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McCONNELL GOLF

Hits the Beach

WELCOME TO THE RESERVE AT PAWLEY'S ISLAND

By Brad King

Growing membership adds sixth club with The Reserve at Pawley's Island,
a Greg Norman design on the shores of South Carolina

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In 1997, Donald Clement had left his former job as a golf professional and was happily working as head golf coach at his alma mater, Coastal Carolina University in Myrtle Beach. He received a phone call from an old friend, Ronald Crow, who had recently been hired as head superintendent at a new private golf club called The Reserve, nestled on the golf-rich southern end of the Grand Strand — about 20 minutes south of Myrtle Beach between the Waccamaw River and the Atlantic Ocean in Pawleys Island, SC.

Clement already knew about the project located in the community of Litchfield, an area encompassing about 50,000 acres between the Intracoastal Waterway and the Atlantic Ocean, of which only 60 percent were ever slated to be developed. The

Reserve was part of a 700-acre gated community boasting a marina, tennis courts, biking trails, and beach and river access, along with a highly regarded Greg Norman-designed golf course.

In addition, The Reserve Golf Club was one of only a few private facilities along the entire Myrtle Beach coastline, making it particularly exclusive when you consider there are more than 100 daily fee and resort courses from Georgetown to Wilmington.

Despite all he had heard about The Reserve, Clement had a two-word reply when Crow inquired as to whether or not he was ready to get back in the business: "Absolutely not."

"Well," Crow told him, "you need to at least come down here and see what we've got."

Several weeks later, Clement played in the South Carolina Open at The Reserve. Clement said he was knocked off his feet by what he saw.

"I judge a golf course by its conditioning," Clement recalled of his first few rounds at The Reserve. "Yes, I love different features, but I love to play a golf course that is in immaculate condition, and that's what The Reserve prided itself on."

"What brought me here was my friendship with Ronald, the conditioning of this golf course and the people that were here. We've got one of the best memberships I've ever been a part of here. They're proud of their Club."

At the time, many of The Reserve's members came from prestigious clubs in Charlotte, Greensboro and Raleigh, NC, and were lower handicappers who appreciated The Reserve from the tips, where it plays to 7,108 yards and a slope of 136. Yet, the



"Growing in" the greens at The Reserve



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average golfer typically played the member's tees at a more manageable 6,068, minimizing the number and length of forced carries. "My ultimate goal [at The Reserve] wasn't to create an extremely difficult course, just one that's very challenging," Norman says. "So, while you won't have to hit straight every hole, you're always going to have to think straight."

Members also enjoyed a cozy clubhouse, while Norman's design team and the Litchfield Company were also savvy enough to realize that private clubs necessitate top-notch practice facilities. The Reserve features one of the widest practice ranges at the beach, a short game area with practice bunker, and a true-rolling practice green.

Yet, one decade and a giant economic deflation later, The Reserve had lost about one-third of its membership, the majority of which were from out of town. With fewer members, other cuts had to be made, and the golf course suffered.

Enter John McConnell, who had earlier purchased four

exclusive and highly regarded clubs strategically located around NC – Raleigh Country Club, Treyburn CC in Durham, The Cardinal in Greensboro and Old North State Club in Uwharrie Point – along with Musgrove Mill Golf Club in upstate SC. McConnell purchased The Reserve in the spring of 2010 and added Greg Norman's name to the incredible rota of architects at his other clubs: Donald Ross, Tom Fazio, Pete Dye and Arnold Palmer.

"It hurt our membership to sell it, but they knew it was the best thing," Clement said. "Every club McConnell has bought, members have raved. I think it's a win-win. What other club would you want to join other than a McConnell property, when you've got six total clubs you get to go play? They are all among the best courses in the Carolinas."

The first major change McConnell has implemented is a renovation of the greens complexes at The Reserve, changing them from Penn G-2 bent grass — a cost-prohibitive, cool weather grass that fought

the summer heat during its 10 years of use at The Reserve — to Champions ultra dwarf Bermuda. "If it's good enough for East Lake [in Atlanta], where they play the PGA Tour Championship every year, it's good enough for all golfers," said Clement. "I'm excited not only for our members, but the employees on the maintenance staff."

In addition, McConnell is sprucing up the extensive fairway, waste and greenside bunkering at The Reserve with new feldspar sand, the same type used at Augusta National Golf Club, site of The Masters. Other detailing includes the removal of numerous trees and the purchase of updated equipment, including new ball washers, new range ball pickers and high-quality range balls.

"Good times," said Clement about the changes at The Reserve. "That pride our membership used to have in the conditioning of our course is going to happen again, because McConnell Golf prides itself on the condition of its golf courses. I couldn't be more excited." 🏌️