

PROFILED

Out of the shadows

SHADOW WOOD CC, FLORIDA

The renovation of three courses over four years has given the Shadow Wood community in Florida a new lease of life. Richard Humphreys reports

The par-five seventh on the renovated Preserve course at Shadow Wood

Times are good for residents of the Shadow Wood community on Florida's west coast. Each of its three golf courses have been renovated, real estate is sold out, there is now a membership waiting list, and a new clubhouse is planned.

Ten years ago, things were a little more uncertain. In the wake of the credit crunch, developer Bonita Bay Group was selling its golf clubs to fight off bankruptcy. Shadow Wood Country Club was among those, and the members agreed to take control and create their own new vision for the future.

The club has three courses, all built around the turn of the millennium. The North and South were designed by Bob Cupp at the community's main site in Estero. The Preserve course, designed by Arthur Hills, is a 15-minute drive north, located directly alongside the Estero Bay Preserve.

Anticipating some future issues in relation to the infrastructure, the club's committee consulted Cupp for guidance on an initial project on the North course. Before he passed away in 2016, Cupp recommended long-time friend Rees Jones for the project.



The Jones team has worked to ensure the Preserve course caters to golfers of all skill levels. The par-three sixth, for example, is over 200 yards from the back tees, but just 100 yards from the front, where the angle of attack provides an open entrance to the green

Keen to preserve the essence of Cupp's original design for the North course, Jones and his associate Bryce Swanson evaluated the property with Cupp's son Bobby, and also used Cupp's hole-by-hole notes to help guide their plans.

The immediate priority was to reconsider the greens. The problems were three-fold; they were not running consistently, were not very receptive to long, low approach shots that many of the members were required to hit to reach the putting surface, and they had lost some of their original size.

Jones and Swanson designed new greens with more subtle movement and added new hole locations. "We went for more open entrances and made sure the greens could hold the high percentage of low shots being hit into them," says Jones. "The transitions are more of a long, consistent slope, that really complement Bob's original design."

"Given that rebuilding a green means it closes for a period of time, it made sense to evaluate the other

components like playability issues, and what we found was that certain holes or situations were quite difficult," says Swanson.

As well as restoring bunker lines, some greenside bunkers were replaced with closely mown chipping areas. Fairway bunkers were re-evaluated too, with some relocated or removed entirely.

"This has been a 'triple play' and if we had not been successful on the North, the club would still be sitting on the other two"

"In terms of style, we kept everything very much in the fashion of what Bob did," says Swanson.

Work on the North course was completed in 2017, and convinced the membership to "unleash" Jones and Swanson on the South course in the following year.

"The club wanted to make it different to the North, so our bunker style is a bit

of a change in character to the original – there's more movement in terms of how we shaped them," says Jones.

The greens would see a marked contrast in style from the North course, too. Jones and Swanson introduced more internal contours, with the rebuilt greens typically having a variety of levels and distinct pinnable areas.

Now with two successful renovations under its belt and members enjoying those changes so much, it was a natural step for the club to ask the Jones team to look at its third course.

While its location and the fact it had been laid out by a different designer meant it already had different characteristics to the North and South courses, The Preserve brought its own



The short sixteenth on the North (top) and the par-five seventh on the South, which were renovated in 2017 and 2018 respectively

challenges. In particular, it had gained a reputation for being very difficult.

“It was mainly used by players with a low handicap because the layout had a lot of penal aspects to it,” says Swanson. “If you miss the green, you could find a lot of trouble. We had to correct that and make it more playable because the everyday member would avoid it.”

“The setting of the Preserve is more natural,” says Jones. “There is housing, but quite a few holes are framed by the natural preserve vegetation. The wind is a bigger factor on the Preserve too, it has a bit of a coastal feel to it.”

Routed through woods, wetlands and marshes, as well as man-made lakes, there are only two holes on the Preserve where water is not in play. The challenge for the design team was to find a balance of keeping the low handicap players, who essentially had the Preserve course to themselves, happy, but to also make it playable and enjoyable for the everyday golfer.

The solution lay primarily in the

green complexes, and the introduction of aspects of design that had proved successful on the North and South course renovations. Entrances to the green have been opened, and a miss no longer hands out such severe punishment, with balls potentially coming to rest on closely mown surrounds that provide a choice of recovery options.

With construction work on the Preserve taking place during 2020, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic threatened to deal a serious blow to progress. But having frequently worked on projects in Japan in recent years, where fewer site visits take place, Jones and Swanson were by now well accustomed to using technology such as drones to design from a distance. This, combined with the excellent relationship they had cultivated with Glase Construction and the club over the previous two renovations, allowed them to continue with little interruption even while travel restrictions were in place.

The Preserve course reopened in November 2020 and is now attracting the entire membership base. “There are now more higher handicappers playing there, which is a real measure of our success,” says Swanson. This has been particularly beneficial for the club in coping with the rise in demand for tee times that has arisen because of the pandemic, allowing them to spread play more evenly across all three courses.

Jones has taken particular satisfaction in “success breeding success,” with the positive results of each renovation delivering him and Swanson another commission at the club.

He highlights that a major challenge of working at Florida clubs is the small window of time there is to get the job done. “Members don’t want it to close before the end of the season in April. And they want it back open before Christmas,” he says. “So, if you have a major storm, for example, you’ve got a problem.” Jones credits a strong team – designers, constructors and the club’s team of greens committee chairs Jay Sandza and Rich Antonelli, general manager Brian Bartolec and course superintendent Eric Ruha – for delivering a positive outcome under this pressure. Not just once, or twice, but three times.

“This has been a ‘triple play’ and if we had not been successful on the North, the club would still be sitting on the other two,” says Jones. “It becomes easier to get a ‘yes’ vote once you have completed a project very successfully,” he says. “Creating three distinct challenges for the members to play has been a progressive move for the club.” **GCA**