

A CELEBRATION



Walt Disney's vision of the city of the future, as first seen in the Carousel of Progress attraction at Disneyland, has come to life.

Celebration is a master-planned community created by the Disney Corp. on Disney-owned real estate in Central Florida, not 10 minutes from the Walt Disney World Resort—where the Carousel of Progress now is a fixture in Tomorrowland.

And the centerpiece of the small town, a bit of Disney's Main Street USA in reality, is the acclaimed Celebration Golf Club—which was designed by the renowned team of Robert Trent Jones Sr. and Jr.

"There is no question that the golf course is a marquee for the community," said Gene Garrote, general manager at Celebration Golf Club, which opened in 1996—two years after the city was established. "The club is used by the residents for any number of special events.

"But people come from all over to play the golf course because of its great reputation. The Disney name and the fame of the Joneses obviously draw people. The strength of character in this layout is a wonderful celebration to the game of golf."

However, Disney no longer owns the course and have sold off Celebration's Market Street area downtown as development of the community winds down.

The Celebration Co., a Disney subsidiary, sold the club in September 2003 to G.S. Golf Partners LLC of Tampa for \$6.5 million. Among the C.S. Golf partnership are David Creighton Sr. and his son, Adam Creighton, who both played in the National Hockey League.

They purchased a course that has been rated No. 12 in the state by Florida Golf News.

Like the city of Celebration and the Walt Disney World Resort, the course was carved out of the Florida wetlands. The Joneses crafted a magnificent layout that has the feel of a parkland course in some areas and a links layout in others.

The course is a real challenge from the back tees, measuring

6,772 yards, with a United States Golf Assn. rating of 73.0 and a slope of 135—which has helped the club land such events as the 1999 USGA Senior Amateur Qualifier, the 1999 LPGA Section Championship, the 1999-2001 Oldsmobile Scramble National Finals, the 2000 Central Florida Amateur Championship, a 2002 U.S. Senior Open Qualifier and the 2003 Florida State Public Links Championship.

The Joneses' stated aim when building the course was that "every hole should be a hard par and an easy bogey," but with five sets of tees, including a beginners' loop that measures 2,247 yards, Celebration Golf Club is a treat for golfers of all abilities.

WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE

Water is the primary feature on the course, which is dotted by 25 lakes that come into play on every hole except No. 2. From the two back sets of tees, there is water to clear on 10 holes, but none of the carries are excessive for golfers who are playing the correct tees for their ability.

"The water is definitely in play on most holes," Garrote said. "There is water to clear or deal with on all the par-threes, but the shots are not impossible. We're not talking about island greens.

"Throughout the course, there are challenges, but you have the opportunity to play a safe shot on every hole. It's a fair course and it's fun to play. People come here to play the course and most of them come back to play again."

The most challenging section of the course is No. 7 through No. 9, all strong par-fours that once represented one of the best finishes in Florida until the nines were reversed two years ago.

No. 7 is the most difficult hole on the course, measuring 442 yards from the back tees. The lake to the right of the tee does not really come into play, but there are six bunkers to negotiate on the way to the elevated green.

"We switched the nines because the first hole (now No. 10) played directly into the sun in the morning, and the 18th hole, with the clubhouse in the background, is a much better finishing hole than No. 9," Garrote said.

FLORIDA STYLE



Photos by D2 Productions Murphy-Scully

"No. 7 plays longer than the listed distance because it always plays into the wind and it's a bit of a blind shot because of the mounding on the fairway. You have to give it a poke off the tee, but you still might have 150 yards or more left into the green.

"Nos. 8 and 9 also are good par-fours, even though they are not especially long (390 and 379 from the back), so it's a good stretch to finish off your front nine."

While most of the course has an open, park-like feeling, that changes dramatically on the most scenic part of the course—holes 13 through 15—which snake through a serene wetlands area. These holes are framed by stands of native pine, magnolia, oak and weeping willow trees.

WARNING: GATORS PART OF THE SCENERY

This is where you are most likely to see Celebration's wildlife—including alligators, boar, wild turkey, deer and armadillo.

Not long ago, Garrote had a job that was right down Steve Erwin's alley.

"We had a 9-foot alligator out there and we had to have him moved," Garrote said. "It's fun to see the wildlife, but you have to be a little careful around the lakes because it can be dangerous with the gators.

"You get a good taste of the wetlands on the back nine. Rocky Raccoon is liable to come out of the woods to see what you have in your golf bag."

The 13th hole is a 198-yard par-three that plays over a lake to a green guarded by bunkers and trees on both sides of the green, which slopes from back to front.

"No. 14 is one of the few straightaway holes, with everything in front of you," Garrote said of the 382-yard par-four. "What you see is what you get. But there is water to the right of the green and it's a small target. If you miss the green, it's a difficult chip.

"I love the 15th hole. It's a short (335 yards) risk-reward dogleg right. Big hitters can reach it or get close, but it gets narrow up near the green. There is a tree in the bunker on the left side and that seems to attract a lot of balls. But it's a possible birdie hole.

"That's a real good stretch of holes because it gives you some different golf experiences."

The finish didn't lose anything by the switching of the nines at Celebration, because the final three holes also are of a high caliber—the 211-yard par-three 16th, the 392-yard par-four 17th and especially the 566-yard par-five 18th.

All require a tee shot over the water.

"The drive on No. 18 is very deceptive because you can't see much of the driving area, but once you get there you can see that there is plenty of room," Garrote said. "It's a true, three-shot par-five for most players because of the distance and it always plays into the wind.

"The trees on the right can come into play and there is another lake on that side up near the green. When we switched the nines, we knew we would still have a strong finish because that is such a spectacular hole on which to end a great course."

PLENTY MORE GOLF WHERE THAT CAME FROM

Celebration Golf Club certainly can match the golf available on its five Disney cousins (the Palm, the Magnolia, Lake Buena Vista, Osprey Ridge and Eagle Ridge) only a few miles away, and there is plenty more exceptional golf in the area.

Among the best are Falcon's Fire Golf Club in Kissimmee, Southern Dunes Golf and Country Club in Haines City, Mystic Dunes Golf Club in Kissimmee, the New Course at Grand Cypress Resort in Orlando, the Legacy Club at Alaqua Lakes in Longwood and ChampionsGateGolf Resort in Orlando.

All are within easy driving distance of the Walt Disney World Resorts.

The exquisite Celebration Hotel, where the Super Bowl-champion Tampa Bay Buccaneers stayed while holding training camp at Disney's Wide World of Sports, offers golf packages for play at Celebration Golf Club.

There you can see a Disney dream come true without setting foot in the Magic Kingdom.