

Fighting hurricanes and making positive changes at Quail West



The Lakes course at Quail West Golf & Country Club has reopened following a renovation led by golf course architect Drew Rogers.

The completion of the work is the second course renovation Rogers has carried out at the club in Naples, Florida, over the past couple of years, having renovated the Preserve course in 2016.

GCA caught up with the architect to discuss the recent work, dealing with Hurricane Irma, and some of the course's architectural points of interest.

What were the key aims of the renovation to the Lakes course?

The recent work had a very similar scope to the earlier renovation on the Preserve course in 2016, focusing on infrastructure replacement and upgrades to greens, bunkers, irrigation, turf, tees and lake banks. However, the settings of the two courses differ a great deal, so that becomes a definitive focus in the design approach.

With the wider, more open corridors on the Lakes course, we were able to employ more classic, strategic elements that befit the grander scale. Tees were lowered and widened, fairways were broadened, and bunkers were made to be more defined and 'appear' bolder with more effective proportions, helping to promote more strategic angles and optional routes of play.

What kind of damage did Hurricane Irma cause in September 2017?

We're probably all fairly familiar now with the impacts of the hurricane – with the damaging winds, excessive rains and flooding. But the toughest thing about Irma for us was the timing. What many don't realise is the amount of persistent rainfall we were already enduring well in advance of that storm – from June 2017 onward! We were already flooded before Irma, so there was no place for the hurricane water to go. Additionally, we were in the final stages of construction on several of the holes and much of the rest of the course was growing in, but also still quite fragile. Most all of the bunkers were damaged in some way, and water stood for weeks in low spots around catch basins, waiting for the flood waters to recede. All of that turf ultimately had to be replaced. Wind damage was not as impacting on the Lakes course as it was on the Preserve, which is situated among stands of virgin preserve. Still though, debris was heavy and getting around the course was beyond complicated due to the flooding between the holes and throughout the entire community.

What kind of recovery efforts were required?

Ultimately, we were able to put almost everything back as originally envisioned – it just required more time and effort, much to the credit of our contractors – Landscapes Unlimited and Leibold Irrigation – and the maintenance staff at Quail West, headed by Nathan Gingrich and Eric Wiles. Of course, all of the suppliers were also there for us, with grass and sand. The membership was also very supportive. We received pragmatic assurance and patience from club leadership, and we cannot undervalue that. It was a total team effort from start to finish.

How do the Lakes and Preserve courses at Quail West differ?

Both courses are aptly named, with the Preserve really carved out of wetlands and upland preserve areas. It's a good bit tighter because of the presence of that vegetation and its protected boundaries. As a result, though, it's also quite beautiful.

With the Lakes Course, we wanted to capitalise on the opportunity to offer an even more distinctive presentation and a different identity and experience from the Preserve. We were able to do this by working with the inherent attributes of a setting that was much more spacious and open.

In Florida, that can mean longer views and some exposure to wind, and that's where width comes into mind. We were fortunate to be able to employ appropriately proportioned features that played to the grander scale of the setting. There are larger but less numerous bunkers and features that many times swing into holes perpendicular to the line of play. That inherently inspires more playing angles and options for players to consider.

As a result, the Lakes is a bit more of a thinking player's course – a bit more strategic than the Preserve. The greens were completely redeveloped to complement the strategies. We changed the angles of greens and opened up the weaker lines of approach, created bailout areas and more interesting recovery areas – all to ensure that players of any level can find enjoyment and success, but also so the course can be set up, as needed, as a firm test.

What are your reflections now that the course has reopened?

As with any renovation, we always try to study the weaker holes and turn those into the course's strength. I think we did that here, starting with the long par-four seventh by creating an inviting but defined, angled fairway and a 'reverse redan' inspired kick plate approach that will invite players to think about what happens to the ball on the ground.

The par-five eleventh now has a partially obscured green from the primary angle of approach, which is fed by a long slope some 50 yards out in front of the green. So, if you play the yardage, there is risk in running long. But if you use more imagination – and the ground – a much shorter shot will yield the preferred result. But that will obviously take some time for players to discover and become familiar with and trust.

Perhaps the most impacting and interesting modification can be found on the par-three twelfth. What was otherwise a rather mundane and deflective target has now been transformed into a 'half punchbowl' that gathers a fair share of shots into certain birdie range. Think of a combination of the 'Dell' at Lahinch and the 'Punchbowl' at Mountain Lake, but slightly more varied than both because half of the green is openly visible and approachable – and the other half is more obfuscated.

The ultimate goal was to create more options for players and inspire more shot-making creativity. Sometimes that 'change' is questioned and criticised. Change is hard for some, but we're more concerned about the long-term here, and looking to build golf holes that will endure and be adopted as favourites by the majority of players.

The hope is that all of these improvements provide even greater identity and variety, engage the players to have more fun and ignite an overall greater sense of pride in their golf course.