

Craft-Palmer partnership started south Alabama golf boom

By GARETH CLARY
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Arnold Palmer doesn't just build golf courses for anybody with a vault full of money.

So there was a certain degree of trepidation when R.C. and Robert Craft, a father and son with a vision, invited The King and a jetload of his executives to Gulf Shores in the mid-1980s for a site visit.

While the Crafts were certainly financially stable, their pockets probably weren't quite as deep as some of those backing other Palmer projects.

The property they wanted to show off was in a prime location, but it was a table-top flat sod farm with no lakes and no trees.

It was a hard sell that turned out to be quite easy.

Palmer's feet were barely on Craft dirt before R.C. and Arnie were on a golf cart, riding off to watch a sod-cutting gizmo that intrigued Palmer.

"They were nowhere close to the property we were supposed to be seeing," Robert recalled. "Thirty minutes later, they came back and Palmer said, 'We're gonna do it.'"

Golf in Baldwin County and southwest Alabama hasn't been the same since that casual encounter between a couple of self-made men from a generation who understood the value of hard work and the reward of a dollar earned.

R.C. Craft, 78, died late Monday (Oct. 23) afternoon after a long bout with lung cancer, but if you've stepped on one of the area's upscale daily-fee golf courses lately, you'll know his legacy still lives.

If there never was a Cotton Creek, there may never have been a TimberCreek, or a Rock Creek, or a Quail Creek, or a Soldiers Creek.

As usual, R.C.'s timing was perfect, just like when he purchased 870 acres of coastal wilderness in the late 1960s and turned it into a gladiola farm, then a sod farm, then a bustling golf resort. In addition to being a shrewd but humble businessman, he was also an avid golfer, winning the club championship at Gulf Shores Golf Club multiple times.

His decision to build Cotton Creek and his partnership with Palmer triggered a golf boom that dramatically changed the landscape of the Mobile-Baldwin region, just like Palmer took that flat property and transformed it into a golfer's paradise with rolling fairways, azure lakes and trees that look like they've been there forever.

If R.C. and Arnie had not hit it off so well watching that machine slice sod, the area may have never developed into one of the country's top golf vacation destinations.

But they connected, and now you can't drive five miles or so in Baldwin County without crossing a fairway.

Each year, Palmer would invite R.C. to Orlando, Fla., to spend a week at the PGA Tour's Bay Hill Invitational that he hosted.

R.C. went just about every season until his health started failing him in recent years.

When Palmer would visit Craft Farms, he always left the same way. Arnie would buzz across the treetops of the course in his jet and wobble the wings back and forth, his special way of waving goodbye.

On Monday (Oct. 23), surrounded by his family around 5:30 p.m., I imagine R.C. made one final pass over his beloved golf course and waved goodbye.

He will be missed.

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LGA corner: Inside the Ropes (continued)

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14

The Farm Golf Club just north of Lafayette, host to our first event of the year in mid-April, the Club Team Championship; The Atchafalaya Golf Course at Idlewild in Patterson, a Robert Van Hage design that will host our final event, the Senior 4-Ball Championship in mid-September.

The Net Amateur (mid-May) and Junior Amateur (late June) Championships will be held at Beaver Creek Golf Course in Zachary (just north of Baton Rouge). The always popular University Club of Baton Rouge will play host to our 4-Ball Championship in mid-July, and Carter Plantation in Springfield, designed by Louisiana native David Toms, will welcome our Senior Amateur Championship participants in mid-August.

Entry forms will be available for the Club Team, Net Am, and Amateur Championships on February 1. Entry forms for the Junior Amateur, 4-Ball, and Mid-Am Championships will be available on April 1 and entry forms for the Senior Amateur and Senior 4-Ball Championships will be available on June 1.

You may also enter on-line for these championships via our website at www.LGAgolf.org based on the same date schedule. We hope to see you at as many Championships as are feasible for you in 2007.

See you next month...Inside the Ropes!.

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