



PGA TOUR Daily Clips

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A dollar and a dream: TPC Sawgrass celebrates 40th anniversary of iconic course

By Will Brown, Jacksonville Business Journal

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The beginning of a decade will always serve as an opportunity for Deane Beman to reflect on his golf adventures.

The longtime Commissioner of the PGA Tour was instrumental in opening TPC Sawgrass in 1980. Recently, Beman recalled the creativity, deal-making and development that turned woodlands into a world-class golf resort.

TPC Sawgrass celebrates its 40th anniversary this month. The home of the Players Championship is the centerpiece of the TPC Network that has grown to 30 properties spread throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico and an outpost in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The 36-hole resort in Ponte Vedra Beach has helped turn what was once a mining and logging community into a home base for nearly 70 PGA Tour professionals.

“The idea of a stadium golf course — this was the first stadium golf course,” noted former PGA Tour Commissioner Deane Beman at a celebration of the anniversary on Thursday night. “The idea of a stadium golf course goes back to the early '60s.”

In the early '60s, Beman was a fantastic amateur golfer, winning the 1959 British Amateur and the U.S. Amateur in 1960 and 1963. A full-time professional in public relations and insurance, Beman partnered with golf architect Eddie Ault to develop a course where spectators could see the action without a periscope.

The idea of a stadium golf course was mothballed for more than a decade, though, being resurrected when the PGA Tour sought a permanent home for The Players Championship.

Joe Dey, the first PGA Tour Commissioner, wanted to move The Players to elite courses across the United States, similar to the way U.S. Open sites are selected.

The first Players Championship was held in Atlanta on Labor Day weekend in 1974. A few days earlier, and 350 miles away, the golf course at Sawgrass Country Club opened.

Beman, who replaced Dey as tour commissioner earlier that year, aspired to move The Players Championship to Florida and have it played in the early spring.

“In order for the tournament to be as successful as I wanted it to be, it couldn’t just be played on an ordinary golf course,” Beman said. “Back then, tournaments on the PGA Tour didn’t have full-time management. So, they put the committee together 90 to 120 days before the tournament and put it together. I wanted an event more important than that. If we held it at the same place every year, we could invest money to make that facility better.”

Jack Nicklaus won the first Florida-based Players Championship at Inverrary Golf & Country Club in March 1976. The Players moved to Ponte Vedra Beach the following year and has been a Northeast Florida staple for the last 43 years.

“Before we held the first event, I got so enamored with the community leadership and the volunteer group and what they were doing — which they never had to do before, which was start right then for the next year — that I thought this would be a great permanent place (to hold the tournament) even though we had a three-year deal,” Beman said.

To have a permanent home, Beman attempted to have the PGA Tour purchase Sawgrass Country Club, a 10,000 square-foot office park, a tennis facility, beachfront property and more for \$1.8 million in the fall of 1976. However, PGA Tour Board of Directors advised in November 1976 to wait to purchase the property until after the 1977 Players Championship was held at Sawgrass.

The price went up and the deal fell through — but the PGA Tour’s hesitation wound up serving them well.

Instead of the PGA, the Arvida Corp. purchased Sawgrass Country Club, leading Beman and others to look elsewhere. And they used an Arvida helipad to help in the search.

Thursday, Beman recalled sites were scoped from as far north as Laurel Island, as far west as Green Cove Springs and as far south as what is now known as The Outpost property near the Guana River.

The PGA Tour found 415 acres west of State Road A1A that was owned by Paul and Jerome Fletcher, the chairman and vice chairman of St. Augustine-based developers Fletcher Davis, who agreed to sell the property for \$1.

Purchasing the parcel that has blossomed into TPC Sawgrass for less than a penny per acre may have been one of the most notable land sales in Northeast Florida.

Thursday, Beman said bringing in Vernon Kelly as property manager was even more invaluable. Without Kelly, Beman quipped TPC Sawgrass would have featured 15 holes and an incomplete clubhouse.

Kelly and others broke ground on TPC Sawgrass in February 1979, weeks before Lanny Wadkins won The Players. Construction was completed in 20 months.

The idea from the outset was to have a course that resembled a stadium. The project managers used mounds and changes in elevation to allow spectators to sit in a chair or stand and be able to see the action over the person in front of them.

In order to make those mounds, the engineers turned to the sand that was in the ground of the future course.

“We had to chase the sand,” Kelly said. “Everywhere you see lakes, was sand.”

Kelly added the best sand on the property is how the famous Island Green was created. The more they dug, the more sand they found near the famous 17th hole.

There was a discussion about the green being a peninsula, but course architect Pete Dye, settled in an island green. Thursday, Beman noted Dye wanted to make the iconic hole 165 yards from the tee. He wanted the Island Green to be no longer than 135 yards.

During the truncated 2020 Players Championship, the par-3 No. 17 played at 137 yards.

World Golf Hall of Famer Hale Irwin was one of the best at navigating the winds and the undulations at No. 17. His cumulative score of 9-under at the famous hole is tied for third-best in the history of The Players Championship.

However, Irwin’s most famous shot at TPC Sawgrass likely occurred with few spectators. The three-time U.S. Open champion hit the first tee shot on Oct. 24, 1980.

Beman painted the picture: That Friday, it “rained like crazy” to the point one couldn’t see the course from the clubhouse. He, Irwin and two others hit celebratory tee shots. No one else played that day. The rain wouldn’t allow it.

Four decades later, neither rain, heat, modern golf balls nor a pandemic have managed to slow interest in the Island Green at TPC Sawgrass.