

Under the capable guidance of Affinity Management, Ferncroft CC has emerged into a true country club.

All the Right Moves

BY BOB ALBRIGHT • NORTH SHORE GOLF & TENNIS • SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2011

Faced with a room full of skeptical former members, many of whom were staring back at their sixth ownership group in the last decade, Damon DeVito and David Swales knew they did not have exactly a captive audience, neither in the literal or figurative sense of the word.

It was February 2006 and the two principals of Virginia-based Affinity Management had just purchased the Ferncroft Country Club. Greeted with a blank member roster sheet, as well as an uneasy combination of blank stares and furrowed brows, they knew that no matter how grandiose a prospectus they put forth simple words were not going to do the trick. Not with this group.

"People would tell us that it's not your fault, but that you are inheriting this cycle of mistrust," said DeVito. "People wanted to know what we were going to do before we asked them to put up their money."

The membership would get their answer almost immediately, however, once they started to look around their old digs. Within a day of closing on the property, what proved to be a \$3.5 million, five-year string of substantial capital improvements began. First on the list was a complete renovation and re-opening of the previously dormant 19th-hole restaurant, followed in short order by a massive drainage project to 14 of the 18 holes on the popular Robert Trent Jones Sr. championship course.

"It's very easy sometimes to get excited and talk about things that are going to happen, but we try very hard to do things first and then say, 'hey, we just broke ground on this,'" noted DeVito, who was hoping to come away with 50 founding members in that first month. Instead, he got 118 applications in the next six days.

"You undertake a project like that, and news carries

rather quickly," added Ferncroft General Manager Toby Ahern, who is celebrating his 20th year with the club this year and who has certainly seen the good, bad and ugly of ownership groups come and go.

"The consistency factor has been one of the biggest things," said Ahern, who started as an assistant pro in 1991. "Sometimes you were interfered with a lot and then sometimes you weren't interfered with at all. Every year was different, and we just kind of put out heads down and tried to do what we were good at, running the golf course and running a good tournament schedule.

"If you look at '06 to now, however, every year something has been improved on."

One of the first of those improvements, the drainage project, proved to be extremely well-timed as that spring the area was hit with the infamous Mother's Day deluge, which likely would have closed the

course for better than a month had the drainage work not been done. In the ensuing years, DeVito and Swales would build a new multi-section practice area, repave and re-route the cart paths to improve the course's playability, and, most recently, complete a major dredging project on the course's ponds. Along the way, they armored several of the greens with stone walls to keep them from eroding into those same ponds.

A true country club experience

The golf course was just one piece of the greater puzzle, however. When Affinity took over, Ferncroft's eight tennis courts were in disrepair and unplayable, and its spacious swimming pool was leased out. Major upgrades were made to both, and today Ferncroft has become a beacon of the North Shore tennis community, not only with a thriving program of its own, but as home of the

World Team Tennis entry Boston Lobsters, as well.

"We wanted to have a country club. Yes, it was going to be golf-centric because that's the history of the place, but if you don't golf, you should not feel unwelcome here," DeVito said. "There were people who felt that was wrong, and we got a lot of advice to just bulldoze those areas, but that was not our vision."

It's a family-friendly vision that has been embraced by the members.

"It's interesting that the makeup of some other clubs is one where their members will go somewhere else or be on vacation, but our members are here quite often," says Ahern, a former standout on the 1981 St. John's Prep championship golf team.

"This is their vacation. They are not in the Vineyard or at Nantucket or whatever. They're here, and they are utilizing the club.

"The number one thing we wanted to get away from was that feeling of, my membership costs 'X' and I play 'Y' amount of rounds and then do the math," DeVito added. "That's not a private club, it's a prepaid membership."

It's still about the golf

While their successful affiliation with the Lobsters, the new renovated pool area, the addition of a top-notch fitness room, and a gigantic upgrade in not only their restaurant but its staff, as well, have all contributed to that balanced package DeVito and Affinity were striving for, Ferncroft will always be at its core as a golf club.

It starts with a Trent Jones Sr. masterpiece that boasts one of the top finishing holes in the state. Add a rabid membership that perennially boasts some of the best players in the area and Head Pro Phil Leiss and his staff are busy April through November.

"They are golfers and there is no air of pretense," Leiss says with a smile. The Danvers native, who is in his fifth year

with the club, says he cannot count how many times on those weather-threatened days where his tee sheet has been turned upside down as he watched the remaining players all gather on the putting green and pair up.

"Someone will say, 'OK, give me all the balls' and they will all go out. It just doesn't happen like that at a lot of other clubs."

Calling all beginners

The club offers one of the strongest junior programs around and also boasts a very worthwhile scholarship program that introduces disadvantaged youngsters to the game. The proceeds from last year's scholarship tournament alone enabled a dozen youngsters to learn the game.

The latest new program is an academy for complete beginners covering all aspects of the game from technique, etiquette and terminology utilizing the club's expansive practice center and adjacent par-3 course. Leiss notes that it's the perfect setting to lessen the anxiety that many beginners feel when they pick up the sport.

"The great thing about the par-3 course is that there's no pressure. There's not the next group coming up right behind them. You can spend 45 minutes on the one of the holes talking about putting etiquette."

The academy is targeted to all adult beginners from the spouses of golfers to young professionals who need to learn the game for business purposes.

"People want to learn the game for a lot of different reasons," Leiss says of the program, which assesses each student's individual goals at the beginning of the process. "Not everyone wants to be Tiger Woods."

Quite a finishing touch

While the par-5 dogleg left 18th, which personifies risk/reward in every sense, will always stick out as the club's signature hole, Leiss says it's just one of several tests that make this course so compelling. One of his favorites is the No. 1 stroke

hole, the daunting 472-yard, par-4 13th.

"Thirteen is a pivotal hole when you are playing a match," Leiss said of the challenging hole, which features water on the left and necessitates two well-struck shots if you are to have any hope of taking out your putter for your third.

"It can also be played two different ways. You can play it like a par-5 and be really happy with a bogey walking out of there."

The famed 18th has been well-chronicled. How many LPGA Bank Five Classics, club championships or regional events have been decided by a player either choosing to – or not to – try to carry the watery grave that sits so ominously between the fairway and the elevated green?

A return by the LPGA?

Speaking of the LPGA, DeVito said he would be ecstatic to see the tour come back to Ferncroft and rekindle the rich, decade-long history that saw Ferncroft and the Bank Five Classic perennially rank as one of the most popular dates on the LPGA calendar. DeVito says a sponsor who had an interest in rekindling the event approached him in recent years and the course was subsequently qualified by the LPGA as a potential future sight. Landing a title sponsor willing to put down the bulk of the prize money, especially in today's economy, remains the major stumbling block.

"We know it was successful, and we think it would be again," he said. "If it were simply up to us, there's no question we would embrace it."

So would the players. Somehow you get the feeling that Michelle Wie and Co. would have a few less qualms going for the for the gusto with their second shots on 18 as their predecessors did back in the 80s.

For a slideshow of all 18 of Ferncroft CC's holes, log on to the North Shore Golf Blog at www.northshoremassgolf.com/wordpress. ■

Ferncroft through the years

1968-70 – Developed by Joe Mass, who brought in renowned architect Robert Trent Jones Sr., along with his son, Rees, who tagged along on what would prove to be the first job of his illustrious career.

1970 – The course opens as Topsfield Country Club with former Bruin Bill Ezinicki serving as its golf director.

1972 – Renamed Ferncroft Country Club; main clubhouse is built

1975 – Ferncroft Tower is built

1980 – Dale Lundquist captures the inaugural Boston Five LPGA Classic.

1984 – After yet another ownership change, the club becomes known as Tara Ferncroft and part of the Sheraton Tara Hotel Resort.

1990 – Barb Mucha wins final LPGA Classic.

1997-2005 – The club and hotel is sold five times to various management and hotel entities.

2006 – The club alone is sold to its current owners – Virginia-based Affinity Management.

From the Tips

COURSE: Ferncroft Country Club, Middleton

PAR/YARDAGE/SLOPE/RATING: 72, 6,632, 135, 72.9

COURSE RECORD: 65, Paul Barkhouse and Dan Dwyer (modified tees)

OWNERS: Affinity Management

HEAD PRO: Phil Leiss

SUPERINTENDENT: Michael Cassidy

WEBSITE: www.ferncroftcc.com

NOTABLE CURRENT MEMBERS:

Bruins Assistant GM Don Sweeney, Bruin Shawn Thornton, LPGA Hall of Famer Donna Caponi-Byrnes, Red Sox Hall of Famer Jim Rice, Bruins Hall of Famer Ray Bourque.