

St. Charles Park District's Pottawatomie Golf Course Wins State Parks & Recreation Award

St. Charles residents, and certainly St. Charles golfers, have long regarded the Pottawatomie Golf Course as the crowning jewel of the Fox River. Now a state agency has corroborated that view by honoring the St. Charles Park District with a coveted award for renovations undertaken to update facilities and improve the overall golfing experience at the 9-hole public course. The Illinois Parks and Recreation Association will highlight the park district's achievement during the annual Illinois Association of Park Districts/Illinois Parks and Recreation Association awards luncheon to be held on January 25, 2008, at the Hyatt Regency in Chicago.

The IAPD/IPRA "Outstanding Facility & Parks Award" recognizes public agencies for their exceptional and unique achievements in design and development. Competing in the Renovation Category in Award Division IV (agencies with a last known Equalized Assessed Valuation of \$1 billion or more), the St. Charles Park District's nomination scored the highest total number of points among those entries submitted statewide in that division and category. To take top honors, the park district bested Lockport Township Park District for their Challenge Fitness Center; Northbrook Park District for their Techny Prairie Park and Fields; and Downers Grove Park District for their Doerhoefer Park.

Not an Overnight Success

An accomplishment like this doesn't happen overnight. Involving extensive projects such as shoreline stabilization, installation of new irrigation systems, and bunker reconstruction, to name a few, the park district's award-winning renovation program actually began seven years ago, marking the first time in more than twenty years that any major golf course remodeling programs had been enacted.

"In today's market, we're competing against 18-hole facilities, and we're competing against championship courses, yet we're just a 9-hole facility," said Denise Gillett-Parchert, Pottawatomie Golf Course Superintendent. "These changes brought the standards up, and yet it's still the same, friendly, local, hometown course that everybody can call their own."

"Everybody" encompasses some 40,000 players who visit the course each year. With that amount of traffic, the park district's goal was to make improvements that would accommodate players of all ages and abilities on safe and well-maintained grounds while remaining sensitive to the heritage of the facility and faithful to the design of its original architect, Robert Trent Jones, Sr. Greg Martin of Martin Design Architects in Batavia won the contract, and worked in conjunction with golf course architect Jim Spear; Christopher B. Burke Engineering; and irrigation consultants T. J. Emmerich Associates, Inc.

"Greg Martin's philosophy fit our golf course," said Gillett-Parchert. "It was very important to him to keep the integrity of the Robert Trent Jones design. That was first and foremost."

One of the preeminent golf course architects of the twentieth century, Jones designed or redesigned more than 500 golf courses throughout America and around the world. Noted for their artistic blending of naturalistic landscaping with bold placement of bunkers and water hazards, Jones's courses revolutionized the concept of stimulating play where strategy counted as much as technique. In designing the Pottawatomie Golf Course, Jones capitalized on the course's Fox River bank location when laying out his nine-hole design.

"It's nice to be able to carry on something to the best of your ability that Robert Trent Jones originally started," said Jim Wheeler, Pottawatomie Golf Course Manager and PGA Golf Pro. Opened in 1939, Jones's design has endured for nearly 70 years, and while the park district's goal for a golf course with this prestigious legacy was to remain true to Jones's original vision as much as possible, "the terrain, the conditions, the amount of people who are playing, the safety factors — all enter into whether you are able to maintain the design," said Wheeler.

Building Better Bunkers

That "she-sells-seashells" tongue twister of a statement was actually the impetus for the lion's share of the golf course renovations. Bunkers — those pits of sand found near the playing greens — are strategically positioned to provide challenges for golfers. And while it's one thing to hit a golf ball out of a few inches of sand, it's quite another to do so while standing in a puddle of water or to unexpectedly lob out a small stone instead.

"The bunkers just weren't playable," according to Gillett-Parchert. "Players couldn't get a decent bunker shot out of them. But now you can. It makes a big difference."

In fact, it was just this kind of feedback from players that confirmed what Gillett-Parchert and Wheeler already knew: that the bunkers did not live up to the standard of play the golf course wanted to provide.

To accomplish this part of the mission, bunkers had to be dug out, underlying drainage tiles, liners and pea gravel replaced, and new sand brought in to ensure a consistent quantity and quality. In some areas, such as the first hole, an entire bunker was removed because it rested on a foundation of rock that was forcing stones up into the sand area. And because some of the renovations were located within a flood plain, regulations prohibited adding new materials. The park district was able to comply with Kane County guidelines by reusing materials for tee construction on five of the course's nine holes.

A Natural Conclusion

In addition to the bunker and tee renovations, extensive landscape restoration involving native vegetation took place on the approaches to several holes, as well as on buffers around the existing lagoon. Aiding in the filtration of fertilizers and pesticides through a fibrous root system that helps purify the run-off before it enters the Fox River, native plants also provide essential habitat for the various birds and animals found at the golf course, thus enabling the park district to maintain its distinguished "Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary" status. The Pottawatomie Golf Course was the first 9-hole

facility internationally to earn this designation and is one of only 234 courses in the world to receive the honor.

And while landscaping plants are a key component of the natural environment at Pottawatomie Golf Course, keeping another plant group -- namely, grass -- viable is, naturally, a major focus. Healthy turf not only contributes to the overall level of course playability, it's also an important aesthetic component. The challenge was finding a way to consistently make the course lush and green without stressing fragile natural resources. Water conservation, in the form of an upgraded and redesigned underground sprinkler system, was therefore part of the park district's environmental game plan when renovating the course. Replacing the old single-row system with a double row system and installing a new variable frequency drive system provided better direction and control. "It made a huge difference in that the course became almost wall-to-wall green," said Wheeler. A new pump also allowed for more efficient use of resources, in that water was no longer drawn from the Fox River, but instead removed directly from the park district's well.

Indeed, accessing the Fox River itself was beginning to be more problematic over the years, especially as its shoreline continued to erode. Since the river played such an essential role in Robert Trent Jones's original golf course design, controlling riverbank deterioration was of paramount concern. Collaborating with the Kane-DuPage Soil and Water Conservation District and the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, the park district undertook a shoreline stabilization project by installing gabion baskets -- interconnecting wire baskets filled with rocks -- that functioned as retention walls. The baskets were then covered with horticultural cloth imbedded with native plant material that not only helped secure precious soil, but provided yet another wildlife habitat.

Concern for the environment was also evident in the choice of material used in renovating cart paths throughout the course. Limestone flagstone was used to line the paths and, instead of asphalt, the paths were filled with gravel and other screenings that are natural products.

Playing Through

From following standards put forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act by installing a new ADA-compliant drinking fountain at hole seven, to constructing a second protective storm shelter at hole 9, and replacing a connecting bridge between holes three and seven, the seven-year renovation program was as considerate as it was comprehensive. Yet through it all, the course remained open for play, which dictated a certain amount of inconvenience for players. "We didn't have the ability to shut down, do everything, and then reopen," said Gillett-Parchert, who credits her staff — assistant Jose Garcia; Danny Baltierra, Rich Balla, Sr.; and Danny Maas — with the project's success. "We were the little engine that could. We just kept chugging along and got it done."

Sometimes, the course needed to be divided into specific sections in order to allow continued play. Such disturbances were taken in stride, according to Wheeler. "Players were okay with it when they knew it was something they had asked for and they knew

there was logical reasoning behind the things we were doing.” The park district took special pains to keep golfers abreast of the renovations, such as displaying presentation boards featuring conceptual plans and updated photos in the Pro Shop, and encouraging comments on the work being done.

“I think these projects were a testimony to our players, to let them know that we want to give them the best product we can,” said Gillett-Parchert.

The feedback now? “It’s great, it’s wonderful,” declares Wheeler.