

TRINITAS – GOLF'S FIELD OF DREAMS

By Bob Fagan

If the fictional Ray Kinsella character played by Kevin Costner, and his Iowa baseball diamond defined baseball's "field of dreams" in the movie of the same name, then Mike Nemee and the Trinitas Golf Club outside of Stockton, California are golf's real-life counterparts. "Build it and they will come" was the mysterious voice whispering in Kinsella's ear. Founder, developer, and course designer Nemee must have heard the same message. Writing about the Trinitas Golf Club is a fascinating and unusual story with easily three different story lines; an unlikely course, built by a most unlikely person, with an unusual business model poised to succeed. And yes, Trinitas is Latin meaning "of the Trinity" – it seems that almost everything about Trinitas is composed of threes.

By way of introduction, Trinitas is an 18-hole golf course about to open this summer near Valley Springs, an easy twenty-minute drive northeast of Stockton, California in the beautiful foothills of the Gold Country. It has golfers who have heard about it buzzing with anticipation, but more of that later.

Picture this. The year is 2000. You are a partner in a successful commercial carpet cleaning business and own heavy equipment liquidation and refurbishing business as well. You are thirty years old and your wife, a year younger, is a successful CPA in her seventh year of managing an important segment of bank clients for a major international accounting firm. Life is good; you enjoy a spacious 4,600 square foot home with all the amenities.

You played on your high school golf team, but were not quite sharp enough to make the team at St. Mary's College. Your playing resume now indicates that you are a six handicap, pretty good, but hardly world-class. Then you spot a couple of hundred acres of raw land, an old cattle ranch, and a vision comes into your head to build a golf course. Never mind that it is composed of pastureland and olive orchards, and has practically zero drive-by traffic. Hmm, looks like a golf course could fit on the property, you muse, and maybe you could harvest and set up an olive oil business as well. But wait, you have never designed a golf course, let alone built one.

Well, this all describes Mike and Michelle Nemee. Mike was not some dot-commer flushed with cash as some might imagine, but a dynamic entrepreneur nonetheless with big dreams. Nemee sold his suburban abode and convinced Michele to set up home in their olive orchard where they did, in fact, start producing Trinitas Olive Oil, a truly exceptional offering. Fiddling around, Nemee decided to build a couple of golf holes around the orchard

and invited a friend, Gary Rieff, who had once built a backyard putting green for Nemee and had also constructed the nearby Lockeford Springs Golf Club, to come see his new property. As Mike says, "his eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw this property." Rieff's message was that he had never seen land so perfect for a golf course. Now the golf course seed was germinating with Nemee.

Mike Nemee had an aerial photograph taken of the property and took it with him on vacation to Italy. While in Rome, he looked



at the photo one evening and the vision appeared. He started drawing and one hole followed another. (The drawings, by the way, are far more sophisticated than you can imagine for a person who claims to have no artistic talent.) Never mind that he had no golf architectural background and no money to fund the project. The point was that he could envision the flow of the course and the drainage to make it work.

For most of us, that is where this project would have ended, but Mike Nemee is a dynamic, engaging fellow who has transformed dreams into reality before, easily an "idea per second" entrepreneur. Says long-time friend Brian Murphy, "Mike has always been an entrepreneur and has always done what he said he would do." Once home again, Nemee sprang into action. Nemee purchased two bulldozers and a bellyscraper from a failing business at bargain prices, and then taught himself how to operate them. He began grading the land and

utilizing native materials on site to construct the golf course (no permits were necessary to grade personal farmland). As fortune would have it, the terrain was most all sand, the most premium of golf course materials.

More things fell together for Nemee. His buddy, Gary Rieff, brought in an irrigation expert, Kyle Ryerson, who studied the site and laid out the irrigation. Nemee dug the trenches and would lay the pipe. Ryerson then brought in Rainbird, a vendor about to unveil the world's most advanced irrigation system, one that would wirelessly communicate with weather stations and remotely control all the irrigation in a computerized fashion, the first in America.

Ryerson also introduced Nemee to Lloyd Zastre, an accomplished golf course shaper, who was so impressed with the site; he told Nemee he could turn it into a Picasso. Next, came agronomist, Mark Logan through an introduction from golf course developer, George



Kelley, of Stevinson Ranch golf course fame. Logan believes that a course should be maintained with minimal chemicals and water. He recommended Nemee plant a hybrid Bermuda grass (TiffSport2) on the tees and fairways. (This type of grass requires 60% less water, fertilizer, and maintenance than traditional ryes and bluegrasses.) All these people knew that Nemee had no money and simply charged him for their time by the hour. Mike Nemee is, in addition to other things, an enthusiastic salesman and visionary. These people all shared

Mike's vision and wanted to help be a part of the project. Continuing his resourcefulness, Nemee trimmed all the century-old oaks on the property and sold them as firewood to raise money. (Only eight trees were removed in building the course.)

Now seven years later, Mike and Michelle, still live in less than 1,000 square feet adjacent to the mowers and heavy equipment in the maintenance shed. Visitors to his office and the course share the family's bathroom, which now includes the toys of two-year old son, Sam. It has been quite a sacrifice in comparison to their once more comfortable life style. The important thing is that the course is about to open to play. The property has grown to 440 acres and includes spacious finished homes for both his parents and in-laws. Construction will begin soon on a Clubhouse/Olive Oil tasting room. There will be only 13 lots adjacent to the par-five thirteenth, each featuring magnificent views of the distant Sierra range. Buyers

are eagerly awaiting their late summer release. The golf course unfolds over a sprawling 280 acres, and the Nemees have a gorgeous location reserved on a high promontory to build their own dream

home. Yes, Trinitas will be their home along with all their parents.

Was Trinitas to be just another ordinary golf course, the article would end here, but it's not. Trinitas promises to be an exceptional golf experience and features an "outside the box" business model. This writer was introduced to Mike Nemee more than a year ago by a phone call from the very respected golf professional, George Buzzini, Jr., himself a golf course builder and proprietor. He said, "Bob, you have to see this place, it's fantastic! It will be a world-class golf course." Such words coming from one not easily impressed, who also could be viewed as a competitor, quickly caught my attention. Others have arrived at the same conclusion. Veteran fellow golf writer, Ron Salsig, calls the place "jaw dropping" and has written that the experience has left him "with a starry-eyed look and a wonder so deep that words can scarcely describe".

So what about the course? First, it is scenic, bordering on spectacular, also peaceful and quiet – a perfect anecdote for a busy lifestyle. The layout is composed of two distinct topographies, a rolling, sometimes hilly terrain dotted with live oak and olive trees, and a second flat plains area built to a links motif. The course plays in three sections (remember it's Trinitas). You begin in the trees, progress to the links areas, and conclude with a combina-



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tion of the two. Mike Neme is a devout Catholic and continues his expression of threes to include many features on the course. The layout has three lakes on the course, many of the bunkers have three lobes, and every green has three hole position areas. The yardage of every hole even ends in a three, though if my math is correct, the total yardage of the course cannot then end in a three. (Wonder if he thought of that?) Make no mistake; Neme will incorporate that numerology into nearly everything here and about to unfold at Trinitas.

Mike Neme is a very passionate, enthusiastic, dynamic individual and his course reflects that. He states that he wants to return passion to the game. While seeming like a fluffy, grandiose statement, it is genuine and is indeed reflected in the character of the golf course. This is not a cookie-cutter layout. It is interesting, at times bordering on quirky, but as such really does evoke a passion. How quirky? There are several holes that curve against the slope of the ground, but they are playable. The wide, but shallow eighteenth green is severely sloped and if the green is as fast as the others a ball dropped on the left side could roll off the right side of the putting surface more than ninety feet away. The seventeen green has a creek running underneath it. While unusual, it is not totally unique until you realize that it bisects the putting surface in the middle where the depth of the green is only twelve paces deep! Novel? Yes. Goofy? No. This course has personality!

Always one to utilize his available resources, Neme found an abundance of cobblestone on the property and had it all cemented to form the borders of the creeks that meander

throughout the property and are featured on 16 of the 18 holes. In all, there are two and one half miles of rockwork that cost a million dollars per mile to construct. There are also several bunkers and waste areas that feature this extensive rock work. Love it or not, this extensive rockwork is a unique part of the course's distinctive personality.

I usually find the term, a "thinking man's golf course" one of the most inane, worthless, and overused terms in golf, but at Trinitas, no matter your skill level, you will have to think your way around and be patient if you hope to score well. The course is not long, currently projected at around 6,800 yards from the tips. With the exception of the stout par-four 473-yard twelfth with its elevated green, the two-shotters are mostly short, some maybe even drivable for the longest hitters. To defend against today's "bombers", Neme often cuts off fairways at certain distances forcing players to either lay-up or attempt heroic carries, increasingly a common tactic among more experienced designers to challenge longer hitters. You will also encounter many gentle, but uneven lies – just enough to keep the good player out of their automatic "dial-it-in" comfort zone when firing at the flags. All the putting surfaces, while actually average in size, play much smaller which really gives the course its challenge. Miss a putting surface, and you will have to draw upon all your skills to recover. There are seldom any flat level putts at Trinitas. Each shot is an adventure.

Make no mistake; Trinitas is a very difficult

golf course, a "wolf in sheep's clothing". There are lots of birdie holes, but most golfers will also leave lots of shots unrealized. However, the putting surfaces are so nicely manicured, the expert putter will be able to "run the table", a tribute to the superb conditioning of the greens. It combines for an exciting match play venue, but a surprisingly stern stroke play one.

Speaking of holes, the quartet of par-threes is outstanding, with the 153-yard drop-shot third being one of the best in California if not beyond. The 593-yard eighteenth may just be the toughest finishing par-five in America – a complete test its entire length. As you review the remainder of the layout, you will discover that Neme has routed it so as to provide complete directional variety, and a nice pacing and flow to boot.

Did Neme have professional architectural advice? Not really. Long-time family friend, Champions Tour player, Bob Eastwood with whom Mike was best of friends with Eastwood's son, Scott, offered some refinements once the grading was finished. It concerned the two back nine par-fives. The advice was simply to open up the landing areas a bit more to make them playable for the average golfer. If the course has a weakness, it is that it is too demanding for the novice or beginning golfer. Actually, it is very playable, but it is also very tough on mistakes. Though there are a minimum of forced carries, the fast, sloping greens, uneven lies, and sometimes-narrow targets make can be very intimidating, but Trinitas is



"California's Tournament Golf Course".

For an investment of a \$50,000 deposit, one secures free golf as a member (you only pay cart fees) for twenty years with no annual dues, minimums, or assessments. At the of twenty years, the deposit amount is returned. For Corporate Memberships, a \$75,000 deposit will secure playing privileges for three people. For a pure golf experience in a pristine unhurried location, in what should become a coveted, prestigious membership, this may be the best offering around.

The course is being set up and marketed as "California's Tournament Golf Course". The fairways are firm and fast as are the silky smooth greens. Rather than finding a glob of mud on your ball like so many area courses, your drives with bound forward just like the PGA TOUR courses you see the pros play on.

Normally, a very challenging golf course designed by an amateur golfer located off the beaten path would face tough odds for survival, but Neme only needs around 13,000 rounds per year to fit his business model. That's roughly a third of what most courses would need to prosper and his tee sheet is already filling up. By restricting play, he feels that he can keep the conditioning and the experience absolutely top shelf. Sounds exciting to me.

So there, you now have the rest of the story why the industry is abuzz with the Trinitas Golf Club. There was no architect, no construction company, but one incredible story. The crusade to Trinitas starts now – golf's new "field of dreams" – be part of it, and tell them "Bob Fagan sent you!"

For further information, call Trinitas Golf Club at 209-887-9150 or visit their website at www.trinitasgolf.com ■

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