



A Course Takes a Brilliant Step Backwards

by Lawrence Certain
Photographs by Johnson Pictures, Inc.

There are times when the most forward-focused actions are best determined after recalling and reflecting on one's beginnings. From there can come the freshest of perspectives. Such is the case in the rebirth of a golf course on St. Simons Island's northernmost end.

Opened as The Hampton Club in August of 1989 (named for the vast Hampton Plantation that operated there during the Island's antebellum era), the course swiftly gained player praise and industry awards for a design that included the four astonishing island holes that remain its sensational signature. The author of the design was the late Joe Lee, revered still for his innovations in course architecture that married layout to land in wondrous ways.

The course owners were the same then as now: MMI Hotel Group, owners of The King and Prince Beach & Golf Resort. In October, following a \$3.6-million transformation that touched virtually

every yard, the course reopened as the reshaped, restored and renamed King and Prince Golf Course.

Over the last twenty years, the course had done what all golf courses do beneath the traffic of over 20,000 annual rounds of play. It aged. Greens shrank in size, trees grew, fairways migrated and bunker depths decreased. Nothing too terrible, mind you, but nonetheless a distancing from the brilliant beauty and playability of Joe Lee's original course shaping and sightlines that the owners wished to see recaptured for the enjoyment of golfers for the next twenty years.

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"It's simply a matter of unfailing stewardship," says Rick Mattox, the course and club's General Manager for all of its twenty years of operation. "For Mike Sturdivant, Earle Jones, Gaines Sturdivant and the MMI management team, providing the finest possible golf experience for our members, Resort guests and golfers has always been the highest priority. I can't recall a single time when they did not eagerly invest in changes, small and large, that would result in more memorable and enjoyable play."

The process of restoring what would become today's King and Prince Golf Course began in 2008 with a million-dollar improvement to the course irrigation systems. As work progressed below the ground, MMI began the process of assembling the team that would create the restoration above it. Selected as course architect was Billy Fuller, founder of Billy Fuller Golf Design, Atlanta, whose credentials include five years as course superintendent at Augusta National and another fifteen as a designer and senior agronomist for Cupp Design, Inc., where he worked on the creation of over 130 courses in North America and Europe.

"I was honored to be selected by MMI for the restoration of their Joe Lee course," said Fuller. "Of the over 200 courses he designed, this has to be one of his proudest accomplishments. The owner's goal was to preserve Joe Lee's original course design while making the upgrades to modern grasses and other physical (continues)



OPPOSITE PAGE: The dramatic 13th hole at the King and Prince Golf Course—where drives from the back tees must carry the marsh—is one of the course's four signature island holes, accessed by a network of elevated cart bridges. **TOP:** The green of the 14th hole of the King and Prince Golf Course looking back down the fairway. This challenging Par 5 is a classic Joe Lee test of skill. **ABOVE:** At the course's all-new practice facility golfers can hone their skills under true game-like conditions, including putting, sand wedge and fairway bunker shots and, on the driving range, target greens with pins and traps.

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modifications that twenty years of advances in ball and club technology demand." With Joe Lee's original design plans as a constant compass, Fuller set about the challenges of a re-design that melded restoration of the course's classic elements with the gentle additions of new and exciting ones.

Chosen to physically bring the restoration project to life was Medalist Golf Company who is considered to be among the top golf course contractors in the industry and who handled construction of the Ocean Forest and Frederica golf courses for Sea Island Company.

Following the closing of the course in March of this year and the ensuing six months of intensive construction work, new grasses and meticulous grooming, the King and Prince Golf Course opened for play in October to the immense satisfaction of its owners. "It's everything we



The course's gracious Clubhouse offers a full pro shop, dining, club storage and men's and ladies' locker facilities.

had envisioned it to be and much more," stated Gaines Sturdivant, President of MMI. "Thanks to the original design of Joe Lee and the work of Billy Fuller, Rick Mattox, our greens superintendent Chuck Moore and everyone on the project team, the course has resumed its place among the finest golf experiences anywhere."

To look down the fairways of the new King and Prince Golf Course is a delight visually, but to

look down at its turf surfaces is a study in golf course agronomy at its most advanced and specialized. "The course now uses a family of four new grasses," explained Rick Mattox. "Like the greens at courses such as East Lake and the TPC, ours are now Mini-verde, a newer bermuda type with no grain and an ultra-smooth and truer putting surface. The green collars are planted with Tifsport Bermuda; the tees, fairways and rough are planted with Celebration Bermuda; and the bunker banks have Empire Xoysia.

These grasses all present different textures and shades of green giving the course a new beauty and a real wow factor."

While it was the green complexes that underwent the most dramatic changes in the course restoration, other enhancements included the addition of strategically positioned fairway bunkers, subtle modifications to fairway shapes and mounds, enlarged and laser-leveled tees,

cart path improvements, a fleet of new golf carts and new tee complexes which offer five distinctively different length challenges for golfers, from the longest (Old Ironsides) that plays to 6,462 yards, to the junior tees (Azalea) that play to 4,929 yards. A refurbishment of the Clubhouse, with its dining room serving lunch daily, pro shop and locker facilities, is also underway.

Complementing these improvements is the all-new practice facility that architect Billy Fuller considers, "the real icing on the cake." Here, golfers can practice with every club in their bag under true game-like conditions, including putting, sand wedge and fairway bunker shots and, on the driving range, target greens with pins and traps.

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After Hampton Club members enjoyed their first opportunity to play the new course as part of the grand opening events on October 10, the praise for the physical transformation was enthusiastic. "We could not wait to play our beloved golf course," remarked Chuck Cottone, member, secretary of the Hampton Club Men's Golf Association and a property owner at Hampton Plantation since 1987. "There were some member con-

cerns early on, but that's to be expected in situations like this where dramatic changes are planned. The credit goes to Rick Mattox and the regular meetings and tours he hosted for the members that kept us involved and informed every step of the way. The process was an amazing revelation for members. We're grateful for the immense amount of work that was done and for the extraordinarily gorgeous results. The name change makes perfect sense, and the restored course makes us all proud to be members."

The King and Prince Golf Course is open and extends an invitation to come discover the experience of playing its 18 restored holes. To make tee times, or for information on the Club's various membership offerings, call (912) 634-0255.

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