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Bright future for Golf Club of Georgia New owner returning club to lofty status

By Mike Blum

When the Golf Club of Georgia opened in the early 1990s, it immediately shot to the top of the list of metro Atlanta's finest private golf clubs, with the Lakeside course selected as the best new private course to open in the U.S. in 1991.

The Creekside course followed two years later, giving the club a second standout layout that provided a decided contrast in playing style from Lakeside.

In short order, the Alpharetta club hosted the Georgia Amateur, U.S. Open qualifiers, Georgia PGA tournaments, a unique pre-Masters event matching the U.S. and British Amateur champions, and a Champions Tour stop for six years.

The Champions Tour event ended in 2000 due to sponsorship issues, and other than the Georgia Cup and an annual college tournament the club has hosted for the past decade, Golf Club of Georgia has not been nearly as



Golf Club of Georgia, Lakeside 11th hole

prominent in Atlanta area golf circles as it once was.

Among the reasons was the departure of the club's original Japanese ownership, which spent lavishly to help create Golf Club of Georgia's lofty reputation. The membership operated the club for about a decade, but it eventually became neces-

sary for the members to sell.

Businessman Ben Kenny, who also owns Horseshoe Bend in Roswell, acquired Golf Club of Georgia last year, and is early in the process of restoring the club's standing in the Atlanta golf community, much as he has done in recent years with Horseshoe Bend.

Kenny invested millions of dollars in the restoration of Horseshoe Bend, with the improvements to the course, clubhouse and infrastructure coming in stages. The same outline for Golf Club of Georgia has already begun, with the Creekside course opening recently after five months of renovation work by Medalist Golf and renowned Atlanta-based golf course architect Bob Cupp, who also handled the renovation at Horseshoe Bend.

Improvements to the clubhouse are to begin this month and expected to take about a year to complete. The changes will include a reconfiguration of the men's locker room and grille, an updating of the main dining room and the creation of some meeting space within the existing building. The social aspects of the clubhouse will also be addressed, with a new banquet hall and the expansion of the bar to make it an indoor/outdoor operation.

Golf Club of Georgia opened as a golf club as opposed to a country club, and

[See Golf Club of Georgia, page 6]



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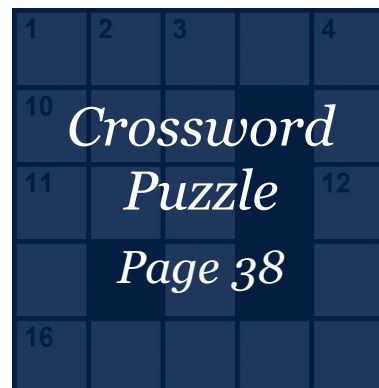
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Golf Club of GA

[Continued from the cover]

that aspect will not change. However, for families that want swim and tennis facilities along with the great golf the club offers, Golf Club of Georgia members have access to those at Horseshoe Bend, which has long been well-regarded for both and formerly hosted an ATP tour event,

Jacqueline Welch, the vice president for both clubs, describes the work being done at Golf Club of Georgia as “a total transformation. Golf Club of Georgia had an amazing reputation and we want to capitalize on that reputation. We’re making a lot of changes to bring it to the next level.”

In addition to the renovation work on Creekside and the improvements to the clubhouse, one of the aims of the club’s “transformation” is to make it a more inviting place for families. Without swim and tennis, Golf Club of Georgia operated as mainly a guys’ club, but with more of an emphasis placed on junior clinics and camps, the family-oriented direction the club is heading in is already evident.

Kenny’s efforts to upgrade the entire facility at Horseshoe Bend have been well received by its membership, who spent many years hoping for a return to its 1980s status as one of the Atlanta area’s top private clubs.

According to Welch, Kenny is bringing the “one vision, one direction” approach he used at Horseshoe Bend to turn around the declining status there to Golf Club of Georgia. After more than a decade of being a membership-operated club, not everyone was on board with the change in direction, but as Welch pointed out, “It’s hard to make everybody happy.”

Welch says there was also some initial skepticism at Horseshoe Bend after Kenny acquired the club and informed the membership of his plans for it, but after the sizeable amount of money he spent to improve it, the skepticism has been replaced by appreciation.

Kenny’s goal for the members of his clubs is simple, Welch says.

“He wants you to enjoy yourself.”

For more than two decades, the members at Golf Club of Georgia have enjoyed a pair of outstanding but contrasting courses, but have enjoyed one more than the other.

Lakeside, the first of the two to be designed by acclaimed architect Arthur Hills, was built on the prime golf course land on the property, with much of the back nine winding along Lake Windward. Creekside was constructed on

a site not as ideal for a golf course, with a considerable number of wetlands areas impacting the layout and the terrain not nearly as gentle as that used for Lakeside.

While Lakeside offered a traditional, tree-lined setting with its large, undulating greens responsible for much of its challenge. Creekside was more of a modern, target-style course, with the wetlands areas requiring a number of forced carries.

Over the years, some of the areas that required shots to have to carry from point A to point B have become fairways, and a few others are either having some of the high native grasses mowed or being sodded to add some definition.

John Huban, who took over as Golf Club of Georgia’s head professional about a year ago, says member play was largely oriented towards Lakeside.

“They sort of avoided Creekside. It was hard and a little too demanding.”

Among Cupp’s changes was the removal of a sizeable percentage of bunkers, mostly along the fairways, with little work done to the greens complexes. Some new tees were added to reduce the length of some of the forced carries, and a new set of senior tees are being introduced to make it a little less intimidating for members who can’t hit it as far as they once did.

Huban said the initial response to Cupp’s efforts to soften Creekside a bit was positive, but it remains a serious challenge, just not quite as daunting as it was previously.

The removal of many of the fairway bunkers has made Creekside a less demanding course off the tee, but there are still plenty of holes that will not respond kindly to miss-hit shots. If you can hit it reasonably solid off the tee, Creekside is not an overwhelming test, although there are several stout par 4s and a pair of demanding par 3s that will require your best efforts to avoid damage to your scorecard.

Creekside’s more inviting front nine offers a number of scoring opportunities, beginning with a narrow, rolling par 5 that features one of the more sloping greens on the course. For the most part, the excellent putting surfaces on Creekside are gentler than those on Lakeside, but they have sufficient movement and speed to put your touch to the test.

Both par 3s on the outgoing nine are short and on the tame side, with a pair of

undersized par 4s also offering scoring opportunities. The ninth still requires a modest carry over a hazard, but with the right side fairway bunkers removed is a much more receptive hole.

There are three standout holes on the nine, starting with the narrow par-4 third, one of several with sizeable hills along the fairway that can be friend or foe depending on how it re-directs shots that land on them.

The toughest hole on the course, and one of the most difficult you’ll encounter anywhere, is the long par-4 eighth, with a creek short of the green requiring a lay-up for shorter hitters or those whose tee shots are a bit errant. A long, narrow green presents a tough target from long range, with fall-offs along the edges making for some testy short game shots.

Creekside’s target nature is perhaps best exemplified by the reachable par-5 fifth, which sports a large, island fairway followed by an angled second shot over a wetlands area that is being re-sodded. Trouble and trees left of a narrow strip of green and a thin row of trees are in play to the right for those who bail out.

There are no soft touches on the lengthier back nine, with the only short hole among the group the par-4 13th, which begins with a carry over wetlands to a fairway that runs out for those who hit more club than they need. Even if you find the fairway, a tree short left of the green can impede approach shots.

The remainder of the nine features two lengthy par 3s with hazards in play, a par 5 with a creek that winds through the fairway and impacts both the second and third shots, two more par 4s requiring carries to reach the fairway and a pair of strong par-4 finishing holes that lack hazards but not



much else.

Lakeside is not as potentially penal as Creekside, but has more than its share of water in play, along with some greens that can get very quick with plenty of break.

Water is a serious factor on about half the holes, including an exceptional trio of par 3s that rate high for both beauty and challenge. Both nines finish with risk/reward par 5s with water guarding the greens, and the par-5 11th offers some glorious views with a green perched along Lake Windward.

The par fours are a diverse group, with four on the short side and only one with serious yardage numbers, with its downhill nature reducing the effective length. Most of the fairways are on the generous side, with the greens complexes providing much of the challenge on a course, that like Creekside, is superbly conditioned. 🏌️

For information on Golf Club of Georgia, call 770-664-8644 or visit www.golfclubofgeorgia.com