



TIGER TONES IT

Woods' early designs stand out as 'fun' courses for the common man

by Bradley S. Klein

MONTGOMERY, TEXAS

Golfers who show up at Tiger Woods' first U.S. course design here, 52 miles northwest of downtown Houston, are in for a surprise at Bluejack National. The man who eviscerated golf courses with an overwhelming display of power and dart-like aerial approaches to heavily defended greens is now presenting a version of the game that is positively

genteel, traditional and – imagine that – even fun.

For a real estate course, Bluejack National is pleasantly relaxed in terms of how the home sites are distributed across the landscape. You can

forget about playing into or alongside somebody's backyard. For all the investment entailed in hiring the golf industry's unchallenged business headliner, the developers have opted not to cash in by lining the fairways with golf-frontage housing.

It would be easy to chalk it up to someone on the downside of a 20-year reign. Woods prefers to attribute it to an accumulated wisdom about how the game is played and where the business is going. "We don't need more very long and hard golf courses," he told *Golfweek* via email. "We need more golf courses that are fun. The more difficult courses can be fun for really good players, but not for most people."

That certainly describes Bluejack National. The course, set to open in mid-November, is the centerpiece of a 755-acre real estate and recreational community. Its seeming remoteness, 15 miles northwest of The Woodlands in largely undeveloped horse country, is likely to change with the impending development of a major Exxon corporate base, with 13,000 employees. There also are plans underway at the state level for a major road linking Houston to College Station – home of Texas A&M (thus the nickname of the new State Highway 249, "the Aggie Expressway").

Bluejack National is a par-72 golf course of enormous scope and flexibility, with tees ranging from 7,542 yards down to a family- and junior-friendly 3,008 yards. Those latter tees are not an afterthought; they occupy flat, well-defined ground that shows respect for players, whether they be kids, grandparents or newcomers.

Designing for the gamut of everyday golfers rather than just championship play means paying attention to the ground game. At Bluejack National, that has been easier to achieve than at most Houston-area courses because the land here comes with ideal contour – rolling terrain with 90 feet of elevation change across the site, distributed in a variety of wooded and open areas rather than sheer linear fall from one end of the site to the other. The Bermudagrass fairways are uncommonly wide – 50 yards on average and wrapped around and sometimes behind the greens to allow for creative ground-game options into the putting surfaces.

The immediate area in front of and around the greens are mowed tight and kept topdressed and firm. Grow-in superintendent Eric Bauer calls them "foregreens." It's an appropriate links-style reference

TASTE TEST

A look at Woods' new restaurant, **P30**



DOWN

Bluejack National

for a golf course whose playing character derives more from The Old Course at St. Andrews (“my favorite course,” said Woods) than from the classic aerial-golf parkland layout that he so commanded during his PGA Tour heyday.

As with all of Woods’ ventures, his architecture business is a small, tight-knit operation. The eponymous ETW Corp. has seven full-time employees in its office in Jupiter, Fla. Longtime friend Bryon Bell, 39, is titular president of the company and oversees the design operation. Technical design work – routing, grading plan, construction specifications – is handled on a contract/project basis with Beau Welling, 45, a former Tom Fazio associate who operates his own design shop out of Greenville, S.C.

Welling said that working with Woods is easy. “He analyzes every possible way a shot can be played before determining how he wants to play,” Welling said. “I think the more possibilities there are, the more interesting he finds the golf experience.”

Woods’ official debut came in December 2014 with the opening of Diamante’s El Cardonal in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. The inland site looks down and out toward the Pacific Ocean on the southwest tip of the Baja Peninsula and is part of a 1,500-acre resort and residential property that includes enough land for what will be a third course, also designed by Woods and preliminarily referred to as The Oasis. (Davis Love III designed Diamante’s Dunes Course, which opened in 2009.)

El Cardonal was benched into a steadily sloping hillside and required a relatively modest amount of earth

moving, about 350,000 cubic yards. Plans for Oasis call for much more shaping – “as much as 4 million cubic yards,” in developer Ken Jowdy’s words. The idea is to create a course from a low-lying desert environment, a very different proposition than using the more exposed slopes and dramatic arroyos that define El Cardonal. Welling and Woods already have narrowed the routing from more than a dozen iterations.

Back at Bluejack National – the course derives its name from a rare species of oak tree found onsite –

Bauer and crew are completing the grow-in and getting the fairways and approaches as fast and firm as Woods wants them. Aside from the short, downhill par-3 12th, every green is accessible on the ground.



Diamante’s El Cardonal

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“As a big fan of links golf,” Welling said, “Tiger loves the option of playing the ball on the ground. We often hear him say, ‘Let’s let them use the ground as a friend.’ It is pretty cool that even with his abilities and accomplishments, he understands that.”

Small wonder that Bluejack National adheres to the native contours, replete with tees at natural grade level rather than built up as launch platforms. During a course walk, Bell, Woods’ right-hand man, refers to them as “lawn tees.” It’s an apt phrase for an engaging and fun walk in the park.

Woods, who transformed professional golf with power, swagger and celebrity, seems curiously intent on making his mark on design in a quieter way. **Gwk**