

Renovation Lends New Magic To Old Tabby

By Trent Bouts

Magic is the art of illusion and Arnold Palmer's golf course design company has conjured more than a little enchantment in its renovation of Old Tabby Links, a coastal gem in the Low Country near Hilton Head. To slash the amount of bunkering by more than half yet make it appear like it might have been doubled is surely wizardry. That messing with the mind's eye is also apparent in the fact that landing areas have been widened on most holes even though the maintained acreage has been reduced.

That disparity between what you see and what you get is a running theme at the new Old Tabby. Where you might have gone out and simply negotiated the golf course previously, now you are more likely to find yourself negotiating with it. Can I carry that bunker off the tee or is there really more room out to the right? That line down the left side looks safe enough but I wonder if that pine further on will interfere with my second shot.



Director of golf Bill Sampson and golf course superintendent Jay Gratton are delighted with the new touches at Old Tabby.

14 PALMETTO GOLFER FALL 2018

And so it goes. Players in next year's South Carolina Golf Association Senior Championship will certainly recognize the golf course but find a new edge to its personality. Some greens have moved slightly or been angled a little differently, sometimes to accommodate issues with shade from the myriad live oaks on Spring Island where the course sits. But sometimes those minor realignments are to reframe approach shot values and to incorporate expanded chipping areas or run-off zones around the green.

"There was some nervousness going into the renovation," says golf course superintendent Jay Gratton, who admits to a love affair with the course he arrived at in 1997. "There was the thought that, 'Hey, you've already got a great golf course. Don't let's mess it up. There was a fear of that.'"

But Gratton and director of golf Bill Sampson, who arrived in 1996, were well aware that time had put wrinkles on the original that Arnold Palmer and Ed Seay produced in 1992. Few greens maintained their original size and true shape because of the attrition that comes with decades of daily maintenance. The TifDwarf putting surfaces themselves were proving increasingly irritable and less responsive to care. Then there was about 140,000 sq. ft. of bunkering that had become contaminated with other soils from years of washouts from coastal storms.

The fatigue was being felt below the ground as well where the original irrigation system was ailing and sometimes failing. Today's system features twice as many heads, nearly 3,000, but gives Gratton vastly increased control to a point where he gets a better outcome consuming less water and energy to get it out there.

The trepidation Gratton and Sampson both felt going into the renovation was off-set at least in part because the Palmer design firm was coming back to do the work worth \$4.7 million. The more they

talked with Brandon Johnson, the project's lead designer, the more they found his vision compatible with that of Seay, who made annual visits to Old Tabby, often with his son Mason, until he died in 2007.

So it is small wonder then that late this summer as Gratton and Sampson make their way around the course, they carry on like kids with a new version of the old toy they'd always loved. Sampson throws balls into greens grassed with MiniVerde ultradwarf bermudagrass demonstrating how a marginal difference in trajectory or direction can produce major discrepancies in outcome. He puts a ball from 15 yards down in a bowl beside one green then chips another from the same spot



The par three 17th hole, with a slightly realigned green, at Old Tabby is one of the most striking holes in South Carolina golf.

to show that golfers now have a range of options from where they may have had next to none previously.

It's not just people from Old Tabby who love the outcome. *Links* magazine gave the course its prestigious Renovation of the Year award, an honor that has only increased in merit since the recession. With barely any new courses being built, renovations are where most of the action is these days so Old Tabby had some competition.

Several aspects of the renovation further enhance compatibility with the original mission, not just of the course but of the community that occupies Spring Island's 3,000 acres, a third of which is devoted to preserving the ancient maritime forest. More than 20 years ago now, developer Jim Chaffin, of Chaffin/Light Associates, stepped in after learning of a proposed development with as many as 5,000 homes. Chaffin's goal was a "park with a community in it" rather than the other way around, which is why there are only 410 sites today. Environmental sensitivity was a primary consideration at every step.

Using less water certainly fits that bill as does the reduction in maintained acreage. Less than half the amount of bunkering also reduces the maintenance footprint with less edging and hand raking of what had to be done with machines previously. The renovation also introduced more native plants increasing the natural, rustic tone of the course in keeping with the ruins of a 200-year-old plantation house beside the ninth fairway. Here and there, Gratton and his staff also introduced more of the oyster shell concrete known as tabby that the course takes its name from.

Coupled with a revamped practice facility, Sampson says the renovation has restored the "former luster" and then some. "Hopefully people will respond to the great product we have now," he says. "In fact I think we're already beginning to see it. There are several new homes under construction and this year has been one of our best since the financial crisis."

That's magic. •

FALL 2018 PALMETTO GOLFER 15