



Charlotte

CAN *Queen City* GOLF
CONTINUE TO GROW?

By Craig Distl

The year was 1979 and golf certainly wasn't hot in Charlotte. The city had just lost its PGA Tour event, the Kemper Open, and new course construction was nonexistent.

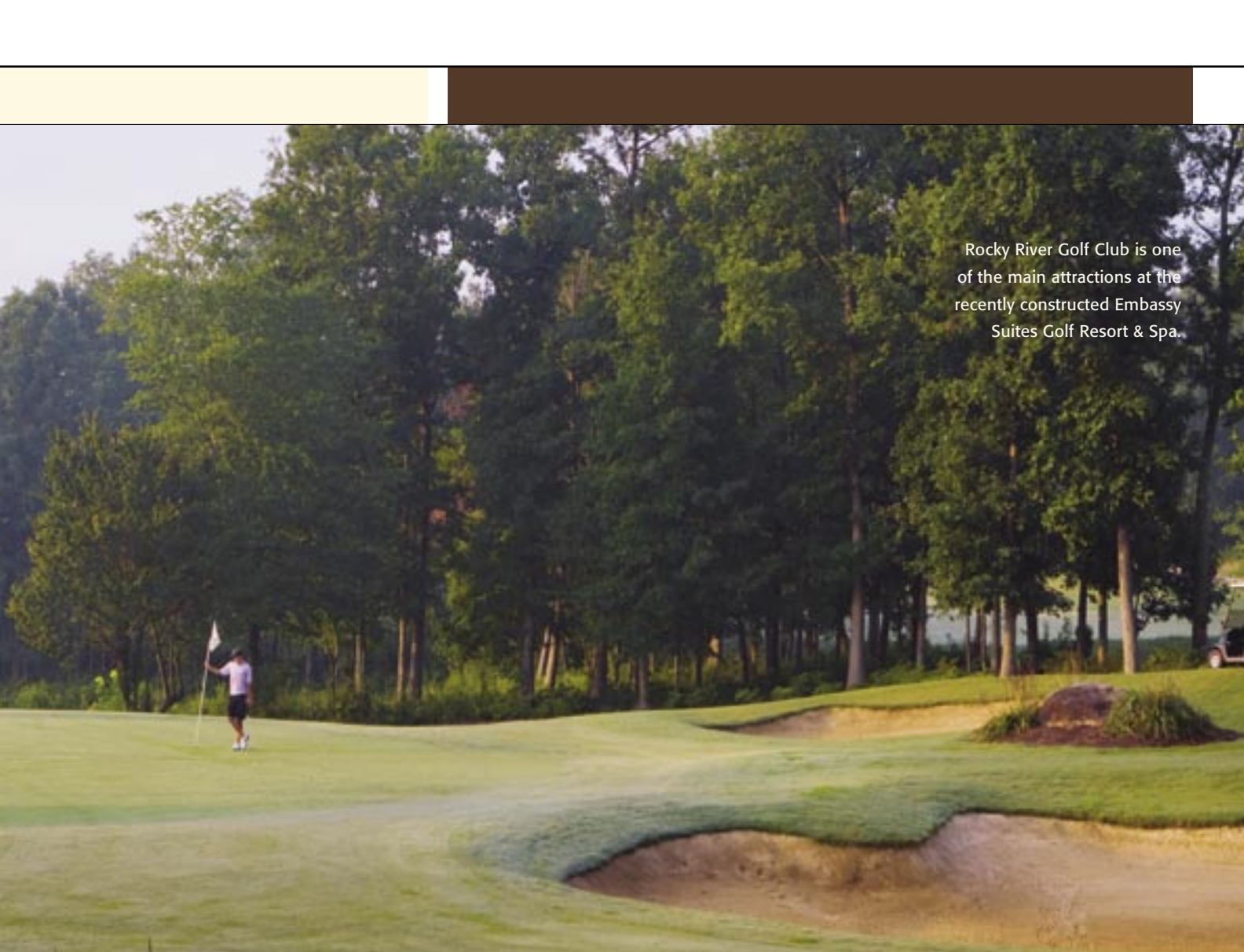
Established, private courses like Charlotte Country Club, Myers Park Country Club, Carmel Country Club, and Quail Hollow served the well-heeled. But the public golfer often made trips to outlying areas like Kings Mountain, Pageland, S.C., and even Pinehurst to get in a quality round.

Ron Green Jr., the *Charlotte Observer* golf writer, was a youngster working part-time at Quail Hollow when the PGA Tour departed.

"From a golf perspective, a lot of people were really, really disappointed," he says.

It was hard to imagine then, but a couple of decades later, Charlotte was in the midst of one of the biggest golf turnarounds any city has ever experienced.

The fuse was lit in the 1990s, when strong economic growth led to course construction on a grand scale. Designers such as Arnold Palmer, Rees Jones, Dan Maples, P.B. Dye, and Tom Jackson built no fewer than a dozen quality Queen City layouts in that decade. Many of these courses were either public or semiprivate — the average golfer suddenly had "at home" options.



Rocky River Golf Club is one of the main attractions at the recently constructed Embassy Suites Golf Resort & Spa.

Area Boom

NO SLOWING DOWN

The boom was expected to taper off in the new millennium. Instead, it has mirrored Charlotte's vibrant economy. Jack Nicklaus crafted one signature course, the Club at Longview, while his company built another, The Palisades. Meanwhile, Springfield Golf Club, a high-end daily-fee course, popped up south of town in Fort Mill, S.C., and Greg Norman added a wonderful private course, The Point, north of town on Lake Norman.

And it wasn't just course construction that fueled Charlotte's golf boom. All aspects of the industry kicked into high gear, led by the PGA Tour's return in 2003 with the Wachovia

Championship on a Tom Fazio-renovated Quail Hollow. Meanwhile, two professional mini-tours took root in Charlotte, Dana Rader established herself as a Top 100 instructor through her golf school at Ballantyne Resort, and amateurs found a circuit of their own, the Charlotte-based Amateur Golf Tour, which provides a tour experience to regular golfers across the country.

"For the longest time, Charlotte was sort of sitting there and didn't have a huge presence, golf-wise. Obviously, the Wachovia Championship just transformed everything," Green says. "We went from not having a PGA Tour event to having one of the six or

eight most important weeks of the year on the PGA Tour."

OPTIONS ABOUND

Nowadays, public access golf is readily available in the area, and the sheer number of good courses keeps rates affordable. Whether you're a Queen City resident or a visitor, the options are plentiful.

The two biggest newsmakers in public golf in 2007 were Birkdale Golf Club and Rocky River Golf Club.

Birkdale, which opened in 1997 in Huntersville, was sold to the IRI Group, which operates the popular Carolina Trail, a



Rocky River GC



Quail Hollow



Ballantyne Resort

consortium of daily-fee courses in the Charlotte area. Birkdale was billed as a country club experience for the public golfer when it opened — an Arnold Palmer championship layout with an impressive clubhouse and all the amenities. It now joins Highland Creek and The Tradition to give the Carolina Trail three excellent venues on its “Northern Trail,” while the “Southern Trail” remains solid with The Divide, Charlotte Golf Links, and Waterford Golf Club in Rock Hill, S.C.

“In my younger years, Charlotte public golf was really limited. You basically had McDonalds, Wendy’s, and Burger King to pick from. All of a sudden you had Highland Creek, and you had Ballantyne, and Rocky River, and The Tradition,” Green says. “What you learned was with golf courses, just like businesses, people go to the ones that give you the best value and the best course. Places like Birkdale elevated the standard of public golf courses.”

Rocky River Golf Club made a big splash in 2007 when its owner, the city of Concord, constructed a \$65 million hotel/convention center/spa adjacent to the course. The property has been re-branded as the Embassy Suites Golf Resort & Spa, playing off the strength of the Dan Maples-designed golf course and its proximity to Lowe’s Motor Speedway and Concord Mills, the state’s largest shopping mall.

“We took what was here and added the complete package,” says resort general manager Terry Crawford. “This is the only facility in the United States where you have

a golf course, hotel, spa, convention center, NASCAR speedway and a major shopping mall all together. There’s a lot to do here.”

Ballantyne is Charlotte’s “oldest” resort, opening back in 1998. The resort is known for its high-end hotel and the aforementioned Dana Rader Golf School. It features a very good golf course that will get even better, thanks to an upcoming renovation.

“We’re renovating some holes, re-doing tee boxes, and making them larger,” says Rader. “The office park is growing out here, and we’ve added two 10-story buildings on the 14th fairway. It’s going to add a tremendous look to the golf course. We’re very proud of the character of the course and how it has grown in, and we want to continue to make it a better product.”

Additionally, Rader has opened a second golf school location about 50 minutes north of Charlotte at Statesville Country Club. Longtime instructor Jay Reid heads up that operation, which is open to all golfers even though Statesville Country Club is private.

Three other great semiprivate golf options in the Charlotte market are Skybrook Golf Club, Olde Sycamore Golf Plantation, and Verdict Ridge Golf & Country Club.

Skybrook is situated northeast of the city on a rolling, forested tract of land reminiscent of the North Carolina mountains. Architect John LaFoy used the existing terrain to build a strong course with plenty of ups and downs, and consistently top-notch playing conditions.

Olde Sycamore is also known for excel-

lent playing conditions, thanks to a husband-and-wife partnership. Superintendent Mark Burnette keeps the Tom Jackson-designed layout plush and manicured; his wife, Tina, is the club’s horticulturist, in charge of landscaping at the southeast Charlotte course.

“Come out in April and you might think you’re in Augusta,” says owner B.V. Belk. “She does a wonderful job.”

Verdict Ridge, located on the west side of Lake Norman, was created by former Charlotte mayor Eddie Knox. Knox designed much of the layout himself and got the name from his many years as a lawyer. Verdict Ridge is a challenging layout, with a good deal of elevation change. Several holes require approach shots to carry wetlands, and the greens have a good deal of undulation.

PRIVATE CLUBS KEEP PACE

Interestingly, the daily-fee golf boom impacted the private sector, prompting many country clubs to update their offerings in order to compete. Greensboro architect Kris Spence, known for restoring Donald Ross courses, has been busy in recent years in the Charlotte market.

Spence has redesigned two courses, Cowans Ford Country Club and the North Course at Raintree Country Club. And he’s renovated four others: Gaston Country Club, Carolina Golf Club, Cedarwood Country Club, and River Hills Country Club on Lake Wylie.

“The demographics of Charlotte and the



Olde Sycamore Golf Plantation



Dana Rader Golf School – Statesville CC



Charlotte CC

amount of young people in their 30s and 40s that want to enjoy golf as a recreational hobby is pretty high,” says Spence. “We’ve certainly seen substantial increases in membership growth at all the clubs we’ve worked with. They’ve gone from looking to fill membership rosters to having waiting lists.”

Even though it never has a problem with filling its membership, Charlotte Country Club is also undergoing a renovation. The venerable club, designed by Donald Ross in 1910, is expected to reopen in November following a complete revamping by noted architect Ron Prichard of Philadelphia.

“We got our hands on some aerial photographs from 1938, and there was a pretty good feeling to restore the golf course more to its original Ross character, with calibration to today’s technology,” says Bill Hall, director of golf. “Ron is really a purist and has a pretty lengthy career in restoring and working on original Ross courses. This golf course is going to be special.”

Hall notes that 31 bunkers visible in the aerial photos disappeared over the years and will be restored. Prichard is also reworking the final three holes — which were not original Ross holes — following a renovation by Robert Trent Jones Sr. in the 1960s.

The renovation will be showcased in 2010 as Charlotte Country Club celebrates its centennial by hosting the U.S. Women’s Amateur. With the “new” course able to tip out at 7,400 yards with a par of 71, Hall hopes more big events could be on the club’s horizon. “We would love to host a

Walker Cup or USGA Amateur ... events like those,” says Hall.

Other private clubs that have undergone recent renovations include Providence Country Club, Myers Park Country Club, and Pine Island Country Club.

CONTINUED GROWTH?

Now that the first decade of the 21st century is drawing to a close, the question for Charlotte golf remains the same as it was a decade earlier: Can the boom continue?

Many people think it will.

Spence is aware of a few proposals being floated for new courses, and added that he’s been approached more than once. “There’s been chatter about a couple of courses,” he says. “If Charlotte continues to grow at its current pace, there’s going to be room for more courses. Established clubs are healthy and comfortable where they’re at, but more people are moving in and looking for alternatives.”

The Observer’s Green isn’t sure if more courses will be built. Instead, he sees the boom continuing in another manner. He notes that two PGA Tour players — Johnson Wagner and Brendon De Jonge — have relocated to Charlotte, while Jason Gore is eyeing a move to Lake Norman. And agent Thomas Parker, who represents Charles Howell III and others, is also based in the Queen City.

“I think it just keeps going forward,” says Green. “The Wachovia will hopefully stay here for a while; I know they have a con-

tract through 2010, and people have taken to it and embraced it. We keep hearing maybe there’s a PGA Championship down the road. That would be great. If there’s a big step to be made, that would be it.”

Kym Hougham, tournament director for the Wachovia Championship, has also heard the rumors about a potential PGA Championship at Quail Hollow. That would certainly showcase Charlotte to the golf world, but he points out that a certain golfer named Tiger Woods did a pretty good job of that himself earlier this year.

“Any time you get the best players in the world to come to your city, it’s certainly going to make the world take notice,” says Hougham. “Having Tiger win the 2007 Wachovia Championship brought national and international acclaim to the city of Charlotte.”

Craig Distl is a Charlotte-based freelance writer.

WHEN YOU GO

When planning a Charlotte-area trip, keep in mind that many of the courses mentioned in this article are CGA member clubs. For more on these and other CGA member clubs — including course and slope ratings — go to www.carolinagolf.org and click on the “Member Club Web Pages” section.

Photographs courtesy of the courses; Photograph courtesy of the Dana Rader Golf Schools.