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Lemon Bay Golf Club reopens December 1, after renovation

BY SCOTT COTHERMAN

Drew Rogers is one of those rare types who visualizes acres of dirt as a beautiful future landscape. And that is exactly what he did collaborating with members, suppliers, and staff at Lemon Bay Golf Club this summer. Just as he did for fifty other golf courses over ten years as his own man.

Rogers was raised in a small town in southern Illinois. Quaint and wholesome, Robinson (pop. 7094), is home to the Heath family (of candy bar fame) and a small refinery whose executives actively supported the local country club. It was there that Rogers was exposed to the game of golf, playing thirty-six holes a day with his friends, sunup to sundown.

"I feel very lucky to have grown up in that town and play at a golf facility that really shouldn't have been there in the first place," said Rogers. "I got exposed to a lot of high rolling people and wanted to figure out how to make golf a career. I tried it on the playing side but that was not going to go anywhere."

After washing out at Eastern Kentucky University as a freshman player, Rogers enrolled in the University of Kentucky's landscape architecture program. He combined a passion for golf with his schooling and eventually found his way to Arthur Hills, the acclaimed golf course designer from Toledo, Ohio.

The American Society of Golf Course Architects calls the Arthur Hills name "synonymous with designs that are beautiful, fun to play, and classic in their character and strategy." For 18 years, Rogers honed his talent in the Hills organization before breaking away to form his own design firm two years after the Great Recession of 2008.

Ten years later, Lemon Bay member Tom O'Shane came calling. O'Shane had recently played Old Elm Golf Club in Chicago, which he learned had been renovated by Rogers. He was so impressed with the quality of that course upgrade that he sought out the man responsible.

At that time, O'Shane led the club's task force to chart its future, which included oversight of the golf course renovation. He explained the opportunity to Rogers in a phone call, but admits it was a hard sell. Rogers had never heard of Lemon Bay and did not know where it was located. He used Google Earth



for a sky-high view of the property, noting the beauty of its topography and proximity to the Gulf. Only then did O'Shane persuade Rogers to tour the golf course during his next trip to Florida.

"He walked up the steps to the clubhouse and you know, Drew's very cordial, very nice," recalls O'Shane. "We got in the golf cart to tour the course and he told me all the reasons he didn't want to do the project."

"I had four projects going at the time, so my resources were stretched," said Rogers, explaining his reluctance to take on more work. "But I wanted to see the layout with my own eyes so that I could feel the potential of it ... or not."

"The change in Drew's personality as we drove the golf course was just amazing," beamed O'Shane. "We came off the golf course and he said, 'this is a wonderful, wonderful piece of property.' Drew said, 'I see a lot of opportunity here' and I said, 'sounds like you have an interest.' He says 'yes, I want to do this job.'"

Once on board, the hard work began.

Key to the effort was helping the task force sell the project to the club's members. Rogers honed his pitch after spending time in the area with O'Shane and Lemon Bay members, visiting other local golf courses and gaining a sense of the culture around Gasparilla Island.

What Rogers discovered was a friendly, welcoming environment that reminded him of growing up in the Midwest. "They were kind enough to select me to do the work and I'm delighted," said Rogers. "I really feel a part of who they are and where they're going,

which is making it that much more fun and rewarding."

So, what was it about Rogers' vision for the golf course that resonated so deeply with Lemon Bay's members, resulting in nearly nine in ten members voting to proceed with the project? He told them, simply, "I do not want to change Lemon Bay. I want to make Lemon Bay a better version of itself."

But it was not a garden of roses along the pathway to the renovation.

O'Shane reports the biggest disappointment to date was the 20-month delay in getting the new equipment package the club ordered, attributable to ongoing supply chain issues. The items were ordered with anticipation that it would be here by September but it will not arrive until the first or second quarter next year.

"The club also continues to lose trees, especially pines, from the aftermath of Hurricane Ian," laments O'Shane. "We guess we must remove an additional two hundred trees. We are in the process of developing a program for the replanting of new trees over the next several years."

O'Shane says the goal of the renovation was to make Lemon Bay a shot maker's golf course, accomplished with Rogers' design amplified by the handiwork of Leibold Irrigation. "We have some great holes out there now, but the members will feel like it is an entirely new golf course," claims O'Shane. "Every hole was redesigned in some manner."

And with that, there are sure to be many beautiful days in the neighborhood, courtesy of Mr. Rogers.

The Lemon Bay Golf Club Grand Reopening is scheduled for December 1.

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■ Above, LBGC course architect Drew Rogers with club president Tom O'Shane. Below, The new green complex for Hole 5 at Lemon Bay Golf Club.

