

# Lemon Bay Renewed

By Garland Pollard

Photos by Caroline Clabaugh & Dave Sansome

Last December, Lemon Bay Golf Club celebrated a major renovation. A freshened-up design with architect Drew Rogers completely overhauled the course, without completely changing it. A deft feat.

In November, just before the official reopening reception on Dec. 1, Club President Tom O'Shane and Course Manager Damon Williams were taking guests on tours of the links.

"The routing is the same," said O'Shane, pointing out new raised greens, and more elaborate water features. As they moved around by golf cart, they stopped and said hello to members out on the course for the first time.

To see the course now, it has the feel that it has been there for ages. On the course, some actually walk. The flat links, and views through the complete course, give the impression of a historic venue, down to a new, American-made Verdun golf course clock at the first hole. The clocks, a custom for older courses, are now one more new landmark in the Lemon Bay tradition.

The original architect of the course was Jim Petrides, an engineer who helped guide the building of nearby Rotonda back in 1980. While his first design was modest, over the decades, the course has built on what was before.

The early founders of the Lemon Bay Club, led by the late Kimpton Honey (see timeline), took what was a very modest course and turned it into a family club specifically for golf lovers.

This newest renovation, three decades later, has built on what was before.

"The holes are in the same place," said Williams. "But the holes have taken on a different personality."

Wherever possible, they worked with nature.

"We picked up angles," said O'Shane. "We took advantage of the natural hazards."

This most recent complete redesign came about as the discussion progressed about the need for regularly scheduled course renovation. Greens in Florida need a redo every 15 years, pumps and mechanics every 20. But what got the club thinking that more had to be done, among many things, was a look at the irrigation system.

"When I saw rubber bands and chewing gum out there, I said, we got a problem," said O'Shane. "The irrigation system is the lungs and the heart of a golf course."

## The Magazine of Boca Grande GASPARILLA *Island*







The club realized that if they had to dig up the course and redo the greens, they should take this opportunity to make something better. The membership was surveyed, and 87 percent agreed.

Through the process, the members have been patient. Before closing, there was such love for the course that they played down to the last moment possible before it was dug up. "Our membership was playing on brown dirt, really," said Williams.

Getting it done, however, was not easy, nor inexpensive.

Hurricane Ian and the delays of finding equipment and workers pushed the club to the limit. And then there was simple inflation, taking the cost to \$7.8 million.

While they came out ahead of budget and on time, there were other surprises.

During the redesign period, they discovered that a 2.7-acre parcel abutting the course to the south was going to be the site of about two dozen or so new condos. While the Eagle Preserve Development, which sits to the west of the course, was sympathetically designed with Lemon Bay in mind, this new property would completely overshadow the southern side of the property.

"It's an odd piece of property. It opens up along the water," said O'Shane, pointing to the west, just a few feet off the course. "They were going to have a swimming pool right here."

One asset incorporated in the new design was local landscape. A Golf Digest reader review summed up the course experience, calling it a "forgiving layout with some interesting wildlife, including gators, eagles, osprey, and lots of cranes."

While the layout is a bit more challenging post-renovation, the Florida animal park feel has been enhanced, as the renovation removed 1.5 miles of concrete, to give the course a more natural look.

Central to the club's thinking has been their partnership with The Audubon Society, as the

course is part of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf. The certification is not just protective of birds, but it involves chemical use reduction, wildlife habitat and water quality management. It has to be renewed annually and looks at the whole ecosystem, which is seen as an asset.

For instance, the redesigned course is pierced with dozens and dozens of large, dead pine trees, still in the ground. Across the region, pines were not only hurt and killed by the pine bark beetle, but Hurricane Ian stressed the surviving trees. In total, the club lost 700 trees, many of them pines.

The club is replanting, of course, but has elected to leave many dead pine skeletons up, what they call "monuments." These sculptures not only make the landscape more interesting but provide bird and animal habitat.

The update of the course is not just about making a home for animals, birds, reptiles and fish but rethought plantings, such as pond banks with bahiagrass, needing less fertilizer, and the clearing of clogged ponds.

"That all used to be cat tails," said Williams.

In the north part of the course is tiny Lemon Creek, which the course has cart bridges across. Lemon Creek is a major spawning ground for tarpon. Across the road, the creek feeds into what was the old Wildflower Golf Course, which had opened in 1973 and later went bankrupt. In 2010, it was purchased by Lemon Bay Conservancy, and prevented the 80 acres from turning into condos. In recent years, Lemon Bay Conservancy has opened up the creek to connect its old golf course lakes to Lemon Creek, which has allowed wildlife to have a corridor through the middle of the course.

Just as soon as he took guests through, a manatee actually appeared.

"That's deep water," said O'Shane. "Manatees in there and everything."

For more information, visit [lemonbaygolfclub.com](http://lemonbaygolfclub.com) or call (941) 697-4190.



Above: Summer 2023 renovation  
Below: An elevated green with new bunkers.





Above, the course's most recent architect, Drew Rodgers with the then Club Board President Tom O'Shane. Below; Grounds Superintendent Eli Rahz.



## Key Lemon Bay Dates

**1980:** Original course designed by Jim Petrides.  
**1982:** Course opens as Lemon Bay Beach and Country Club.  
**1989:** Kim Honey arranges \$3.7 million loan from NCNB to buy the course at \$2.2 million and \$1.5 million for improvements. The club opens as Lemon Bay Golf Club with 125 members.  
**1990:** Club holds first annual meeting. Work begins on new clubhouse.  
**1991:** Chip Copeman hired as superintendent. Eagle Preserve opens.  
**1997:** Update and redesign by Chip Powell  
**1998:** Long membership waiting list makes for consideration of purchase of Long Marsh course in Rotonda.  
**1999:** First scholarship awarded. Club closes on Long Marsh course.  
**2004:** Club sells Long Marsh course.  
**2006:** Clubhouse modernized.  
**2009:** Kim Honey retires as president.  
**2010:** Lemon Bay Conservancy purchases Wildflower Golf Course just across Placida Road.  
**2014:** Club celebrates quarter century.  
**2020:** Hiring of Drew Rogers for renovation  
**2022:** Hurricane Ian  
**2023:** Club formally reopens Dec. 1

## Founding Governors

Edward H. Coale  
 J. Kimpton Honey  
 Richard P. Lyman III  
 John F. Marsellus  
 Robert W. Pierce  
 David P. Williams III

## A Commitment to Youth, Local Golf

In 1996, Lemon Bay had a vision to not only take care of its own members, but support new, young golfers from the area. This has turned into their key non-profit project, A Better Shot.

Each summer, the course hosts an eight-week junior golf program, based on ability. The lessons are not just about golf skills, but life skills. A key part of the mission is working with each child "to excel at their level, having fun while learning rules, etiquette, and social skills."

The day's events also include a club buffet lunch. Approximately a hundred children participate, with staff, community volunteers and club members coming in and helping.

The club also does a large amount of outreach. Each year, they provide over \$80,000 in college scholarships. So far 72 youths have been recipients, with a half million in scholarships granted.

The club's endowment fund now has \$1 million, which they hope not only to give a few partial scholarships, as is now the practice, but to be able to provide full tuition for one student each year.