The SECRET IN THE PINES

Whispering Pines Golf Club has a high-profile multimillionaire owner, a commendable philanthropic record, and arguably the best course in all of Texas. So why have you never heard of it?

By John Garrity
IT BEGAN AS A struggle between man and beetle. The man was Corby Robertson, Jr., chairman and CEO of Houston-based Natural Resource Partners L.P., a company that manages 26 portfolio companies and controls 5 percent of the coal in the U.S. The beetle was the Pine Bark Beetle, a wood-boring pest of the subfamily Scolytinae.

“In east Texas,” Robertson explains, “any place you don’t mow grows trees.” That includes the 660-acre timber plantation he bought three decades ago, a lakeside tract near the drowsy town of Trinity, an hour north of Houston. “I never harvested it,” he says, “and the forest became very mature. Then the pine bark beetle started eating my trees.” And since the only remedy for bark beetles is the axe, Robertson ordered his staff to start cutting. He had them topple trees and bulldoze narrow swaths, selectively cutting the surrounding forest. He dozed up soil and sand at attractive intervals, smoothing them with a chain drag. He planted the cleared areas with a drought-resistant turfgrass. It took about a year.

“We invented a game we called ‘Olf,’” Robertson continues. “We used a washtub for a hole instead of a rabbit hole.” And here he smiles. “I tell you, it’s a lot easier to hit a washtub. But then we made a mistake. We invited Jay out to look at it.”

“Jay” would be the late Junius Joseph Hebert, winner of the 1960 PGA Championship. Hebert examined the rolling terrain, the sparkling lake, the marshes, and he said, “This a wonderful place. You ought to build some real golf holes.”

STARTING BLOCKS The first tee at Whispering Pines. One panel of raters has named the layout the best course in Texas for five straight years.
Getting the world to recognize Whispering Pines may take a while, thanks to its rural address. “It’s like being at Pine Valley in the 1930s,” says head professional Chris Rowe.

“We’re a secondary, not a primary club, so a member might only play here two or three times a year,” says Eric Fredricksen, the association’s executive director and former tournament director of the Shell Houston Open. “But we have about a 95 percent renewal rate, which speaks volumes about the quality of the golf experience.” On average, Whispering Pines logs only 5,000 rounds per year, distributed over two 15-week seasons. The club closes summer and winter, when the weather in East Texas can be, shall we say, less than ideal.

You will not hear about Whispering Pines from a high-priced P.R. firm or by direct mail. (“We’re not selling homes or property,” Fredricksen says.) And you certainly won’t see the founder and celebrities walking its fairways on the Golf Channel, a la Donald Trump. “If Corby stepped into the golf shop right now, nobody would guess that he owns the place,” says head professional Chris Rowe. “That’s how he is.”

Robertson is no less laid back at his company’s headquarters, which occupy the entire 36th floor of a downtown Houston office tower. But visitors are met with a strong sense of style, from the terracotta warrior that greets you at reception to the antiques and Persian rugs in the furnished corridors. “My wife, Barbara, is the decorator,” Robertson says, stepping into...
his moderately sized corner office. “But she didn’t decorate my messy desk. Don’t give her credit for that.”

Whispering Pines, he concedes, is a product of serendipity, an unforeseeable consequence of his having attended summer camp as a youngster. “I went to Camp Longhorn,” he recalls, “and I earned enough merits to buy a single-shot, bolt-action .22. I was very proud of that achievement, and I really liked the camaraderie of camp life.” He liked it so much that in 1968, while he was still pummeling opposition ballcarriers for Texas, he teamed up with his roommate and future College Football Hall of Fame running back Chris Gilbert to make use of 1,800 acres and an old hunting lodge of his family’s on a chain of lakes constructed by the WPA in the 1930s.

That property, five miles from its present site on Lake Livingston, became Camp Olympia—a renowned summer camp for boys and girls, ages 7-16. The camp now operates 360 days a year, introducing roughly 5,000 Houston fifth graders annually to more than 40 outdoor activities. A thousand of those kids take part in Camp Olympia’s 20-week First Tee programs at adjoining Whispering Pines. “Forty-two years later,” Robertson says, “we’re still loving every minute of it.”

IT WAS IN YEAR TWO that golf came to Camp Olympia in the form of a three-green, nine-fairway course built by Robertson’s father and veteran PGA pro Jackson Bradley. (“The greens stimped at about 2,” Robertson recalls.) Two decades passed before Robertson had to square off with the pine bark beetles. A self-described “sporadic golfer,” he had no more design experience than his dad, but he had learned a thing or two playing roughly half the courses in the Top 100. “My philosophy was to follow the natural features,” he says, sounding like every big-name course plower since Old Tom Morris.

Robertson does not claim design credit for Whispering Pines, although the routing is his. He interviewed several prominent architects before hiring Nicklaus Design’s Williams, in 1998, to stretch the championship length to 7,480 yards, build Tour-quality green complexes and add refinements like the sprawling bunker field on the par-5 second hole. “Chet did a lovely piece of work there, digging a big hole for a waste area,” Robertson says. “It’s one of the more beautiful holes in Texas.”

Getting the world to recognize that fact may take a while, thanks to Whispering Pines’ rural address. Even Rowe, who spent 10 years as an assistant pro at Colonial, had his doubts when he first drove through sun-baked Trinity in August 2005 to interview for the head pro position. “But then you see the course. Wow! Now I wouldn’t trade jobs with anyone,” he says. “It’s like being at Pine Valley in the 1930s.”

Others suspect Robertson is emulating Augusta National. There’s no Magnolia Lane at Whispering Pines, but the entrance road takes arriving golfers on a scenic loop through the woods, around a cove and past a cluster of four-bedroom cottages reminiscent of Augusta’s famous “cabins.” Barbara Robertson, who designed the clubhouse interior and decorated each themed bedroom, has filled the spaces with masculine art and tchotchkes. In further homage to green-jacket land, Corby Robertson has begun work on a par-3 course. “When I first joined, I thought the course and the club were as good as they could get,” says Houston attorney Dan Spain. “But every season they find ways to improve.”

Robertson smiles at that kind of talk, but deflects the praise. “Give the credit to Caney Creek and Mother Nature,” he says. “I just had the good sense not to mess it up.”

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