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TPC Network Turns 40

By John Steinbreder ▪ August 22, 2020



With the building of the Stadium Course at TPC Sawgrass four decades ago, then-PGA Tour commissioner Deane Beman did more than give the Players Championship a permanent home. Quite inadvertently, he also sowed the seeds of a business operation that today consists of 31 golf facilities and generates hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenues for the PGA Tour.

Called the TPC Network, it currently comprises private, public and daily-fee courses that serve recreational golfers throughout the United States as well as in Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia and Malaysia. Several of those layouts also act as venues for PGA Tour, PGA Tour Champions and Korn Ferry Tour events, such as TPC River Highlands outside Hartford, Connecticut, the home of the Travelers Championship, and TPC Southwind in Memphis, Tennessee, where the WGC-FedEx St. Jude Invitational was held last month. This year's PGA Championship was staged at TPC Harding Park in San Francisco, California, and the first tournament of the 2020 FedEx Cup playoffs, the Northern Trust, is being played this weekend at TPC Boston.

That is an impressive collection. Equally as significant is how that division of the tour is thriving as it celebrates its 40th anniversary this year.



Deane Beman, shown in a backhoe, was a driving force behind the TPC Network.

Designed largely by Pete and Alice Dye with significant impact from Beman, TPC Sawgrass was the first piece of that portfolio when it opened in the fall of 1980. Many industry observers, including a number of his tour professionals, considered it a risky venture. But Beman believed it was an important move for an organization looking to bolster its identity only a decade or so after spinning off from the PGA of America.

One way to achieve that, he felt, was to create an important new event. And that is exactly what Beman did when he founded the Players Championship shortly after he assumed the job of commissioner in 1974. The competition moved around for several years before finding a permanent home at TPC Sawgrass in 1982, just 18 months after that complex had opened.

Scores for the first Players staged on the Stadium Course were in many cases sky high, and competitors criticized the course the Dyes and Beman had fashioned on a low-lying, 415-acre parcel of land in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. Ben Crenshaw described it as “Star Wars golf designed by Darth Vader,” and J.C. Snead derided the layout as “90 percent horse manure and 10 percent luck.” Even the winner of that year’s championship, Jerry Pate, was exasperated, and after securing his victory, he famously pushed both Dye and Beman into the man-made lake by the 18th green before diving in himself.

But spectators raved about a layout that made it easier to follow individual golfers or to stake out spots on grassy mounds to watch specific holes and shots without their views being obstructed.

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So did the sponsors of other tour events who had accepted invitations from Beman to attend that first Players at TPC Sawgrass. And it wasn’t long before they began asking the commissioner how he could do something similar for them. In the weeks and months after that first tournament, Beman also fielded similar and quite unsolicited calls from golf course developers around the country who were suddenly enthralled by the concept of “stadium golf” and realized that having that kind of course as well as a regular PGA Tour stop would bring great cachet to their properties – and help sell homes while filling tee sheets.

That unexpected enthusiasm prompted Beman to ask Pete Davison, whom the commissioner had hired to be the first head professional at TPC Sawgrass, to start expanding the TPC brand. By 1984, the network had added TPC Eagle Trace in Florida, an Arthur Hills course that became home of the Honda Classic, and TPC Plum Creek in Colorado. Then, Davison engaged Pete Dye to revamp a course outside Hartford, Connecticut. It became TPC River Highlands and the host of the Sammy Davis Jr. Greater Hartford Open, known today as the Travelers Championship. Two years later it added TPC Potomac in Maryland and TPC Scottsdale in Arizona, and in 1987 those venues were both hosting tour events.

As for TPC Boston, it came online in 2002 – and became a regular tournament site the following season. Arnold Palmer crafted the original course, but Gil Hanse led a redesign of the layout in 2007, with assistance from Brad Faxon.



No. 16 at TPC Boston

As Davison looks back at those days, he well remembers an early conversation he had with Beman. “When he hired me, Deane said I would be responsible for all golf operations at TPC Sawgrass,” said Davison, who went on to become the chief operating officer of the division that oversaw the TPC Network. “‘I don’t know what to tell you to do,’ he explained. ‘But everything has to be first-class.’ And he gave me a similar mandate when we started establishing other TPC clubs.”

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Pete Davison

Even with those changes, several constants have remained. “Everything still has to be first-class,” said Jim Triola, the PGA Tour’s chief operating officer of golf course properties. “Every course has to be capable of hosting tournaments. And from an operational standpoint, we strive to provide the best possible experience – from

the tour professionals competing on them and the spectators watching the events to the recreational golfers who play them at other times of the year.”

Another critical function, according to Triola, is ensuring that each TPC property supports grow-the-game initiatives like The First Tee as they also provide tour professionals with places to practice and for sponsors to “activate their relationships.”

Forty years after, the network that Beman birthed in the swamps of the Sunshine State has never been stronger.

Top: No. 17 at the Stadium Course at TPC Sawgrass. Photo: Stan Badz, PGA Tour via Getty Images