” ■



Bill Davidson, CGCS, right, presents a plaque of appreciation to USGA Green Section stalwart, John Foy, back when Davidson was president of the Florida GCSA in 2015