

# Staying on top through continuous improvement

When it opened in 1949, the course at The Dunes Golf and Beach Club was only the second in Myrtle Beach. Now there are close to 100, but The Dunes Club is still widely recognised as the best. *GCA* spoke with Rees Jones to find out more



“They’ve been caring for the golf course and bringing it up to speed every decade”

“It started the boom,” says Rees Jones, of his father’s 1949 layout at The Dunes Golf and Beach Club in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

The first course in the area was Pine Lakes, designed by Robert White, which opened in 1927. It was over two decades until the next, when Robert Trent Jones arrived on the ‘Grand Strand’ with his design for The Dunes Club.

Development in the area gathered pace and while it was another decade before the third course in the area – George Cobb’s Surf Club – opened in 1960, over 100 more were built by the turn of the century, with Myrtle Beach becoming known as one of the most golf-dense cities of the world.

But despite the dramatic increase in competition, The Dunes Club has maintained its position as the number one course in the area. Jones says this comes down to great architecture.

“This is the coastal Augusta National,” he says. The course was built immediately after Trent Jones had collaborated with Bobby Jones on both the reworking of holes at Augusta National and the design of Peachtree. The same shaping crew that worked on those projects was brought in to build The Dunes Club.

“It has a lot of the same attributes,” says Jones, highlighting the elevated and contoured greens and sand-flashed bunkers. “It’s by the sea, but it’s really a parkland golf course – the trees are so spectacular. Dad was extremely excited to have an opportunity to build a golf course where wind affected the game, but by the same token the trees offered some protection from the wind.”

While The Dunes Club may not have the same dramatic elevation change as Augusta and Peachtree, there is undulation. “That’s what Dad was so fascinated by,”

says Jones. “It wasn’t a site that needed any earthmoving. In that era, they didn’t move much dirt because they had the opportunity to design on great sites, so they didn’t have to. And they didn’t have the budget to move a lot of dirt anyway.

“The natural flow of the land is just spectacular. They gave him all the land he needed, and he was the best at green contours. Augusta, Peachtree and The Dunes Club have really fabulous green contours, that work.

“Dad was here a lot. Jimmy D’Angelo, the pro, was his friend. We spent a lot of time here as kids.”

D’Angelo was instrumental in bringing America’s golf writers to The Dunes Club, where they frequently held a pre-Masters gathering. So word got around.

The course also has its share of signature holes, including the par-three ninth, which plays towards an Atlantic Ocean backdrop, and the famous thirteenth, ‘Waterloo’.

“It’s a par five that wraps around Singleton Lake,” says Jones. The hole offers a classic risk-reward scenario in that the more aggressive line close to the lake you take with your tee shot, the better chance you have of reaching the putting surface with your next shot. But as might be expected from Trent Jones, that would be anything but easy. “It wasn’t hit in two for probably 45 years!” says Jones.

The club’s ongoing success is as much a result of its commitment to continuous improvement as it is to great original architecture, believes Jones.

Trent Jones was invited back over the years to make improvements to the course. “Dad optimised the site, but there were some things that weren’t initially allowed to be done,” he says. “For example, the founding fathers thought his originally proposed location for



Photo: Carl Kerridge Photography



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*Above, Rees Jones with shaper Nino Mongollan and The Dunes Club's golf course superintendent Steve Hamilton during this year's project to rethink and rebuild bunkers throughout the course, as seen on the par-four eighteenth hole (left) and the par-three ninth (top)*

the eleventh green was a bit too hard. But the club eventually went to the original concept.

"They've been caring for the golf course and bringing it up to speed every decade. It's not major stuff because the original design was so well conceived, but it makes a big difference."

For the past 15 years, the club has continued the same spirit of ongoing improvement with Rees and his associate Steve Weisser, working alongside the long-standing superintendent Steve Hamilton.

"Back in 2003, we brought the greens back to their original sizes. The grasses are now Champion bermuda, so we have also recontoured greens. Just like Augusta, we have kept the same concepts but brought the grade in so they can take the higher speeds."

The club has also added tees, so it remains a test for the best – it has hosted the US Women's Open, PGA Tour Qualifying School, the Senior Tour Championship, PGA National Championship and US Women's

Four-Ball Championship – while being playable for members. "We've brought it into the twenty-first century. Every group that comes to play it loves it, finds it a challenge and a true test.

"It's just one of those golf courses that pleases the average golfer and really tests the best," says Jones. "Dad always wanted to build a true test of golf, but what I think is fascinating is that there are 800 members of The Dunes Club and they find it really playable."

This year, the club has installed a state-of-the-art drainage system, and Jones and Weisser have conducted a comprehensive review of the bunkers.

"We've made sure the fairway bunkers are in the proper location," says Jones. "They've been re-evaluated based on the equipment of today. Technology has changed where people are hitting it. I think they're now well located for both the best golfers and those who play from the various tees. We've

moved bunkers into the fairway in many cases and brought them into play in the second landing areas on par fives.

Better Billy Bunker liner has been installed throughout, and the bunker review has led to an overall reduction in the sand area. "Every bunker has been rethought and relocated or rebuilt. We also carefully evaluated the depths of the bunkers. We've taken some fill away and cut them down into the surface."

Jones describes The Dunes Club as a throwback to the era before golf course architects started cranking out golf courses too rapidly. "Some people call me the link, because I still have my memories of the past, and I know what's going on today.

"What really makes me happy at places like Bellerive, Congressional, Atlanta Athletic Club, Golden Horseshoe and The Dunes Club, is that I've been entrusted with the ongoing design of some of my father's great golf courses." **GCA**