

Miami Beach Golf Club

by Randall Mell

Deep History and Cutting-Edge Design Have Created a Golf Experience to Match the Lifestyle

Peering down an emerald fairway that sprawls toward South Beach, Randy Weber points out the eclectic targets players can use to navigate their way across Miami Beach Golf Club.

Towering in the distance, beyond the 12th fairway, there's the Portofino Towers, a pink and powder blue testament to the exotic charms of Miami Beach's Art Deco architectural design. The high-rise condominium is home to some of the city's most rich and famous residents.

But here, at the fourth tee, the club's director of golf is squaring his driver dead at the Setai, a 40-story glass tower that shimmers like a diamond off the beach. It's a luxury condo and boutique hotel with a five-star restaurant and bar.

Weber can pick out any number of trendy targets along the horizon.

That's part of the swanky aura along the American Riviera.

"We have the ultimate 19th hole," Weber says. "You can walk to South Beach from here."

Though Miami Beach Golf Club is just five blocks west of the glitz and glamour along Collins Avenue and the oceanfront, a short time ago the golf course wasn't worthy of an association with anything chic.

This municipal course was old and tired ... an eyesore.

"It was in horrible condition," says Johnny LaPonzina, president of Professional Course Management, the firm hired to manage and operate Miami Beach Golf Club. "It was a disgrace to the community. There were so many rocks and weeds and so much dirt, it was almost unplayable."



A \$10 million renovation and re-design created today's engaging layout.

City officials in Miami Beach changed that three years ago with the course's re-opening after a major renovation led by architects Arthur Hills and Steve Forrest.

In a city that thrives on Botox injections and the skills of gifted plastic surgeons, Miami Beach Golf Club enjoyed a radical \$10 million facelift. At 82 years old, the club now sports a fresh, hip and youthful look. Though it remains a municipal course, it has been transformed into a high-end public facility making patrons feel they're getting a country club experience.

"This isn't your every day municipal golf course," LaPonzina says. "You're hitting Titleist golf balls on the driving range now. And, we've established extremely high standards of service."

During the peak winter and spring season, the club's 18-hole rate is \$185, with Southeast Florida residents (Palm Beach to the Keys) able to play for \$100 and Miami Beach residents for \$80. The rates fall substantially in the summer, \$85 for 18 holes with Southeast Florida and local residents enjoying lower rates.

The new \$4 million clubhouse opened in June. With a stylish geometric design and canary yellow exterior, it fits right into South Beach's Art Deco concepts.

Today, like the trendy nightclubs that surround it, Miami Beach Golf Club is becoming a place to be seen.

"You never know who's going to walk through the door to play here," Weber says.

Actor Matt Damon plays when he's visiting. Former NFL great and actor Jim Brown is a member. So is fellow Hall of Famer Lawrence Taylor, who not long ago brought NBA legend Michael Jordan as his guest on a 45-hole, one-day marathon.

Count former President Bill Clinton and former Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino among the guests, too.

"This golf course has a rich history," LaPonzina says. "It was a very special and unique place. Go back to the '50s and '60s, you had celebrities at the club. You had notorious figures mixing with them, gamblers and mafia figures. They weren't just playing here, they were hanging out, playing cards and craps."

Walk into the new clubhouse, and the past comes to life on the walls flanking the entranceway and in hallways leading to the dining room and pro shop.

There's a grainy black-and-white photo of Jackie Gleason with Arnold Palmer. Gleason lived on Alton Road, across the street from the clubhouse. Palmer made his professional debut down the road at Miami Springs Country Club. There also is a photo of former President Warren Harding with club in hand. And there's a shot that makes you do a double take, a photo of an unidentified man taking his stance on the head of an elephant. He appears to be addressing a golf ball teed up on the end of the elephant's trunk.

"We're not really sure what that was about, but we think it might have had something to do with the Republican convention being here," says Jackie Ryden, the club's director of marketing.

What is known today as the Miami Beach Golf Club was actually opened as the Bayshore Golf Course in 1923 by Carl Fisher, a pioneering developer. Fisher built the Alton Road subdivision in a bid to lure wealthy winter residents of New York, Indianapolis and Detroit to South Florida. He also built the original Miami Beach Golf Club, an 18-hole course adjacent to



Bayshore. That course was eventually plowed by developers, paving the way for construction that now includes the Miami Beach Convention Center.

An environmentally friendly strain of grass, it can be nourished with seawater or reclaimed water. In fact, seawater acts as a natural pesticide and herbicide and is a boon to water conservation.

"At 82 years old, the club now sports a fresh, hip and youthful look. Though it remains a municipal course, it has been transformed into a high-end public facility making patrons feel they're getting a country club experience."

With the city investing \$6 million on the Bayshore course renovation, and another \$4 million on the new clubhouse, LaPonzina says he insisted on a name change.

"We had to get rid of the name Bayshore, and the image that went with it," LaPonzina says. "People who identified this course with the old, worn-out Bayshore would never want to play it. This is a different course today, an entirely new and different experience."

So the name Miami Beach Golf Club was resurrected.

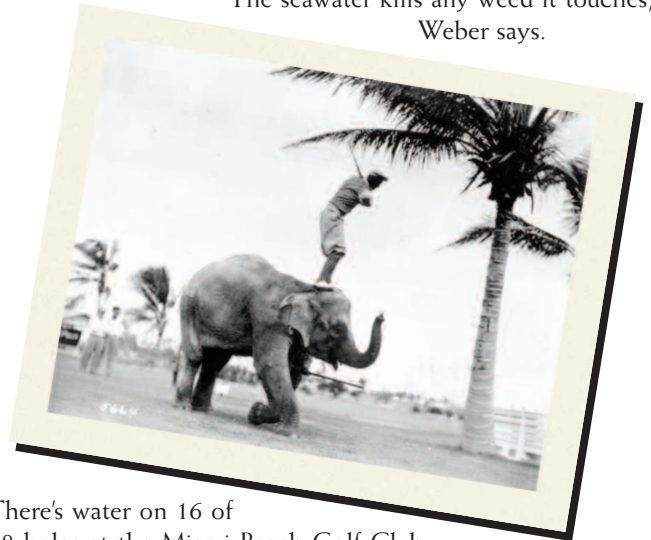
While Hills and Forrest mostly followed the old Bayshore's routing, they created a dramatically different look. The course was completely bulldozed, the lakes drained and expanded and reshaped.

Seashore Paspalum grass was another factor in upgrading the course's look and playability.

"I like the way the ball always sits up on this grass," Weber says. "On the greens, it's as close to bent grass as you can get in the South."

Seashore Paspalum grass has a lush, deep-green hue that marvelled greenskeepers after turf specialists genetically altered it for adaptability to golf.

"The seawater kills any weed it touches," Weber says.



There's water on 16 of 18 holes at the Miami Beach Golf Club, and it comes into play on 14 of them. The lakes and ponds are fed with seawater. Hills and Forrest created pockets of wetlands

**BECAUSE MOST
GOLFERS HAVE TO
SPONSOR
THEMSELVES.**

Callaway
GOLF
PRE-OWNED



800-940-3238
callawaygolfpreowned.com

throughout that also enhance the course's look.

With mangrove trees hugging some ponds, with canary palms, golden bamboo and gumbo limbo trees throughout, there's no mistaking you're in the tropics. Ibis, heron and other fowl fly in and out of the wetland pockets.

The lakes teem with tarpon and snook.

"You can see them tailing all the time," Weber said. "If you were in a flats boat in the Keys, you would be looking for that to cast toward."

The course also is home to dozens of iguana, some of them as large as four feet.

"We call this Iguanaville," Weber says, pointing to the trees along the pond at the eighth tee box. "There is a huge colony of iguana living out here. This is my daughter's favorite spot."

The course is designed within 128 acres, but the strategic shaping of ponds and discriminate use of trees make each hole appear to stand alone despite the mostly open feel to the property.

"The location, right there near South Beach, is marvelous," says Forrest, the architect and business partner to Hills. "But the property is flat. We were able to create some movement using all the dirt we dug out of the ponds. That allowed us to raise the greens and tees and cut bunkers into

side slopes and create more attractive visual images."

The course plays from five sets of tees, measuring 6813 yards



Water plays on 14 of Miami Beach Golf Club's 18 holes.

from the back tees with a 73.1 rating and 131 slope.

You get an immediate feel of the experience the design team intended at the first hole.

A dogleg-right par 5, you have some room on your first tee shot, but the hole toughens as it winds around a lake to a small, elevated green.

"This course gets sneaky hard as you move to the back side," Weber says.

The 17th is the signature hole, a 183-yard par 3 over water to a sloping green guarded by a large horseshoe bunker. At this tee box, you get a panoramic view of the condos and hotels sprouting on the horizon along South Beach.

You'll also likely see some of those tailing tarpon and sunbathing iguana.

"The city has built a golf club it can be proud of," LaPonzina says. "I think it's a prototype of what more and more municipalities want to do with their golf courses." ❖

Randall Mell is the golf writer at the South Florida Sun-Sentinel and is co-host of the Nationwide Golf Exchange on The Sporting News Radio Network at 7 a.m. on Saturdays.

