

Rees Jones Resurrects A Field of Dreams

BY TRENT BOUTS



Rees Jones and Bryce Swanson,
co-designers of the resurrection
of the Wellman Club.

REES JONES has walked and worked on much of golf's finest terrain. His more than 250 designs, renovations and refinements worldwide include so many U.S. Open Championship sites — Baltusrol, Congressional, The Country Club in Brookline, Oakland Hills, Pinehurst No. 2 and so on — that he is known as the "Open Doctor."

He's played Augusta National as readily as many of us roll up at the local muni. He's teed it up with a handful of U.S. Presidents. His father, Robert Trent Jones, Sr., is in the World Golf Hall of Fame. His brother, Robert Trent Jones, Jr., like Rees, is a past president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects. In short, Rees Jones is golfing blue blood.

Why then, at age 80, would his juices flow so apparently as he traipses in the dust, the ashes really, of a course as close as it gets in South Carolina to the middle of nowhere.

Since 2010, that course, the Wellman Club, sat closed in tiny Johnsonville, about half-way between Lake City and Conway, and nearly an hour south of Florence. That puts it in the midst of a tract along I-95 made infamous as the "Corridor of Shame" by a 2013 documentary on economic and educational neglect.

When the golf course shut down, Johnsonville's official population was a mere 1,480 — hardly enough people to keep a putt-putt in business, and census sources suggest that even that number is on the decline. All the more reason then to wonder why Jones, whose legacy in the game is long cemented, would take even a passing interest let alone a passionate one.

"Are you joking?" he says. "I feel like I'm a kid again." Certainly, he laughs like one bouncing around in the back of a cart on a recent course tour. Jones' father worked into his 90s and those genes clearly passed down. He exudes a life force and a curiosity that keeps him in step with men half his age.

A kid indeed, with his hands in the dirt and playing with friends. "My people," he calls the assortment of contractors helping on the resurrection that will cost more than \$4 million by the time the formerly semi-private course reopens to the public this fall. As the undisputed expert and authority on this project, Jones got to hand-pick who would do what towards shaping his vision.

That's not always the case at prestigious clubs with long histories and board rooms full of strong personalities and opinions to match. Sometimes it's a battle for architects, sometimes it's a dance, but it's rarely ever free rein.

With co-designer and longtime colleague Bryce Swanson, Jones brought in Southeastern Golf for the heavy lifting. Over the years, he's worked with company president Scott Veazey on more than 40 projects. One of Veazey's senior men now, Clyde Hall, was first hired by Jones himself as a kid straight out of college. "So, the communication is perfect," Jones says.

Even so, the appeal of reviving the Wellman course goes beyond doing what he loves with a few friends. There's the character of the property itself and the original routing laid out by Ellis Maples and Ed Seay, with nine holes opening in 1966 and nine more in 1971.

"I think this piece of ground is what a golf course architect looked for when my father built a golf course," Jones says. "He had to have land that didn't need to be moved much. It's got good flow and good contours. They're not overly dramatic but it's not flat and it has a

natural lake. It just makes sense. It really works. This is a piece of land you would pick.

"Another thing is, it looks like Pinehurst more than it does Myrtle Beach. Because of the flow of the land and the trees are predominantly pines. I think people are going to find this course, they are going to want to play it, and they will be willing to drive a long distance to get here."

That is important to Jones too. He is acutely aware of what a buzzworthy golf course could mean to a small town with as many empty shopfronts as full. Jones knows he is not merely building a golf course, but something through and around which real economic blood could flow. The Open Doctor as Open Heart Doctor.

His wife, Susan, of 54 years, hails from a similar kind of place, Red Springs, with a population of less than 4,000, just 90 miles away in North Carolina. "From when I would visit, this town is a lot like Red Springs," Jones says. "I wouldn't be surprised if they hired me because I had an association with a town just like theirs."



The Wellman Club sat idle for more than a decade but, as the sign indicates, is about to be born anew.

That, and his knowledge and appreciation of how a golf course can serve to build community, as well as serve it. Jones cites return visits to some other, far higher profile, daily fee courses he's worked on in the past — Torrey Pines in San Diego, Bethpage Black in New York State and Bayou Oaks in New Orleans.

"I've done a lot of real high-end deals," he says. "But when it comes down to it, I think places like Torrey Pines and Bethpage have given me the most pleasure because when I go there, they are like people's second homes. Every time I go, I see the same faces, the same people. Not necessarily having to play golf but seeing their friends. People are going to be doing that here too."

"I'm at the stage where I do really want to contribute to the game. More people have the chance to play a place like this than a private club which is restricted and hard for a lot of people to get on. This is a place that is going to get young people into the game, and this is where they all start, where they can pay a green fee. Personally, I think this place is going to be like the social center of the whole county and major component of the area. It's a pretty good golf course."



Scalloped bunkering is one of the features of the new design at the Wellman Club, produced by Rees Jones and Bryce Swanson.

That last point is delivered with the kind of understatement that is meant to underline. Jones in fact believes the course will be strong enough to host tournaments with as much prestige as a South Carolina Open or a State Amateur Championship. It now stretches to 7,200 yards with a nerve-testing 220 of them from the tips over water on the par-3 closing hole.

"We're building more of a pre-Depression-era golf course, sort of a Golden Age, classic design," Jones says. "You'll find bunkers in various locations, like you do in the British Isles, not just one out there at 250 yards and then one on either side of the green. With the predominantly sandy soil and maintenance to encourage the ball to roll out, the ground game will be very much in play. You'll be able to bounce the ball up onto most greens. You won't have to hit the perfect shot to get where you want to go. That will make it popular with entry level players, kids, shorter-hitters."

But as with the 18th, there are also opportunities for reward when taking the ball into the air. The par-5 11th is a reverse likeness of one of the best-known holes in the state, "Waterloo," the 13th at The Dunes Golf and Beach Club. At the Wellman Club, the dogleg arcs

left around the lake and will give longer-hitters a choice whether to take on the water or lay up with their second shots.

In its heyday, the Wellman Club hosted an annual qualifier for what was then the Nike Tour, now the Korn Ferry Tour. Back then Randy Glover, a former PGA Tour winner, was head professional. Today, golf course superintendent Andy Traynham is a grandson of another South Carolina Golf Hall of Famer, Dillard Traynham, who won the SC Open and State Amateur, twice.

Traynham spent the past seven years honing his skills at The Dunes Club, which Jones' father designed, and that Jones, the son, has been tweaking and tending to off and on for the past two decades. That familiarity almost makes Traynham another of Jones' own "people." "Andy's really very accomplished," Jones says. "He's ready to roll."

Ready to roll he may be, but the city and county officials behind the project have already done that with dice. Investing that kind of money — from a Florence County penny sales tax for capital projects — on a "new" golf course in a town without a hotel when Myrtle Beach, an hour away, has 100 courses and Pinehurst, two hours away, has nearly 40, is nothing if not ambitious.

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But belief can be a powerful thing, as Jones and Johnsonville community leaders acknowledged with a standing ovation one day this spring. Maybe 60 people gathered at the town hall to meet Jones and the team from Florida-based Down to Earth Golf Facility Services that will manage the golf course. But Mayor Johnny Hanna also wanted to introduce someone else, someone, he said, “who knew this golf course would come back, who knew it in his heart.”

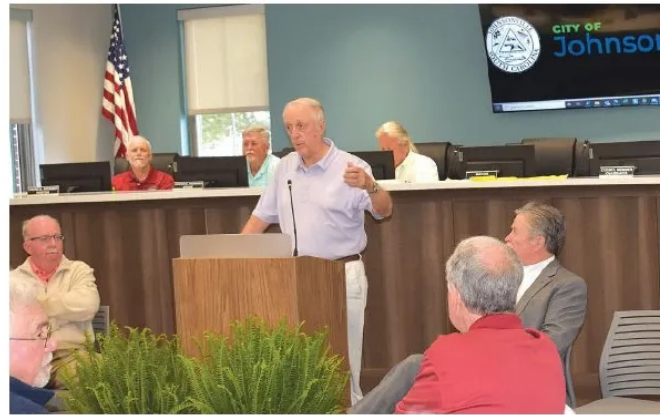
Rising for the applause was not that easy for Bobby Hirst. Of similar vintage to Jones, Hirst is battling significant health problems. He worked on the golf course maintenance staff at the Wellman Club for 35 years before he was told the shutdown would be “a temporary thing.” His own property sits beside the course, and it pained him to see it growing over as “months turned into years and years turned into more years.”

“It started to disappear,” he says. “I had to do something about it. So, with the help of some neighbors, I was able to collect money and little by little I started to cut it. In the summertime I would cut all the fairways and then wait until wintertime to cut the roughs.”

Pulling an old bush hog behind an even older, temperamental tractor, commandeered from remnants of the club’s maintenance fleet, Hirst kept mowing and mowing in the hope that someone, someday, might recognize a golf course and resurrect it as such. “I started there at the bottom,” he says of when he was on staff. “I didn’t play golf, didn’t even know anything about golf. But I fell in love with the golf course and treated it like it was my own.”



The Wellman Club’s new golf course superintendent Andy Traynham with Bobby Hirst, who mowed the golf course voluntarily since 2010 hoping it would one day be revived.



Rees Jones speaks to Johnsonville town leaders about progress at the Wellman Club.

But even hope gets thin when you stretch it across a decade or more and with breakdowns — mechanical and physical — Hirst admits, “It got to a point where I wasn’t sure I could continue doing it. But something kept telling me to keep going. To be determined. That something would happen.”

When he first heard whispers of a revival, he was skeptical. There was talk in the past that turned to nothing. “Then I heard the names of the people who were involved, and I thought, ‘Well, maybe this is true this time,’” Hirst says.

Then town representatives wanted to know if he could keep mowing the property, using their equipment and for a stipend. He said, “Well, sure.” The money wasn’t much but it was better equipment, and the diesel fuel and oil were coming from the city, not my pocket!”

“This is truly a field of dreams story,” says Jones, referring to the 1989 baseball fantasy film starring Kevin Costner. “We’re not in the cornfields but we are in a small community, and I think the golf course is going to be a major hub. People will come.”

The stuff of dreams, yes. Delusions, no, says Mayor Hanna. “It wasn’t just something where we woke up one day and decided to open a golf course,” he told the crowd at the reception. “Back in 2017–2018, council had the vision of bringing back the golf course. We formed a committee and hired consultants and did feasibility studies.”

As city administrator Jim Smith said, “It’s been a long four or five years getting to this point. I’m almost 70 years old and I’ve been doing this (work) for nearly 40 years now. I’ve seen a lot of cities and towns go through ups and downs and councils come and councils go. A lot of times it’s the assets these places have that get them through the tough times. If this golf course is managed properly, the city of Johnsonville will have such an asset.”

A consultant was due in town the following week to begin work towards a companion hotel project. By June, Traynham was laying sod and scheduling hours for Hirst to come back on payroll. Jones himself was also in town to check on progress and his “people.”

“My mother said the greatest thing about the family being in the golf industry was that there are so many great people in that life,” he says. “Your quality of life is really enhanced with all the great friends you make.” ■