



COUNTRY CLUB OF THE SOUTH: THE PICTURESQUE SECOND HOLE (LEFT) WHICH IS MUCH MORE DANGEROUS THAN IT APPEARS, AND THE PAR-3 FIFTH (ABOVE); BELOW IS THE TIGHTLY WOODED 16TH.

COUNTRY CLUB OF THE SOUTH

Echoes of Augusta

BY PATRICK JONES



Country Club of the South

4100 Old Alabama Road
Johns Creek, Georgia 30022
770.475.6779
countryclubofthesouth.org

The unbridled cacophony of roars from the back nine of The Masters on an unforgettable Sunday afternoon in 1986 has long since subsided. Jack Nicklaus electrified the crowd that day with his charge-from-behind victory at age 46. It remains one of golf's most indelible championship moments.

That historic Masters highlight was more than 20 years ago, but reflecting on its significance is beneficial when framing the background on the development of Country Club of the South in North Fulton County.

The course, the Golden Bear's first design in the Atlanta area, opened for play in 1987, just a year following his Augusta triumph.

Country Club of the South came to fruition when the golf industry was flourishing and Nicklaus was riding the crest of his unexpected inspiration around Amen Corner.

Nicklaus, a six-time Masters champion, intentionally – or osmotically – conveyed some of his fondness for the Bobby Jones and Alistair Mackenzie-designed layout into his own courses in that era. The Country Club of the South was no exception.

"There is a little bit of Augusta influence in (the Country Club of the South course) for sure," says Sean Kennedy, director of golf at the club. "Hole No. 11 here – I would not say it mimics any hole at Augusta, but just the way it flows with the fairway bunkers on the left and the way the greenside bunkers fit into

the hill – is very reminiscent of some of the things that are done at Augusta. We don't have the white sand, but that hole looks very Augusta-ish."

When Nicklaus and golf community developer Bob Sierra teamed on the 700-home gated community off Old Alabama Road, it was an instant success. (Nicklaus and Sierra also paired on English Turn in New Orleans and Avila Golf & Country Club in Tampa among others.) With the exception of the nearby Atlanta Athletic Club in Duluth, Atlanta's northern arc was underserved in the 1980s when it came to exclusive golf community choices.

The cachet of the city's first Nicklaus-design lured successful Atlantans from every walk of life through the club's gates. Its geographically broad and emboldened name – Country Club of the South (definitely not referring to its south Alpharetta proximity) – added to its prestige.

"Country Club of the South was the highest end development in Atlanta at that time," says Michael Ryan, Country Club of the South's chief operating officer and general manager. "Basically, it was the 'Who's Who' of Atlanta living in here."

Business executives, famous singers, a famous redneck comedian and a laundry list of current and former professional sports stars continue to call the development home. Former Atlanta Braves pitcher Charlie Liebrandt has won the club championship.

The club's 6,982-yard championship course and 57,000-square-foot clubhouse hosted the Champions Tour's Nationwide Championship from 1991 to 1994. Mizuno USA, based in Norcross, selected Country Club of the South as its base for golf equipment research and development. It is an ongoing relationship that continues today.

The course cuts through rolling terrain that is tightly lined with pines and hardwoods. Nicklaus frequently incorporated the property's meandering creeks into play. A stream lines the right side of the fairway on No. 2, a seemingly simple 370-yard par 4, before cutting back in front of the green. This attractive water feature regularly wreaks havoc, contributing to No. 2's ranking as the No. 1 handicap hole. A tree growing out of a rock partially blocks the right side of the green from that side of the fairway, adding to No. 2's difficulty.

"Golfers are constantly amazed by No. 2," says Ryan. "It is not a long hole, but it is one of the hardest."

The signature hole is the par-3 13th with its double green bisected down the middle by a stream. Kennedy favorably compares it to the double green of No. 8 at Pine Valley Golf Club in New Jersey, which is regularly ranked as the nation's best course. CC of the South's 13th plays 145 yards to the left green and 165 yards to the right green.

The Country Club of the South course integrates many of the features that Nicklaus favored during that era of his design career. He was known for his personal preference for hitting a power fade, thus a majority of the holes are doglegs to the right. Mounds, hills and water tightly protect many of the greens.

"Jack put a premium on approach shots," says Ryan. "There are no run-ups on this course. You have to fly the ball in."

Kennedy says the course remains playable for the less accomplished golfer, but it will never be labeled a pushover.

"The course is a good challenge for sure," says Kennedy. "But it won't beat you up if you keep the ball in front of you. If you start going sideways, it can make for a long round of golf emotionally."

With the Country Club of the South approaching a quarter century of service, needed changes and renovations are under way. Ryan says the club has redone its tee boxes and thinned out the flora after decades of growth to "open up some of the greens and recreate what Jack did back in the day when the trees were a lot smaller."

Atlanta-based course architect Mike Riley, a former Nicklaus Design associate and designer of area courses such as Reunion Golf Club in Braselton and Crooked Creek Golf Club in Alpharetta, has been retained to overhaul Country Club of the South's green complexes. The project is scheduled to begin in February 2010.

Some of the moguls and contouring will be "softened," Kennedy says. The grass will be switched to bentgrass. "But as far as overall design goes, it won't be changed," he says.

Ryan reiterated that Country Club of the South's spillover magic from that memorable day at Augusta National 20-plus years ago will not be tampered with.

"The greens will retain the character of the Nicklaus layout," says Ryan. "We are not changing that. We may enlarge the greens in a couple of areas, but we are keeping Jack's design and vision." ■