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Golf Course Renovated

By Jeff Roberson

The Ole Miss Golf Course is still in the same location that it's been for more than 40 years. But a lot of other things have changed.

The course was closed from January 2008 until October 2008 for a major renovation, which included the greens being rebuilt to USGA specifications, fairways sprigged with 419 Bermuda grass, all new cart paths, a fleet of 60 new electric golf carts, a state-of-the-art 900 sprinkler head irrigation system capable of pumping out more than 850,000 gallons of water a night, rebuilt sand bunkers and the addition of back tees on several holes, pushing the course to more than 7,000 yards in length. Also, the driving range has been doubled in size.

Watermark Golf LLC/Nathan Crace Design was responsible for the \$3.5 million renovation project.

"It was a major renovation of the golf course with the goal of taking a significant step up in class," said golf course manager Gerald Barron. "We've tried to move to a best-in-class facility compared to other university-type golf courses. We think we've done that.

"We've rebuilt every green to USGA specifications. We've added 20 bunkers that add to the beauty and play of the course. As soon as you drive into the area, you can see the changes. We've added numerous new tees and from the tips, it's 7,000 yards-plus now," Barron said.

The grass on the greens has been changed from a couple of different types of Bermuda grass to a type called Tiff Eagle. The fairway grass has been changed out from a mixture of common Bermuda to a 419 hybrid Bermuda. Many golf courses have that type grass on them.

"The ball sits up and it's easier to hit off of," said David Jumper, assistant director of golf. "You might not get as much roll, but it's a lot softer and it makes it better to hit."

There have been some adjustments to the actual course. Holes 1-3 are basically the same. The green on No. 4, a par 4, has been moved slightly, toward the tee to allow the No. 8 tee box to be extended back toward the entrance road where No. 4 green formerly was.

There is also a large lake on the right side of the fairway and green on hole No. 4.

“That’s our irrigation lake,” Jumper said. “There was a small pond there before, and now it starts back behind No. 3 tee. From the white tee on No. 4, it’s about 200 yards to the edge of the lake.”

There is plenty of room in the middle of the fairway and also down the left side of that hole.

“But that lake (on the right side of No. 4) will catch a lot of balls,” Barron said.

On the two par 5s on the front – holes Nos. 6 and 7 – fairway sand bunkers have been added to challenge the tee shot. There is a new back tee on No. 7, stretching that long par 5 out even more for the golfer who chooses to give it a go.

There is also a new sand bunker in the bend of No. 9 fairway that could catch drives of golfers who try to cut the corner but maybe don’t hit their best shot at that moment.

“The look of No. 9 has improved dramatically with that fairway bunker,” Barron said. “We took out some trees and it just looks prettier than it ever has. We also added another back tee on that hole also.”

Holes 10, 11, and 12 are basically the same. There are some big changes on holes 13 and 14.

“On 13 we added five fairway bunkers,” Jumper said. “It’s the No. 1 handicap hole. It’s not that long but it’s tough.”

Hole No. 13 parallels the airport runway. Years ago trees blocked the view of the airport from the course. In the past few years, those are gone and the area is totally open. All the airport property is in view of the course on No. 13.

Barron said the openness of the hole makes it tough for several reasons.

“The wind always blows on No. 13,” Barron said. “You get up on that hill and you’ve always got wind.”

On No. 14, a dogleg par 5 that was challenging for the average golfer but not so much so for the scratch golfer, has been changed dramatically.

“We cut some trees on the right side (of the fairway) and moved the green over probably 20 yards to the left,” Jumper said. “There is now a little pond where the green used to be. You can now go for it in two if you hit a really super drive down the left side.”

“There’s a big trap in front of the green,” Barron said. “There’s a trap on the left. The pond is there. You can make a shot at the green (on the second shot). Before it was harder to do that. It’s a birdie par-5 but it can also be a big number.”

There are new fairway bunkers on No. 15 that won't affect the tee shot but could come into play on the second shot.

"You really can't reach it from the tee, but it really makes you think on the second shot if you're going to lay up or go for the green (in two shots)," Jumper said. "If you go for the green and get into one of the (new) bunkers around the green, it's tough. They're deep. You're really penalized if you go for it and don't make it."

New tees on No. 16 have give that par 3 more variety, and it can now play from approximately 170 yards at the front to 239 yards at the back.

On No. 17, a par 4, the hole can now be stretched out even further back with a new tee that is on the top of the levee of a lake behind the original tee box.

"A lot of people don't even know it's there," Jumper said. "That makes 17 about 453 yards from back there, and there is always wind in your face on that hole. It's just added length and made it more challenging."

The 18th green, once basically non-visible from the golf shop building area, has been lowered so the approach is somewhat different and the view from behind is better.

"We moved some dirt and now you can actually stand at the building and see people on the green," said Jumper, who also mentioned the green was basically doubled in size. "It used to be about 4,000 square feet, and now it's close to 8,000. It's the biggest green we've got."

The approach to 18 has also changed.

"It's bunkered in the front, both grass and sand, to keep the ball from going back down that hill," Barron said.

"Now it's better to be long than short," Jumper said. "Before, short was OK."

The contour of the greens has been changed with the rebuilding process.

"All the greens now have multiple pin placements, and before that was a real problem," said Barron, due to the shape and contour of many of the putting surfaces.

"Before when you got the greens really fast, there were just one or two pin placements," Jumper said. "Now there are many."

The course is only one aspect of the total golf experience now presented to golfers. There have been improvements in a lot of areas.

"We were committed to upgrading the level of service at the golf course," Barron said. "We've added starters and rangers. We take extreme care of the course and the carts."

We're just trying to do things in a first-class way. We're trying to maintain a club feel while maintaining a first-class public course with reasonable rates."

"The clubhouse is completely renovated. What we're calling the Rebel Fairway Grill has just opened. And one of our goals is to make the beauty of the golf course match the beauty of the campus. We think we've gone a long way toward doing that."

Membership programs have also been expanded. There is a corporate level, as well as a student level and faculty and alumni levels. There is a non-resident level of membership, which is good for fans and alums arriving for ballgames who want to play golf.

"We've tried to give people as many options as we can," Barron said.

Call 662-234-4816 for more information or tee times, or go to the website www.olemiss.edu/depts/golf/ to check everything out concerning the "new" golf course.

The course was named by one national publication as the No. 3 rated renovation in 2008 among courses in its class. The two courses that beat out Ole Miss for the top spot were Cog Hill in suburban Chicago, which hosts a PGA event, and a TPC course in Arizona.

There won't ever be a PGA Tour Tournament at the Ole Miss Golf Course, nor will it ever be confused for a TPC course.

But the Ole Miss Golf Course is better than ever, and the people involved want players to enjoy their experience from the time they arrive until they leave.

One of the starters/rangers, Jim Stephens, says he and the others who are "on the course" are there to assist with that.

"Everybody has a tee time, and we help to control the flow of play on the course," said Stephens, retired from the UM School of Pharmacy and also retired from the Military. "We're here to be non-confrontational and to help make it a more professional golf experience, and I think we've done that."

Stephens said golfers are adjusting to the way things are there now, and he knows it will become even more pleasant into the future.

"It's been a good first year," he said of the way things are now at the Ole Miss Golf Course following the major renovation. "And the second year will be even better."

Indeed it is a new day for the golfing public at Ole Miss.