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A vision in the making

By **Bill Begley**

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Squinting against a bright Texas sun, standing in the middle of a daydream, the two men let their imaginations take over.

“Man, that is a long way out. This is a really long course,” one said, hand over his brow to shield his eyes. “I’d have to lay up from here.”

“Who wouldn’t?” said the other. “Man, this is going to be something. I mean, this really going to be challenging.”

Standing quietly behind them, Blake Bingham smiled.

That’s because the head golf pro at The Club at Comanche Trace is a kindred soul. Back before the bulldozers and the backhoes — back before even the blue prints — he’d done the same thing.

“The land was here,” Bingham said recently while leading a tour of prospective members on a tour of the construction for the new nine holes at the Comanche Trace. “But, so was the golf course. I mean, we stood right here and said, ‘Well, this is where the tee box will be — the hole will have to go right down there.’”

“It was all still prairie, but it was all right here — totally obvious. All you had to do was look and you’d see a golf course.”

Like a vision.

These days, the vision is starting to take shape.

Daily, work on the expanse behind the Pinnacle Clubhouse — sitting high above the ever-growing planned community — pokes and prods and pushes and pulls, man-made and mechanical muscle manipulating nature, coaxing a creek where there was none, transplanting trees from here to there like pawns on a chess board, carving out a paradise in the middle of a prairie.

And, good Lord willing, a new creek will rise sometime this fall, along with nine challenging, breathtaking holes ready for the playing.

“It’s fun,” Bingham said. “To watch it from the beginning, from the conception to the construction to, eventually, the completion. It’s pretty neat. It’s kind of like watching something being born, right in front of your eyes.”

Literally, from the undeveloped ground up.

WHAT WILL BE

The day-dreamers were standing in the middle of what is now a long stretch of dirt, but what will be soon a fairway on the fourth hole of the new back nine. It is a picturesque par 5 with the path to the green bisected not once, but twice, by a man-made creek that will run right next to the green.

Players will cross two bridges to get to the hole ... and, at 575 yards from the back tees, it won't be a short trip.

“We will be able to push that back to about 625 yards for certain events,” Bingham said. “But, those will be special instances.”

There are plenty of potential “special instances” along the 3,800 yard layout, designed by acclaimed course architects Jay and Carter Morrish and being built by Niebur Golf Inc.

Starting behind the driving range with a downhill, 400-plus yard par 4 pocketed by water, the new nine will combine aesthetically pleasing settings with athletically challenging layouts, and, often, the difference between the two will be subtle.

A man-made creek will run along the nearly 450-yard par 4 No. 2, at point appearing to pinch the fairway, but playing away from the hazard will leave golfers with an approach shot that will have to clear a tall pecan tree.

“It looks like the creek comes down into the fairway,” Bingham said, “but really, the creek won't come into play off the tee for most players, and the best way to play it is to shoot for the corner of the creek.”

The best way to play it WILL be to shoot for the corner of the creek.

Right now, the creek is a dry bed, lined with plastic and littered with strategically placed rocks of all sizes to regulate the flow of water. The supply comes from a pond beside No. 10 on the original course, and after running its course will be pumped back up to the pond to begin the cycle anew.

“The rocks came from the construction out here,” Comanche Trace superintendent Scott Parker said. “Whenever they dug up a big rock, they'd pick it up and come place it over here. A lot of what's being used to construct and shape the course was already here.”

But, as Parker put it, things were “tweaked” along the way.

IN THE DETAILS

To say the course was “already there” is more than a little generalization.

Suffice it to say, putting the new nine in place is taking a little more than spreading some grass seed, sprinkling a little water and piling up sand in spots around the greens.

Listening to Parker talk about the science of growing sustainable greens and fairways is a lesson in and of itself.

Each green begins with a sub-surface — essentially, the ground in place — and covered with four inches of pea gravel, contoured to match the sub-surface, and topped with 12 inches of “greens mix,” which looks like the contents of your backyard sandbox, but really is an organic recipe mixed to ensure optimal irrigation and root support.

See.

“People a lot smarter than me come up with the formula,” Parker says, though his dissertation on the

process hints otherwise.

Along with building a recycling creek, other subtle shaping is taking place.

On No. 6, a nearly 480-yard par 4 that frames the clubhouse between trees on both side of the fairway, the landing area was so high, players would not have a clear view of the green from their second shot.

So, builders lowered the rise six feet.

“A blind second shot is no good,” Bingham said, “so we took it down a little.”

The same for a short par 3 at No. 5, though the man-made slope will mean tee shots need to play high enough on the green to prevent balls from rolling back down the slope in the front.

“It’s all about a vision,” Bingham said. “We walk around here and say, ‘You know, this would be really neat.’ And, we suggest it. Then, the next time we come out here, it’s finished and you think, ‘Wow, that works ... but, how about we try this?’ At some point, I’m sure, they’re going to tell us to stop coming out.”

PATH TO COMPLETION

The goal is to open play by November, but Parker is quick to say — borrowing a line from Orson Welles — no rounds will be played before the nine’s time.

“The worst thing you can do is open up a course for play before it is ready,” Parker said. “You end up with more trouble than you had before.

“A lot will go into it. How much rain will we get? We still have to lay water and power lines for the course and the homes being built. We’re ahead of schedule, but we’re not going to go before we’re ready.”

Greens are still being shaped — the contours of each level meticulously measured to ensure proper drainage — and Parker said 20 weeks of water and intense attention will be paid to the greens and fairways by a hand-picked crew exclusively assigned to the new nine.

The large lake on No. 7 — with a peninsula extending out into the middle to house the tee boxes — needs to be shored and filled. Natural grasses cultivated along the fairways. Cart paths poured.

The clatter of heavy equipment and the dusty swirl kicked up from bulldozer treads testify to the work being done and the work that awaits.

But, the outline is obviously in place, and Bingham can’t help picturing the end result in the midst of the mayhem.

“Every course has one or two holes that you remember,” he said. “There is always one, maybe two holes that stick with you after your done. But, out here, when this is all finished, I don’t think there will be just one or two holes — one or two ‘storybook’ holes — that you’ll remember. I think there’ll be nine.”

It’s not hard to imagine.

