

SHARK!

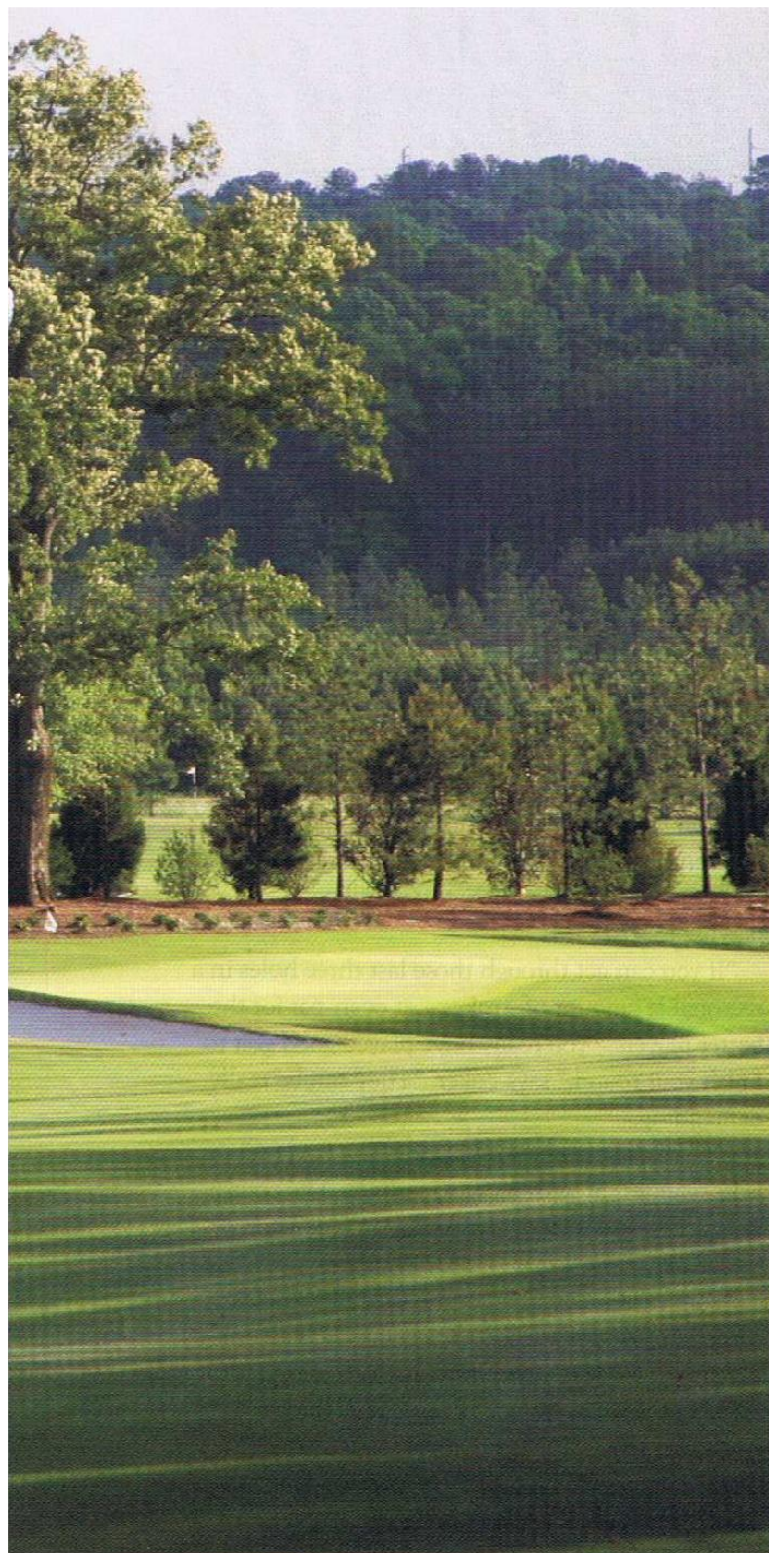
WHEN ASKED TO DESIGN ANOTHER GEORGIA COURSE, JUST FIVE MILES FROM HIS LANDMARK DESIGN AT SUGARLOAF, GREG NORMAN DIDN'T MIND – AND HE DIDN'T DO ANYTHING THE SAME. THE RIVER CLUB STANDS ON ITS OWN. AND IT IS OUTSTANDING. BY PATRICK JONES



winnett County is prime Shark territory. Greg Norman opened his first signature course in the U.S. with the Tournament Players Club at Sugarloaf in Duluth in 1997. It was a development partnership with Charlotte-based Crescent Resources that, at the time, cornered the North Atlanta market on high-end residential country club living.

Norman was in his golfing prime during that era, a reign that earned him the ranking as the No. 1 golfer in the world for 331 weeks.

In the ensuing decade, Norman's priorities have changed. The two-time British Open champion has recalibrated his unmatched focus from playing golf to building a global



business empire. The international raconteur's Great White Shark Enterprises includes a portfolio of businesses that range from designing golf courses to selling prime Australian beef cuts, clothing and bottles of wine. Norman's branding maintains its cachet even though he no longer grabs the spotlight contending for major championships.

Crescent Resources continues to rely on Norman's design skills even as his high-profile

playing career has wound down. His latest contribution to the Atlanta golf scene is The River Club, located along the banks of the Chattahoochee River in Suwanee. Because of the unmitigated success of the TPC at Sugarloaf, Crescent showed no hesitation in hiring Norman to design The River Club, even though it is nearly a next-door neighbor in ever-growing Gwinnett.

"We were very familiar with the area because of Sugarloaf, and knew it would be a great location for another new community and golf course," says Norman.

There was one obstacle: not building a course that could be labeled as Sugarloaf II.

"Our challenge was to do something entirely different because they are so close in proximity, not only from the community appearance and architecture, but with the golf course itself," says Ed Weinlein, senior vice president at Crescent Resources, who was instrumental in both developments. "The biggest challenge was to sit with Greg and say, 'We've got something that's five miles away. We can't do the same grasses. We can't do the same bunkers. It's got to be entirely different.' And that has been achieved in spades. We were on such a tight timeline to get the zoning and everything else done (at The River Club). His group just responded extremely quick and had a routing plan that was quite conducive to what we were trying to do. We had (Norman's) undivided attention. The same guys on the bulldozers at Sugarloaf were also here with us. There was a lot of crossover."

The most noticeable differences between Sugarloaf and The River Club are the bunker designs and choice of grasses.

The TPC at Sugarloaf, home to the PGA Tour's AT&T Classic since its opening, features Norman's own GN-1 brand of Bermuda grass, zoysia rough and Crenshaw bentgrass greens.

"Sugarloaf has a lot of course design aspects that (Norman) grew up with in Australia – sodwall bunkers, rolling entry into the bunkers and bunkers surrounding the greens," says Weinlein.

THE RIVER CLUB

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[crescentresources.com/
community/atlanta/riverclub](http://crescentresources.com/community/atlanta/riverclub)

The course lies near the Chattahoochee River and nine holes play near one of the club's lakes. The course has an intimate, park-like feel.

The designer Greg Norman also created courses for Crescent Communities at The Point near Charlotte, N.C., and Oldfield in Beaufort, S.C.

Live The River Club homes are priced from \$1.4 million.

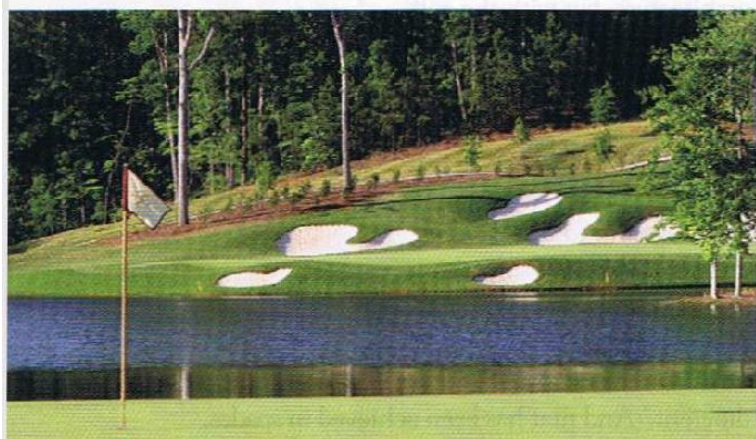
Homesites range from the mid-\$200s to more than \$1 million.

THE RIVER CLUB

The River Club features what Weinlein calls more of a "homogenous look" with its non sod-facing bunkers, more mainstream Bermuda 419 fairways, and blend of A-1 and A-4 grasses on the greens.

"With those grasses we are allowed, during the course of even one playing season, to let it grow, cut it back, taper it down," says Weinlein. "In that way, in my definition, it gives it more of a classical look that can change complexion overnight."

The River Club is private and gated. It is located on the Peachtree Industrial Boulevard corridor just north of McGinnis Ferry Road. It features 400 home sites with houses ranging from \$1.5 million up to \$9 million. Plans call for 450 golf memberships. The course officially opened for play in May 2005. A 30,000-square-foot clubhouse is



scheduled to open in May 2008.

The 7,182-yard, par-72 course is impeccably groomed. The River Course hosted U.S. Open qualifying in 2006, when Matt Kuchar set the standing competitive course record of 69. The course starts benevolently enough with a straightaway 411-yard par 4 that allows golfers to find their range. No. 2 is where the fun truly begins. Head professional Pete Baker called this 205-yard par 3 one of his favorites on the course. The tee shot requires a carry over water to the largest green (55 yards wide) on the course.

"Depending on where the pin is, it can completely change the hole," says Baker. "If the pin comes up front, it is going to bring the water into play. If the pin goes back right, it is a really tough location to get at. Front left brings water and bunkers into play. No. 2 is my favorite par 3 out here because it has the element of strategy. Even

though it might not be a tough green to hit, it can bring in three-putts. It is really a good hole.

"All of the par 3s on the course are extremely strong, both from an aesthetic value and a shotmaking value," says Baker. "And then, from there, (Norman) gives you some really good risk-reward opportunities on the par 5s, as well as on some par 4s."

Norman's design savvy is particularly apparent on the closing holes. No. 16 is a 451-yard par 4 that ranks as the second toughest on the course. That is followed by the easiest, a 148-yard par 3 that features an elevated tee shot to an island green.

"No. 17 is a short hole," says Baker. "You can make a two there with a good shot in, but if you miss the green you can easily take a five. If the wind is blowing at all, even if you have a wedge or a 9-iron in your hand, it can play a whole lot different."

The closing hole is a lengthy uphill par 4, playing to 470 yards.

"If you can get through those last three holes in a reasonable amount of strokes – at even-par for the better players – you really have played good golf to finish your round," says Baker. "They can be really demanding."

One of the pleasures of playing The River Club is its seamless fit with its surroundings. The course is designated as a Certified Audobon Cooperative Sanctuary.

"I am extremely proud of the way all 18 holes turned out, and it's definitely a course I could enjoy playing every day," says Norman. "What excited me about this development was Crescent Resources' commitment to preserving the environment. We designed The River Club to accent the natural features of the land, and that's something I try to incorporate with all of our designs. I am most pleased that we were able to recreate some damaged wetland areas and in turn create a habitat where birds and other animals would call home. Golf course design is not simply taking a piece of land and altering the landscape to fit a plan that you have in mind. In today's world, dealing with any kind of development takes a lot of patience and a commitment to leaving the site in better environmental shape than you found it."

As Weinlein says, at The River Club, the Great White Shark's vision has been achieved in spades. ■