



A symbol for a rebuilt. city

Adam Lawrence visits New Orleans to see the city's newest golf course, finally rebuilt after the destruction of Hurricane Katrina



Photo: Larry Lambrecht

The par four sixth hole on the new South course at Bayou Oaks in New Orleans, designed by Rees Jones

Golf, one might reasonably assume, was not high on the priority list of most New Orleanians at the start of September 2005, as the city began to pick itself up after the ravages wrought by Hurricane Katrina. But, according to Bob Becker, chief executive of City Park, the 1,300 acre urban green space located less than two miles from the French Quarter, that wasn't quite the situation.

When Becker and his team were able to move back into the park, several weeks after

Katrina, the devastation was almost total. And, as the park receives no tax support, the impact of the hurricane was potentially fatal; with nothing going on, no revenue was coming in. The team tried to figure out how they could make some cash, fast, and thought of the golf driving range. The equipment had been spread far and wide by the water, so they went out around the park looking for mats and the like, and eventually put together enough gear to open the range. And then, Becker says, something remarkable

happened; from the wrecked city, golfers, desperate for normality, began to emerge. The park was earning money again, and the long road to recovery could begin.

It was a long road indeed. Before the storm, City Park had been home to four golf courses. The North course was rebuilt and reopened in 2009, but the new South course has had a much longer gestation. Becker says he and his managers decided fairly early on that restoring four courses was pointless, and eventually a plan coalesced; the footprint

of the former East and West courses would be used to build an all-new, championship standard course that could potentially host the Zurich Classic, the longstanding New Orleans PGA Tour stop. Rees Jones and his team were appointed to design the new

example of East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta (a course also renovated by Jones), where a community redevelopment programme funded by revenues from the golf club has, over two decades, revitalised a very run down area of the city.

“This park became a symbol for what rebuilding New Orleans was all about”

course, but it took several years to get to a point where construction could start; the course finally opened during summer 2017.

Before we get onto the golf course itself, it's worth discussing the rather unusual circumstances under which the new Bayou Oaks South course is being operated. A local non-profit organisation called the Bayou District Foundation is managing the operation. It was inspired by the

So, as well as being the key source of income for the park, the new South course will be the economic engine behind an urban regeneration scheme for one of the most impoverished areas in New Orleans. Already, an education programme and health care facilities at Columbia Parc, a development of 685 homes spread over 13 city blocks, have been backed by the Foundation, and more will follow. In a city

that has suffered as New Orleans has, it is an inspiring story.

Now; to the golf course. Given that it covers most of the footprint of two previous eighteen holers, it isn't hard to figure out that the new South course will be big; it is. The total area of the course is 250 acres, and from the back tees it stretches to a Tour-worthy 7,302 yards. There are, however, seven sets of tees; Jones, along with his associate Greg Muirhead, was determined to make what is, after all, a municipal course, playable for the largest number of golfers. With that in mind, local residents get preferential green fees. Ranging from US\$59 to US\$99, resident fees are no doubt higher than City Park golfers are used to, but for a course of this level, they are very good value.

The new course is, in some ways, remarkable for what it is not as much as for what it is. Jones and Muirhead, along with contractor Duininck Golf, have built a course that appears natural. On a piece of property that has the feel of New Orleans low country, they have not indulged themselves in unnatural shaping, or indeed done that much visible earthmoving at all (actually quite a lot of dirt was shifted, to install an enormous drainage network and to raise playing areas to minimise the impact of any future flood, but it is hard to spot). I think this minimalist approach was the right thing to do because in this landscape, to create drama by way of earthmoving would inevitably look out of place. Instead, the defining characteristics of the course are the park's watercourses and trees. Jones and his team were careful to preserve the beauty of the site's trees and lagoons and the routing of the holes were determined by these natural features. In essence, the site is classic parkland; open grassed areas separated by

Photos: Larry Lambrecht



Jones and team have created a course that appears natural and is suited to the New Orleans low country, as can be seen at the par five third, left, and par four sixteenth, below





specimen trees. City Park holds the world's largest collection of mature live oak trees, with some that are more than six hundred years old; not only does the new golf course respect those trees, it highlights them.

There is a lot of water, both the natural bayous that are so characteristic of the area, and lagoons constructed as part of the golf course build. Many holes dogleg around ponds or trees – perhaps the outstanding hole on the course is the thirteenth, from the back tees a massive 489-yard par four, and still above 400 yards even from the third shortest set. The hole doglegs hard around a lake; and a bold drive down the right centre of the fairway will be rewarded with the easiest angle of approach into the green. Like the rest of the golf course, the low-profile greens fit the site naturally and allow for the ground game as well as the aerial one. Mostly open at the front, their contours are subtle which allows them to be quite challenging at championship speeds. The course is playable for all calibre of golfers while still having the ability to host a PGA Tour stop or even a major championship.

“We were very fortunate to have worked on both Bethpage State Park’s Black Course

in New York and Torrey Pines South Course in San Diego, both US Open sites, bringing both popular courses back to more prominent public venues that golfers are waiting in line to play,” says Jones. “I think the same will hold true for Bayou Oaks, because it will be the premier golf course in the region.”

“This park became a symbol for what rebuilding New Orleans was all about,” says Mayor Mitch Landrieu. “We talked about not building (New Orleans) back the way it was but the way it should be if we had gotten it right the first time. What’s happened at City Park now is the best example of that, and of course this is the crown jewel. This project is the best gift that we could possibly give to New Orleans for our 300th anniversary (in 2018).” **GCA**

There is a lot of water on the course, including natural bayous that are characteristic of the area. The back tees stretch to a Tour-worthy 7,302 yards, but Jones has accommodated seven sets of tee markers, making the course playable for golfers of all abilities