

# THE UNLIKELY

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SWEETENS COVE OVERCOMES OBSTACLES TO MAKE AN AUSPICIOUS DEBUT

BY MARTIN KAUFMANN

**A**s you look through this issue, you'll notice a lot of familiar names at the top of various state lists. There's Pebble Beach in California, TPC Sawgrass' Players Stadium Course in Florida, the Seaside Course at Sea Island in Georgia, Kapalua's Plantation Course in Hawaii, and many others that are well known even to casual golfers.

People who play the ponies might refer to these courses as "chalk." They're thoroughbreds. You expect them to finish first in their state rankings.

Every now and then, however, a surprising name pops up at the top of a state list. That brings us to Sweetens Cove Golf Club, which certainly has to be the most unlikely course to finish No. 1 in its state rankings this year. But there it is, sitting in the top spot in Tennessee.

Consider the obstacles Sweetens Cove had to overcome.

It's only a nine-hole course.

It has been open less than two years.

It's in rural South Pittsburg, 30 miles west of Chattanooga.

It was designed by an obscure, out-of-work architect, not some name-brand designer.

And that architect, Rob Collins, describes the course that he blew up to make way for Sweetens Cove as "the worst golf course I've ever seen. It was pasture golf."

So by some reckonings, there was nowhere for Sweetens Cove to go but up. Who, though, would have guessed that it would rocket to the top spot, knocking Mirimichi to No. 2 in the Volunteer State?

How did this happen? You have to go back to the early 2000s, when Collins and Tad King were working on a Gary Player project, and realized they had similar ideas about course design. Fast forward to the financial meltdown later that decade. Collins was working on a Player design in Canada when the

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project was shut down. He moved back to Chattanooga and, out of necessity, King-Collins Golf Course Design was born.

Theirs is a design-build business model that they believe gives them both a cost advantage over competing firms, *CONTINUED ON PAGE 8*

No. 9 at Sweetens Cove



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SWEETENS COVE

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and total control over their projects. Collins oversees the design, King the construction.

Their first assignment was to rebuild Sequatchie Valley Golf & Country Club, which would become Sweetens Cove. Collins wasn't discouraged by the pancake-flat Sequatchie site; he has a go-big-or-go-home design philosophy. He was determined to create something memorable.

Not surprisingly, one of Collins' architectural idols is the late Mike Strantz, whose too-short career produced some of golf's most striking designs,

including one of Collins' favorites, Tobacco Road in North Carolina.

Collins believes architects impose too many "rules" that limit their creativity. The lesson he took from Strantz was this: "You can push the envelope more than you think you can. I like bold architecture that leaves an impression on you."

Sweetens Cove is defined by huge driving areas and big greens, but with shaping that requires approaches to be played from the proper angles.

"You can hit it anywhere, but if you want to score you have to find the sweet spots," Collins said.



One of the benefits of the width and large greens is that players have developed their own cross-country routings around Sweetens Cove. "Imagination is the only thing that

limits the number of holes," Collins said. "It's a natural off-shoot of the architecture."

We might be hearing more from Collins and King soon. The recognition that Sweetens Cove has enjoyed has prompted calls from other developers.

Collins said he and King are in discussions involving as many as seven potential projects. Collins knows most of those probably won't pan out, but allows, "We are one phone call away from having all of our dreams come true."

"After all the blood, sweat and tears, it feels good," Collins said. "I won't lie to you." **Gwk**

# 3 ACES

SWEETENS COVE ISN'T THE ONLY CINDERELLA STORY IN OUR RANKINGS

BY MARTIN KAUFMANN

SWEETENS COVE GOLF CLUB might be the unlikely course to rise to the top of its state rankings, particularly given that it's just a nine-holer. But there are other Cinderella stories in our rankings. Here are the stories of three little courses that charmed our ratings panel and rose to No. 1 in their states.

• If someone asks you a question about golf in



Alabama, what will be your first thought? It probably will have something to do with the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail.

To be sure, our top 10 Best Courses You Can Play in Alabama is heavily populated by trail courses. But once again this year, the No. 1 course is FarmLinks at Pursell Farms in Sylacauga, 45 miles southeast of Birmingham.

FarmLinks was built as a "research and demonstration course"

where Pursell Technologies could showcase how its agronomy products perform on various grasses. Course superintendents visit throughout the year for educational seminars.

But somewhere along the line, people began to realize that architects Michael Hurdzan and Dana Fry had routed an impressive golf course. FarmLinks has been No. 1 on the Alabama public-access list for four consecutive years.

• Before Pine Dunes



Resort & Golf Club opened in Frankston, Texas, the town was noteworthy mainly as the hometown of ZZ Top drummer Frank Beard. In a state the size of Texas, who would have guessed that the No. 1 public-access course would be found in a small farming community 100 miles southeast of Dallas?

The Pine Dunes story seems even more implausible when one considers that the woman who developed the property, Jodi Lutz, was



a former figure skater who didn't play golf. Lutz also didn't realize that the rundown, nine-hole course she had acquired sat on the sort of sandy soil that makes architects' hearts flutter.

The late Jay Morrish and his son Carter realized what a special property Lutz had acquired, and in 1999 began building the 18-hole layout that perennially is at or near the top of *Golfweek's* Texas rankings.

• The Nebraska Sandhills has become a popular, if unlikely, destination for

golfers lucky enough to secure tee times at Sand Hills Golf Club, which opened in 1995. The subsequent opening of properties such as The Prairie Club and Dismal River have only intensified interest in the region.

No visit to the Sand Hills would be complete, however, without a drive down to Gothenburg to play Wild Horse Golf Club. It's sometimes thought of as the "public Sand Hills," in part because it was created by Dan Proctor and Dave Axland, crew members for Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw when they were building the real Sand Hills. Wild Horse not only is No. 1 on the state's public-access list, but No. 87 on *Golfweek's* Best Modern Courses list. (Sand Hills is No. 1 on that list.)

Aside from being No. 1 in Nebraska, Wild Horse, with sub-\$60 green fees, also has the unofficial distinction of being one of the country's best golf bargains.