

TRINITAS GOLF COURSE- SILENT NO MORE

April 1, 2007 magazine article in NCGA Golf Magazine and posted on Trinitas website

The buzz in the golf industry is all about a golf course in the Sierra foothills that flew so far under the radar no one knew of its existence. And now everyone wants to be a part of it.



Trinitas Golf Course, 22 miles east of Stockton just off Hwy. 26, not only created this kind of buzz when word slowly leaked out – it practically set the golf course industry on its collective ear.

How could a masterpiece be built in such secrecy? This seemed impossible. Architects always file their plans and drawings in the public domain. And no golf course construction company ever began construction without insiders knowing about it.

So imagine the surprise of golf executives when they encounter someone who has been to Trinitas. This golfer talks of a view of the High Sierra peaks almost from Tahoe to Yosemite, and a golf course that fits so perfectly into the land that it looks like it has always been there.

Jaws drop to the floor. The course is already up? Yes, for a couple of years. But it hasn't opened yet. Later this summer.

Then they hear this course has an advanced, computerized irrigation system. How could this be? There must be some reason for all the secrecy.

The answer is actually pretty simple. There was no architect. There was no construction company.

Huh?

“You might say God built it,” Mike Nemea explains. “The land was that good. The golf course was always there. We just kind of grew some grass.”

Mike who?

Mike Nemee. He practically did the whole thing all by himself. Others with talent and expertise eventually came along, only because they wanted to be part of this project, not to have their signature or tag attached.

Nemee is the first to admit he is a complete outsider. He has absolutely no experience in the golf business, never had any interest in golf course architecture or construction. He bought the land, an old cattle ranch, because there were olive trees and he thought it would be a good place to set up an olive oil business. Which he did.

Then one day he decided to build a couple of small golf holes around an orchard on the property. He invited a friend, Gary Reiff, who had built him a putting green in his old back yard, to have a look. Reiff is a golf construction guy who built Lockeford Springs GC nearby. His eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw this property. He told Nemee he had never seen land so perfect for a golf course.

Nemee played golf in high school and college, but he describes himself as nothing but a six-handicapper and he had no money to build a golf course.

But he read a book, *Golf Course Architecture*, by Michael Hurdzan, which explains how to build a course. He had an aerial photograph taken of the property and went on vacation to Italy. One day in Rome he looked at that aerial photo, saw the creeks and natural drainage and began doodling a hole. The next day he drew another hole. Soon he had drawings of 18 holes; remarkably professional for a guy who claims no artistic talent.

Creeks and natural drainage are accentuated by cobblestone gathered from the property.



Back home, invigorated, Nemee bought two bulldozers and a bellyscraper from a friend whose business went defunct. Nemee had never operated machinery like this, but he learned, and graded the land on his own. Utilizing native materials, Nemee was able to harvest sand and cobblestone on the property. Once he started the work, a miracle of what could only be called synchronistic confluence began.

Reiff brought in an irrigation guy, Kyle Ryerson. He walked the site and laid out the irrigation. Nemeo told him, "You spec it out and I'll install it." Ryerson agreed that Nemeo could dig the trenches and lay out the pipe.

Ryerson brought in Rain Bird, which suggested a high-tech system for irrigation that would fit his vision. It's all computerized, operable by a handheld device similar to a Palm Pilot. The system talks to the weather station and the control stations.

Ryerson also brought in Lloyd Zastre, a well-known golf course shaper. Zastre told him he had quite a canvas here, but he could make it a Picasso. He did.

George Kelley, who developed Stevinson Ranch GC, brought an agronomist, Mark Logan, to Nemeo. Logan believes in old school agronomy with minimal chemicals. Logan was handed the reins to specify climate appropriate turf grasses and playing surfaces that require less fertilizer and maintenance. He helped Nemeo plant TifSport2 Bermuda.

All these guys knew Nemeo had no money. They just wanted to be part of this thing, and charged him by the hour. At one point Nemeo trimmed all the century-old oaks on the land and sold the firewood for money.

The 17th green plays over a creek.



It took seven years for the vision of Nemeo and his creative friends to become reality. No bureaucrats, no beancounters, hardly any organization. Just the confluence of a vision.

"I never wanted to build a turnstile daily-fee golf course," Nemeo said. "From the beginning I wanted to put the soul of golf back into the experience."

Champions Tour pro Bob Eastwood is another friend of Nemeo's. He played the course and told Nemeo to soften it up a bit. It was fabulous, but the average golfer would have a heck of a time playing it.

Nemee did, but from the beginning Nemee had a tournament course, a stadium course in mind. One time a few years ago Nemee walked the Plantation Course at Kapalua the day after The Mercedes Championship, and felt every golfer should be able to live that kind of PGA Tour experience. That was his business model. Included at Trinitas is a jumbotron by the 18th green, so golfers can see themselves up there as the tour guys do.

Nemee is a devout Catholic. “Trinitas” is Latin for “of the Trinity,” as in the Holy Trinity. Everything at Trinitas is done in threes – like three-pronged bunkers, a digit three in every hole yardage and three distinct hole locations on each green.

Three is the theme of the golf course. It travels through that many stages. The first six holes are oak woodlands, the second six transitions to links golf and the final six holes are cape-style golf. The third hole is the star of the course, a 153-yard par 3 with the tee on the highest point of land, offering spectacular views. The hole plays significantly downhill to a peninsula green surrounded by water, all beautifully framed by old oaks. The water is separated into three ponds by ever-present cobblestones, harvested from the land.

“Trinitas has a terrific set of par 3s,” management and golf consultant Bob Fagan explained. “The third hole is one of the top short par 3s in California and possibly beyond.”

The 17th hole, a 163-yard par 3, is likely the first golf hole in the world to have a green built over a creek. The green runs over and to the left and right of the creek, with an hourglass stem planted on a bridge over the water. The final hole is a demanding uphill 593-yard par 5 with stadium seating on the left which resembles the 18th hole at the Olympic Club.

Nemee still kind of shakes his head at the way the whole thing came together from nowhere.

“God built it,” was his only explanation.

The buzz is about to get a lot louder.

This is the first installment of a three-part series on Trinitas. The golf course will open for play in late July. For more information, please visit www.trinitasgolf.com

National award-winning golf writer Ron Salsig is a contributing writer for NCGA Golf.