



The new normal (and why it is better)

If Iowa's Grand Falls resort is the sort of golf project we can expect to see in these post-recession years, then the industry has a bright future, says Adam Lawrence

Simpler, smaller, less flashy, less costly. None of these terms is one that would have won a golf architect too many plaudits from clients, journalists, frankly even golfers, for much of the past twenty or thirty years. Sucked in by economic growth, the power of good PR and an overwhelming desire to be the best, the golf business lost itself in a miasma of excess. Courses were made longer, properties became larger, more earth was moved, bigger trees were transplanted.

Many fine golf courses resulted. But no matter how good it may be, it is very difficult for an extremely expensive course to make money. Spend US\$30 million building your course and US\$2 million a year maintaining it and you will find it

tough to make the numbers add up, unless there are some very special circumstances in your market such as potential members ready and willing to pay extremely high joining fees and subscriptions. Plenty of developers swallowed excessive course costs because they believed the result would add value to the rest of their projects: maybe they did, but once the developer has taken his profit on the real estate, if the course cannot break even on its operations, the future is inevitably sketchy.

I don't think I am being unfair to Rees Jones by suggesting it is a good number of years since he built a golf course for US\$5 million. For firms like Jones', that have operated at the high end of the market, the brief from most clients has been to do



The open prairie site at Grand Falls is swept by strong winds for much of the year

something spectacular that will grab the attention of visiting golfers or homebuyers alike. That's why I think the work of Jones and his associate Bryce Swanson at the Grand Falls resort on the Iowa/South Dakota border is really worth trumpeting.

The Kehl family, who have developed Grand Falls, have a long history in this area. Many years ago, the family ran dinner cruises on the Mississippi River in the Dubuque and Quad Cities region of Iowa and Illinois. When the state government of Iowa announced its intention to allow river boats to operate onboard casinos, the family realised the writing was on the wall for its business model, and applied for one of the casino licences. Some years later, when the state decided to permit a small number of

land-based casinos, the situation repeated itself, and the family developed the Riverside casino resort near Iowa City – and Jones built the resort's golf course. When more licences came up for grabs, the Kehls were back in line, and the result is Grand Falls, built hard against the state line with South Dakota to serve the rapidly growing market of Sioux Falls. And, not wanting to break up a successful team, they once again hired Jones and his crew.

The Grand Falls site is not an obviously fantastic location for a top quality golf course. For miles around, the prairie extends, with grasses waving in the abundant winds. The plot allocated to the golf course is 150 acres, 15 acres of which is used by the main lake. The developers,

wanting a bit of wow to the view from the hotel, built a substantial artificial waterfall – not exactly a golf architect's dream.

The fact, then, that the course is everywhere solid and entertaining, and in some places really very good, is testimony to the quality of Jones and Swanson's work. The two best holes, in my eyes, are the twin par fives, the seventh and seventeenth, whose greens are banked into the big mound that supports the waterfall, itself constructed of spoil from the excavation of the main lake. Both holes offer a terrific variety of shots, with good contouring and well-placed bunkers setting golfers of varied abilities different challenges. The seventh green, which has a severe drop off one side into a short grass chipping area is reminiscent of a mirror-image of the ninth



The green of the par five seventh is banked into a large hill created with the fill from the main lake



at Royal St George's in England, and cries out for players to use the slopes to feed balls down to the flag. On the seventeenth, a ridge in the green, combined with the right to left slope, protects rear pins. Hitting a chip that almost goes off the right side of the green and just crests the ridge before catching the slope and bimbbling down to the hole side is guaranteed to put a smile on any player's face.

It's interesting that the property, at first glance relatively short on interest, actually becomes much better the closer you examine it. Essentially it is set around a valley that runs from east to west, and the contours around that valley provide the interest of the site. The compact parcel, combined with prevailing winds that tend to blow either from west or east, made routing most of the holes in those directions a sensible option. The one hole that plays directly across the prevailing wind is the fourteenth, a short par four crossing the creek running along the bottom of the valley. The smart play on this hole will depend on the wind strength and direction, but I think that, so long as I felt I could carry the creek, I'd usually have the driver out; laying up makes for an approach from a slightly downhill lie, and, even if the drive is pulled, the pitch will be significantly easier once the river is crossed.

The windy location is reflected in the design of the golf course. Bunkers, especially by the standards of the Jones organisation, are relatively few in number, and mostly not so large. In places, such as on the fourth hole, where a bunker on the right side of the fairway sets up the drive, I felt that, aesthetically speaking, I might like the sand to be flashed higher up the bunker's face, but, in conversation with both Swanson and Jones, I learned they had spent considerable time discussing exactly that question, finally concluding that a lower sand line — and thus less risk of sand blow — was the better option.

The par five thirteenth is another standout hole. Bunkers on either side threaten the drive, but there is plenty of room, and a solid biff up the right gives the chance to get home in two. The approach is downhill, and the fairway sweeps down from the higher ground to the tucked green. A long second that catches the downslopes and runs onto the green will be a round highlight for any player.

Unusually, the home hole is a par three, built next to that waterfall. The stream fronts the green, while steep dropoffs at every other side make it basically an all or nothing

shot. Though not a fan of artificial water features of this kind, I found it impossible not to smile at the hole. It reminded me that, although we generally frown on one-shot finishing holes, it can actually be an enjoyable way to end your round, with an iron rather than yet another driver in your hand, and the walk mostly complete.

Some years ago, a course like Grand Falls would have been easy to ignore. In the boom years, golf developers and architects alike felt they had to err on the side of spectacular, even excess, simply to attract attention, and straightforward, challenging, entertaining golf rather fell by the wayside. Now, with fewer courses being built, all of us are remembering the virtues of simplicity. This is no bad thing. Not too many golfers can stand expensive, time consuming and uber-difficult championship tests every time they go out to play. What Jones and Swanson have created for the Kehl family at Grand Falls is something that fits its brief to a T: a course which the owners could afford to build and maintain, and where the players who hang out there will have fun, whatever the conditions. Isn't that what golf was always meant to be about? **GCA**