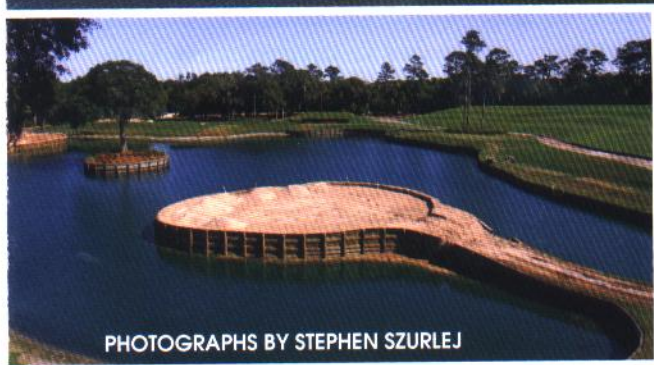


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PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN SZURLEJ

The Stadium's greens—including the one at the famous 17th hole—got new grass and a SubAir System to improve drainage.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN SZURLEJ

Extreme Makeover

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Free of March's scheduling madness and boosted by subtle but significant course changes, the Players goes prime time in 2007

By Tim Rosaforte

WHEN WORKERS DISASSEMBLED THE FABLED ISLAND GREEN ON THE 17TH HOLE AT TPC Sawgrass last spring, they stripped the bulkhead protecting the green and discovered an artifact. There, among the other planks and railroad ties, was a sign former PGA Tour commissioner Deane Beman originally placed in the ground identifying a construction site that was 10 inches deep in standing water. "It read, 'PGA Tour at Innlet Beach,'" says Sawgrass course superintendent Fred Klauk. "It had the old logo and the best I can figure, there was a breach [in the bulkhead] and they used it to plug a hole in the wall."

Golf—and the economics of the game—have changed exponentially since Beman brought Pete Dye to Sawgrass in the late 1970s, took him to a swamp on the west side of route A1A and told the eccentric designer to build a golf course that would not only capture the golf world's attention but also be "spectator friendly," with elephant-sized mounds surrounding the holes for better viewing. From the muck and with a bare-bones budget, Dye jumped on his bulldozer and created an American golf institution, a course players cursed and purists sneered at, but one that served its purpose, eventually helping elevate the Players Championship to the fifth biggest—or fifth most important individual tournament—in professional golf.

But at PGA Tour headquarters located hard by the course in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., where money is no longer an object, that ranking remained a sticking point. While the Players Championship continued to rise in stature, it never joined the majors. Always viewed as a preliminary event to the Masters two weeks later, the Players was never the week's top sports story, usually losing newspaper column inches and television viewers to the NCAA Division I men's basketball tournament. These issues become magnified because while the tour does not have a financial stake in the majors, the Players is the championship it owns. And although the usually serious Tim Finchem draws laughs at a news conference by saying, "Well, we already think it's No. 1," the commissioner knows the event's stature and eventual place in the game is not his call. All he can do, after 25 years, is

reinvent the tournament. "Our objective is to make [the Players] as good as it can be," he says. "If we go to bed every night thinking we've done everything to do that, we should be comfortable."

But comfort comes at a price, and Finchem and company are spending \$60 million to change everything about the tournament—redesigning the course, rebuilding the clubhouse, switching the dates and the way it is marketed and televised and even the tournament's name—all in an effort to step out of the shadow of the majors. (The tour also has altered the name of the course, shortening it to TPC Sawgrass. With one exception—the TPC at Snoqualmie Ridge—the words "at" and "of" are no longer part of TPC course names.)

The tournament name change, shortened from the Players Championship to the Players, is a subtle if not powerful connection to the Masters, the Open and the PGA. The move from late March to May 10-13 means more daylight and primetime possibilities for NBC. It also means better weather and, combined with the refurbished course and a new moisture-removing system below the greens, should mean major-championship scoring conditions. Most important, one month removed from the first major and a month before the second, pros may actually find themselves gearing up for the Players, instead of using it as preparation for Augusta.

"I think [moving it to May] is a no-brainer," says 2005 champion Fred Funk. "Whether it ever becomes a true major, who knows, but it can only help the tournament when you line up the events and there's a big one every month starting in April. A lot of people used to think the Players was a tuneup for the Masters, and that was



A piece of the TPC's early days (Beman with Kelly, right) was unearthed this year.

"A lot of people used to think the Players was a tuneup for the Masters, and that was never a good thing." —Fred Funk

never a good thing. It needed to be out on its own. It was too close to Augusta and too early in the year. The weather was a little iffy, but by changing the date, it changes the golf course, and it should be a slam-dunk."

Funk leads a chorus of positive feedback. From fellow Ponte Vedra Beach resident Jim Furyk ("I'm excited about the May date. The weather's hotter, and the course should play more like a big-time golf event. In March I always felt it was too early"), to international stars such as Ernie Els ("It was always too early. I think it's in the right slot now."), it's hard to find a player who feels Finchem bogeyed this one.

What the players like, besides the schedule change, is what Furyk alluded to: a firm, fast golf course instead of one Dye described as a "pin cushion" that drained poorly and had to be overseeded with five inches of ryegrass as a gauntlet of defense. In the unpredictable weather patterns of March, wet conditions interrupted play countless times and caused three Monday finishes since 2000, mostly because of substandard drainage that caused mud-covered balls and the dreaded lift, clean and place rule to take effect.

Above ground the 81-year-old Dye didn't change much. As he worked in the searing heat of this past summer, resident players such as Furyk, Funk and Vijay Singh offered input, but Dye pretty much did his own thing. Working off a combination of feel and ShotLink statistics, new tee boxes were added to the first, eighth, 11th, 14th, 16th and 18th holes, but to Dye's credit, he did not change the character of the course. This isn't to be confused with the work Tom Fazio did at Augusta National or Rees Jones did at Torrey Pines; only 122 yards were added to the original routing, making it 7,215 from the new tips. There are subtle tweaks, such as the three aiming bunkers along the right side of the seventh fairway and a new green at the short par-4 12th, but visually, and from a club-selection standpoint, it shouldn't play much different than it did before metal woods.

What should change dramatically are the conditions of the greens. Part of the renovation included installation of the SubAir System made famous at Augusta National. From a computer in his office, Klauk will be able to control moisture levels to keep the putting surfaces in prime condition. There's also a new strain of Bermuda (Mini Verde Ultra Dwarf) developed at Texas A&M, that

will make the greens harder to hold and truer to putt.

"If it plays to the firmness it's supposed to, the yardage changes won't be much other than No. 8 (the par 3 is now 237 yards from the tips)," says Funk. Playing the new back tee at 11 into a healthy breeze, Bill Kratzert, the former Champions Tour player and television announcer, still reached the 558-yard hole in two shots—but that came in November, not inside the ropes under tournament conditions. "We'll just have to wait and see until they play the dog-gone thing," Dye said. "It'll play faster so it'll play shorter, but the ball might roll into something. You never know."

This extreme makeover by Finchem & Co. was unlike the days when Dye was on a bulldozer with a machete to kill the rattlesnakes

and his crew was plugging a hole in the wall with a scrap of lumber. This project involved an army of workers and an investment 12 times the cost of the original project, which according to Vernon Kelly, former PGA Tour president of golf course properties, was \$4-5 million, including \$1 for the land and \$1.2 million for the futuristic shake-roof clubhouse, nicknamed "The Deane Dome."

This time around 2.6 million square feet of sod were trucked in, 22 miles of drainage pipe were laid and 68,000 tons of sand was used—and that doesn't include construction on the 77,000-square-foot Mediterranean Revival-style clubhouse with a red-tiled roof that is

scheduled to open two weeks before the tournament.

Executing this monumental transformation in the window between last year's tournament and the 2007 event, required a series of breaks, business deals and the high-energy leadership of Kelly's successor, David Pillsbury, who sat in the double-wide trailer serving as a clubhouse last month and admitted, "We never thought we could get as much done in this time." The key to completion was one of the driest stretches of weather to hit northeast Florida in 20 years. That allowed Dye to take on other projects, such as the sculpting of spectator mounds with elevated walkways for better gallery flow, making more platforms for corporate hospitality tents and adding a new tee at the par-5 16th. The course closed April 3 and reopened on schedule Nov. 13. "If we had written the weather script for a year," says Pillsbury, "it wouldn't have been this good."

Even in a rare season without a hurricane, this would not have been accomplished without another break that occurred when a group from Ireland (Redquartz Boundary Ltd.) purchased the Sawgrass Marriott. For years, players had griped about the hotel's



The old clubhouse was razed to make way for a new one costing \$40 million.

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control of the tee sheet dictating the condition of the course. Because of the previous contract, Dye and Klauk said they were unable to close the course long enough to update the drainage system, and over a 25-year period, a layer of organic dirt and fertilizer had accumulated up to 18 inches deep in places. The hotel still controls 85 percent of the tee times, but will close the course two weeks before the tournament. According to Pillsbury, the Irishmen are more concerned with providing a five-star golf experience and will leave more of the course maintenance decisions to Klauk than the previous owners. The course's closure also allowed the hotel's new ownership to undertake a \$16 million renovation (that's \$33,000 per room) of their own. At that rate the place should feel more like a Ritz Carlton than a Marriott. Taking from the old John Mahaffey quote, this should no longer be the "Marriott Muni."

Then there's the clubhouse, a monstrous castle that will dominate the view. Charlie Zink, the tour's co-chief operating officer, had a growth fund put aside for such matters. Just to appease skeptical players who questioned the investment, however, the \$40 million clubhouse was paid for by three corporate sponsors (Jeld-Wen, PricewaterhouseCoopers and UBS) who will occupy wings of the top floor for entertaining during the event and, as "proud patrons," also paid for all commercial time through 2012. When completed, the clubhouse will be the one-stop shopping destination for all that is the Players, from its history in photo galleries and flat-screen TVs, to its clothing and merchandise in a 3,000-square-foot pro shop, even to the inner sanctum of its Champions Locker Room (one hotel package includes a locker next to Tiger Woods'). It's what Pillsbury keeps referring to as the "The Players House," and according to the business plan will be a multipurpose, income-generating facility the other 51 weeks of the year. "You can imagine what it would be like to have weddings, small-business functions, executive golf retreats here," says Pillsbury. "We tried to create the kind of facility that was second to none."

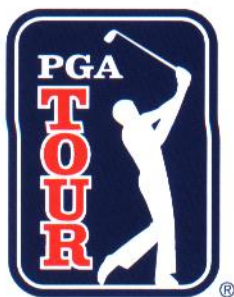
How this translates to television viewers in May will be in the hands of NBC producer Tommy Roy, who moved his family to

Ponte Vedra Beach from New York after falling in love with the community and the tournament in 2005. Being based so close allowed Roy to confer with Pillsbury on the details that are almost subliminal, but crucial in the "look" of an event. At Roy's suggestion, a second story was added to the scoring building with a window facing the clubhouse that can be used for player interviews. Waste areas, such as the one to the right of No. 12, have been landscaped with a cleaner look, and the backdrops behind several greens and tees have been dressed up with vegetation to give the one-time swamp monster a more pristine look. One other benefit: A reduced number of commercials (four minutes an hour) will allow NBC to show more tee shots. "And that's a crucial element to this golf course," says Roy. "Similar to a U.S. Open, you can't get away with spraying it off the tee."

NBC is going to treat the tournament as it does the U.S. Open, broadcasting the Players in high definition with a 2-7 p.m. window scheduled, leaving open the possibility of a Sunday night playoff and trophy ceremony drifting into prime time. The later it gets, the bigger the potential audience. An added bonus: The Players gets promoted during NBC's coverage of the Kentucky Derby one week earlier.

More than starting early and finishing late, and the prettier visuals, the switch to May has the Players positioned to reach another dimension—the much-coveted crossover audience. "I think [the tournament's] going to finally come on the radar of the average sports fan," says Roy. "In March the Players Championship was just fighting a losing battle [with the NCAA basketball tournament] ... and you can't underestimate how important that publicity is. It's huge. Finally it'll have a chance to be one of the great sporting evenings, not just a great golfing event."

In the end, maybe that's all the Players can ask for. Away from the NAAs and separated from the Masters, new and improved, but in a refurbished classic ballpark that will remain familiar to the eye. It's no wonder Finchem is resting easier—at least as it relates to the Players. He's done all he can do. **GW**



Sawgrass

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