

The Preserve

A Golf and Environmental Triumph

By Neal Kotlarek

Plug a tee into the ground on the first hole on The Preserve at Oak Meadows golf course, and you instantly become overwhelmed by a sense of déjà vu. As you stare down the fairway, you become convinced that you have played this hole before. But when and where? As you attempt to gain your bearings and gaze down the left side of the hole, confusion reigns. Past that tree line rests an enormous prairie with wetlands and 17 other holes you are entirely certain you've never seen or played before.

If it's any consolation, those moments of uncertainty will be shared by thousands of golfers in coming weeks when this DuPage County Forest Preserve course opens to the public early this month.

Five years ago, the county enlisted area golf course architect Greg Martin to manage an intriguing project with multiple missions:

1) To perform engineering work that would mitigate wetlands that had created flooding issues on the former Oak Meadows golf course ever since it opened in 1919;

2) To develop an improved environment for wildlife, fish and other aquatic species which call the 288-acre property home;

3) To connect the property with the nearby

community and the regional Salt Creek Greenway Trail, so as to provide preserve access to hikers, joggers and cyclists, and;

4) To replace the 27 golf holes on the land with a dynamic 18-hole championship course.

A preview of the complex in July confirmed that Martin and his team achieved all of those objectives in spectacular fashion. While the popularity of the running and biking paths can only be proven once the property opens to the public, the golf course is a breathtaking display of natural design across and around wetlands, and over 4,000 mature trees that remain standing from the preserve's origins.

That sense of déjà vu you felt on the 1st tee? Martin paid homage to the former Oak Meadows (and, prior to that, Elmhurst Country Club) course by maintaining much of the look and feel of the 1st hole and the 18th hole off their respective tees. Yet this should not be confused with a renovation project, as the course has been given a distinctive new identity across all of its holes, beginning with four crafty and delightful short par 4s and continuing through winding par 5s that call for heroic tee shots and approach shots over water and wetlands.

"Long-time customers have been taking tours for weeks in anticipation of the course's opening," said Ed Stevenson, the district's executive director and director of golf. "They really like what they see, as a very familiar setting is now graced with a fantastic golf course and spectacular landscape."

Indeed, as a golfer who's played Oak Meadows dozens of times over the years, I must sheepishly admit I wasn't even aware of Salt Creek's lingering presence behind the trees of the former course. It is now front and center on the new property as it zig-zags across and along holes to add both additional challenge and natural beauty.

Highlighting the course are the aforementioned short par 4s which break up the round and whet one's appetite for a sure par or potential birdie. Inevitably, of course, trees, woods, water and misguided swing planes make that task easier said than done. The green of the 352-yard No. 4, for instance, can actually be reached from off the tee given supporting winds. Alas, wetlands in front of the tee along with sand bunkers inhibit one's swing and can turn an easy par into an easily explainable double bogey. Remember to keep the ball away from the right side of this putting surface, which takes a deep dive from the flagstick.

If course managers ever name the holes, No. 6 will surely become known as the Devil's Den due to an interesting numerical coincidence that occurred when project administrators were assessing every tree across the property. Each was numbered for identification purposes. Designer Martin could only shake his head during our preview round when his tee shot rolled up behind Tree No. 666, which rests on the right side of the rough. "Of course it's 666!" Martin said with a laugh as he pitched his ball under the sprawling tree and toward the green.

The course's four par 3s display great variety and are no pushovers. The two on the front nine measure 183 yards and 170 yards, respectively, from the black tees. The 223-yard No. 10 is not only the longest of the bunch; it is also the toughest when the greenkeeper decides to put the flagstick on the left side of the putting surface behind a deep bunker (as was the circumstance during my round). The best option is to aim for the middle of the green on this hole and accept a long birdie putt rather than risk a bogey or worse from out of the hazard.

The course's final three holes serve as a reminder of the course's diversity. A short 355-yard dogleg right par 4 with a huge contoured green leads to a tough-as-nails 195-yard par 3 with a green protected by bunkers. The 465-yard final hole calls for two precise

long shots, one from off the tee and the other from the fairway. The generous green offers an appealing target for a 3-wood or long hybrid approach shot. Following two years of construction, The Preserve at Oak Meadows opens for a "preview season" in early August, which will allow limited play to ensure that young fairways, tees and greens will fully take root going into late autumn. Thus, the first full schedule of tee times will start next April.

"It is important to note that only 15 percent of the 288-acre property is dedicated to the golf course," said Martin. "The priority from the start of this project was to develop this land as a nature preserve that the community can enjoy inclusively," he added. In that same context, the future clubhouse for the golf course will also serve as host to district educational programs and events. The facility will include meeting rooms, a pro shop, grill area and locker rooms.

"The long wait is over," said Stevenson. "Just a year ago, most of the land was stripped bare and hardly resembled a golf course. But everywhere you look now, you see life in all of its forms. We're pretty certain that golfers and joggers and cyclists and hikers are going to be proud of this preserve for years and decades into the future."

For tee times and more information, visit www.dupagegolf.com or call (630) 595-0071.



Hole 7



Hole 9



Hole 17

