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FROM THE BLOGS



DRIVING HOME a LEGACY

GOLF in Birmingham, Then and NOW

BY DEREK DUNCAN

There are certain cities in the Southeast that have grown virtually synonymous with the game of golf. Say the words Augusta, Ponte Vedra or Pinehurst to any random group of people, and golf is what invariably will come to their minds first.

Mentioning Birmingham to the same group is not likely to invoke golf ahead of any number of other things, but the region has a deep golf history and an enviable number of quality courses in its arsenal. While it lacks an iconic tournament or course that transcends sports barriers—a Masters, say, or a TPC Sawgrass—Birmingham has its own immensely popular, homegrown event.

The Regions Charity Classic, held this year May 12 through 16 at the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail at Ross Bridge, is the figurative heart of Birmingham's golf culture. Begun in 1992 as the Bruno Memorial Classic by Birmingham's Bruno family, the tournament annually draws the top players from the Champions Tour, including twotime winner Brad Bryant, Ben Crenshaw, Peter Jacobson, Bernard Langer, local favorite Jerry Pate and this year's hot "rookie," Fred Couples. Past champions include World Golf Hall of Fame members John Jacobs, Larry Nelson, Hale Irwin and Birmingham's own Hubert Green.



Regions Financial Corporation signed on as the title sponsor in 2005, prompting a name change to the Regions Charity Classic. In its 19 years, the event has raised almost \$11 million for nearly 700 charities, including this year's primary beneficiary, Children's Hospital of Alabama.

A TRAIL OF COURSES

Though Birmingham doesn't have a singular golf identity, Alabama does in the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail. Ask our sample group a more specific question—what do you know about golf in Alabama—and invariably you'll hear about the RTJ Trail.

By now the story is well known: In the early 1990s David Bronner, CEO of the Retirement Systems of Alabama, made the intuitive decision to invest—some would say gamble—the pension funds of state employees into the construction of a statewide system of dynamic new golf courses. The courses were branded with noted architect Robert Trent Jones' imprimatur, designed to boost the image of Alabama and attract

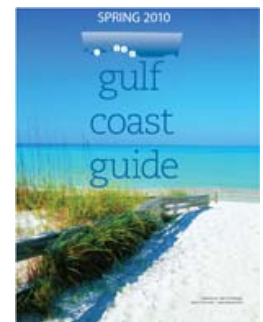
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drivethrough tourist dollars. The vision paid off as soon as the first courses opened in 1992. Today, Alabama tourism, with a huge assist from the Trail courses, is a \$9 billion a year industry, up from less than \$2 billion 20 years ago.

After several key expansions, the Trail now offers 468 golf holes at 11 different venues, with each course seemingly bigger, brasher and more difficult than the previous. It made sense, then, that the Regions Charity Classic would switch venues in 2006 from Greystone Golf & Country Club to the new Ross Bridge outpost, a spectator-friendly course in Hoover with holes circling around several lakes in amphitheater formations and the flexibility to stretch out over 8,100 yards.



Along with Old Overton Country Club, a Tom Fazio/Jerry Pate collaboration that Golf Digest rates as the fourth-best course in the state, the Trail proved that Alabama was fertile golf ground and served the bellwether in a golden era of course openings in greater Birmingham. Pate's Limestone Springs, Golfweek's top-rated public golf course, opened in 1999. The Rees Jones-designed Legacy Course at Greystone debuted in 2000; FarmLinks, the innovative turf and product laboratory and superintendent training complex in Sylacauga, along with its Michael Hurdzan and Dana Fry-designed golf course (Golfweek's fourth-best public course), opened in 2003, followed by Bob Cupp's Ballantrae Golf Club in 2005. The momentum surged into Tuscaloosa with another Jerry Pate design, Old Colony, coming on-line in 2000 followed by Gil Hanse's perennially under financed but mesmerizing Capstone Club in 2001 (No. 2 on Golfweek's list).

BIRMINGHAM GOLF'S FAMILY TREE

Of course, golf in Birmingham didn't just begin in 1992. To get a sense of its top players and notable history, it's helpful to view it through the eyes of Elbert Jemison Jr. Winner of countless tournaments, including both the 1957 and 1958 State Amateur and the 1976 and 1977 Senior Amateur, and one of only three amateur players inducted into the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame, Jemison seems to have touched virtually every Birmingham player and golf course of significance in the last 80 years.

He's seen Birmingham golf from its foundational years to the astounding successes of the RTJ Trail. "Birmingham has been a hotbed of golf for a lot of years, particularly since World War II," Jemison says. "The golf courses started being built heavily in the Birmingham area before the war, in the 1920s before the Depression came, and that slowed things down."

Speaking to him is like playing a game of six degrees of Elbert Jemison, only you can usually get to where you're going in just two or three. Now 89, he began playing at age 6 in 1926, mostly at Roebuck Golf Course and what is now Highland Park (both former sites of the Country Club of Birmingham, founded in 1898, a club that Jemison would serve as president of in the 1960s). He soon developed a game that rivaled Birmingham's greats, like Sam Perry, who won four state amateurs before being killed in World War II. In 1943, when Jemison was stationed as an officer at Camp Butler in North Carolina, he was invited to play in the prestigious North and South Amateur at Pinehurst.

Upon accepting the invitation he called Donald Ross, Pinehurst's famed architect who lived in a house on the No. 2 Course there. Jemison introduced himself as the nephew of Robert Jemison, who had been president of the Country Club of Birmingham and was responsible for hiring Ross to design the club's two new courses when it relocated to Shades Valley in 1926. Robert Jemison had also hired Ross for the Mountain Brook Club

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design when he established that club and community in 1927.

"He invited me over to his home, and we had a cocktail," Jemison remembers, "and after we had our drink he said, 'Can you stay and have dinner with me,' and I said, 'Sure!'" The two got along, talking mainly about the upcoming war. It's likely no coincidence that Jemison would later win both of his amateur titles on courses designed by Ross: Mountain Brook and the Country Club of Mobile.

Another uncle, Rick Woodward, founder of Woodward Iron Company, created what is now Woodward Golf & Country Club in Bessemer as a recreational outlet for his employees. Woodward, owner of the Birmingham Barons and Black Barons, also built Rickwood Field in 1910, the oldest baseball diamond in America.

Jemison forged friendships with Birmingham icons such as PGA Tour player, New York Yankee and instructor Sam Byrd; professional players Mac McLendon and JoAnn Prentice; and Shoal Creek founder Hall Thompson. He was particularly close to Charley Boswell, the country's greatest blind player and winner of 16 National Blind Golf Championships, who passed away in 1995. (Boswell and Sam Perry are the other two amateur golfers in the Hall of Fame.)

And in 1994, it was Jemison who was active chairman of the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame when the Distinguished Alabama Sportsman induction went to, to bring it full circle, David Bronner.

When the galleries line up at Ross Bridge for the Regions Charity Classic, they'll do more than cheer on the players. They'll take part in an ongoing celebration of Birmingham's rich golf tapestry, becoming threads that connect the players and places of the past to those of the present. Golf in Birmingham, as it turns out, does have an identity, a legacy of community and common bonds. As Jemison says, "It's almost like a fraternity."

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