

# Back to the Classics

by BRIAN SILVA

It's astonishing to consider that some 400 separate golf courses will open for play this year, many of them developed by owners of existing golf courses. I also find it extraordinary that 80 percent of these facilities refer to themselves as "upscale daily-fee" layouts. Yet even more remarkable is that we routinely read about these upscale daily-fees: If we believe the hype, every single one is the modern-day embodiment of "classic design"; each one offers that coveted "member-for-a day" golfing experience; and here's my favorite—each one has "five sets of tees that make the course challenging for the accomplished player but enjoyable for the high-handicapper."

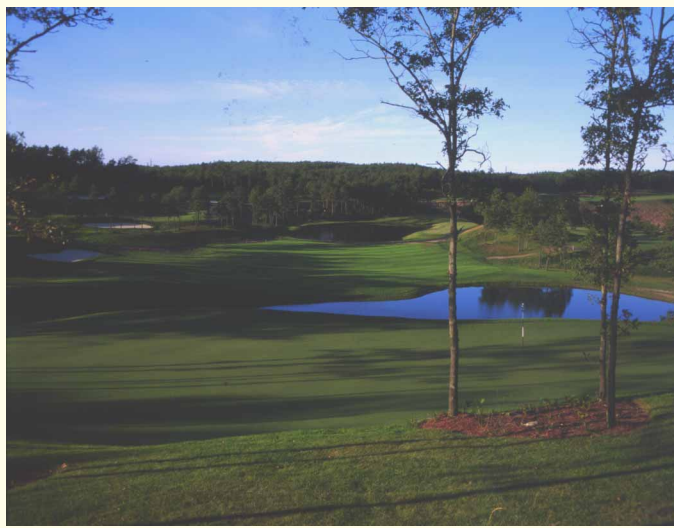
I can make fun of these clichés because they've been used to describe many of my own course designs. But isn't it interesting that these catch phrases, while universally employed, say very little about how a course actually plays? When people look back on the 1990s, they'll remember this decade as the time when upscale daily-fee golf truly emerged,

proved profitable and took center stage. Yet what does "upscale daily-fee" really tell us about a development's central component, the golf course itself?

I've been thinking about this lately because I'm fresh off designing a layout called Waverly Oaks Golf Club, an upscale daily-fee golf course which opened for play this spring in Plymouth, Mass. Waverly was developed by The Ridder Family, who have operated Ridder Farm Golf Course in nearby Whitman since 1958. The last 40 years have taught the Ridders a thing or two about the golf business. Before a spade was ever turned

at Waverly Oaks, the Ridders and I thought long and hard about how we wanted this new course to play.

Now that Waverly is open for business, I've realized something quite interesting: If we examine them closely and use our imaginations, those annoying catch phrases can actually be useful in describing what can be compelling about course design at upscale daily-fees in general, and Waverly Oaks in particular. Here's what I mean:



## "Classic Design"

Don't let anyone fool you: When it comes to sound course design, there are only about 50 prototype golf holes, and no one's come up with an honest-to-goodness improvement to any of them in nearly 100 years. This means every single golf hole built after the turn of the century is either a good variation or a bad variation on an established theme. Therefore, when architects wax philosophic about returning to "classic design" strategies, it may sound like a slick promotion strategy, but it's probably a good idea.

But what does it really mean? Okay,

here's one example of what it means at Waverly: The fairway bunkers at Waverly are randomly placed, which is something Donald Ross did so well on the original nine at Rolling Rock Club and throughout Seminole Golf Club, two courses where I've recently overseen a renovation (all 185 bunkers at Seminole) and an expansion (a new nine at Rolling Rock).

When you examine the older, vintage courses, you quickly notice the fairway bunkers aren't routinely placed at 260 yards down the slice side and 280 down the hook side. Instead they're sprinkled about the landscape, which allows the fairway to weave in and out. This makes a course like Seminole visually appealing. Yet this also explains why bunkers at Seminole caught hickory-shafted drives of 180 yards, and continue to catch titanium-shafted drives of 280 yards. Classic architects like Ross built bunkers randomly, placing their bunkers against

natural hillocks or rolls. We did the same thing at Waverly Oaks: We let the land tell us where to place the bunkers, whose vintage feel is further enhanced by their grass faces.

Here's another one: Most of the putting surfaces at Waverly Oaks are raised up and fall off sharply at the edges - "classic design" techniques Seth Raynor routinely employed at places like Fox Chapel Golf Club, a course I'm restoring in anticipation of the 2002 USGA Curtis Cup matches. It's impossible to work at a place like Seminole, Rolling Rock and Fox

Chapel without absorbing the artistry of Ross and Raynor. I'm not ashamed to say we applied their time-tested ideas with considerable success at Waverly Oaks.

### "Member-for-a-Day"

A golf course can't pick up your bag in the parking lot; it can't serve you drinks at the turn; it can't wash your clubs after you're finished; it can't provide posh locker room facilities. So what can a daily-fee golf course really do provide a country club experience?

All too often, this boils down to a pair of factors: 1) Pristine course conditions; and 2) Reasonable pace of play. Golfers do associate a certain level of manicuring with private clubs, and the standard of maintenance at today's upscale daily-fee course is high and getting higher every day. Waverly Oaks is no exception to this trend, yet this doesn't say much about how the course was designed - and neither does pace of play. Oh sure, the generous fairways at Waverly oaks allow a greater margin for error. The result: Less time wasted looking for stray balls off the tee. Waverly also features very little front bunkering; players can roll the ball onto 17 of the 18 putting surfaces. The result: Less time spent extricating oneself from greenside bunkers.

But is that all there is? Green grass and moving people through? For too long, frankly, I think the preoccupation with course conditioning and accommodating player volume has stunted the quality of design at upscale, daily-fees. I believe the upscale, daily-fee golfer deserves more than that-and it's part of my job as course architect to provide it.

Most daily-fee golfers will never visit Prestwick, Scotland to play the original Punch Bowl green; that's why we took the time to recreate it at Waverly Oaks (no. 15). Most daily-fee golfers will never visit North Berwick to play the original Redan; that's why we created no. 17 at Waverly Oaks-to pay

respectful homage and provide golfers a feel for this ingenious design scheme.

Now, I know what you're thinking: The typical upscale daily-fee golfer won't know a Redan from a two-door Japanese import. I say, "So what!" As an architect, the design of interesting golf holes is the central mandate of my job. Whether golfers appreciate historical allusions or not, we can give them inventive design, risk/reward, punch bowls, stacked-sod bunkers, even an inverted saucer or two.

That's what golfers expect from private country clubs; that's what they should get at upscale daily-fees. At Waverly Oaks, they do.

"Challenging the Scratch Golfer

## Every single golf hole built after the turn of the century is either a good variation or bad variation on an established theme.

while Accommodating the Novice". There's more to this than creating forward tees, I'm afraid. It's a matter of strategic design. Let's stay with the wide-fairway theme for a moment: Generous fairways have developed sort of a bad reputation in recent years, even though the landing areas at older courses like St. Andrews are absolutely enormous! Just because a fairway is wide doesn't mean there aren't more advantageous spots-in terms of attacking a pin-on either side of said fairway. In other words, you may be safe down the left, but it's not the place you want to come in from.

The trick to accommodating all levels of play is creating these choices and communicating them to the good player. For instance, the sixth hole at Waverly is a lovely 432-yard par four that bends gently left and uphill. From the tee, a good player can see the left side is preferable; bailing out right might add 35-40 yards to an already uphill approach. Now, a good player also sees that should he miss left, there's a good-sized swale filled with heavy bluegrass rough waiting for him. This type

of risk/reward equation is all evident from the number six tee; a good player is challenged by the choices he must make while standing there. You may be surprised to hear that high handicappers are, in many ways, more easily served; they're going to hit away on number six and be darned happy when the ball finds the fairway. They're not thinking about sticking their approach shot close to the pin it's a tough hole, so they'll be ecstatic if they can roll a three-wood on in regulation-something a lack of front bunkering allows! Also, repeat players at Waverly may notice a large bunker about 40 yards short-right of the putting surface. Balls hit directly over this bunker will invariably kick hard off a hillside and onto the green-another element

designed to assist the average player. On number six at Waverly, bogey isn't an outlandish aspiration for the high-handicapper; yet par is no picnic for the good player. That's accommodation.

Part of this optimism is purely selfish. I get a real charge out of employing natural features to make golf holes more playable. Yet my partners and I also feel strongly that golf course architects have an obligation to raise the standards of design and foster an appreciation for it. In other words, course design-while accommodating all levels of play-should never be about stooping to meet the lowest common denominator.

Accordingly, while Waverly Oaks may be representative of what upscale daily-fee golf can be, it's hardly typical of the genre. It's superior because 1) The Ridders lined up a magnificent piece of land in Plymouth-the best I've worked with in my 20 years designing golf courses; 2) We thought critically about what would make an upscale, daily-fee really stand out (see above); and 3) Our construction crews worked overtime with me to execute a practical-but-inventive design scheme.

Brian Silva is a partner with Cornish, Silva and Mungeam, Inc., a golf course architecture firm based in Uxbridge, Mass. Silva and CSM can be reached at (508) 278-3407.