

Naples' Quail Creek rebounds from Irma

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Don Hunter, Mike Dero, Kevin Leo and everyone at Quail Creek Country Club braced for another blow from Mother Nature as Hurricane Irma approached in September.

Nearly seven months later, the North Naples club is finishing up a strong season after its "Irma-vation" and looking forward to eventually reclaiming something Irma cost it -- Collier County's first-ever United States Golf Association event.

Irma hit Sept. 10, and just over a week later, Hunter, the club's general manager and chief operating officer, announced to members that the U.S. Women's Mid-Amateur, scheduled to be played in mid-October, couldn't be played at Quail Creek due to the flooding and other damage the course and surrounding community sustained.

"That was probably the toughest management decision that had to be made here at the club," Hunter said. "We were united in it, though. It was very difficult for any of us to verbalize at the end

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Quail Creek Country Club completely reopened both of its courses on Nov. 28, 2017, after damage due to Hurricane Irma.

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of the day. As the chairman, I had to make the call. They were great about it. But I don't think our USGA relationship is over."

The move of the Women's Mid-Am was just the third time in USGA history that a championship site had to be changed. It was moved to the Champions Club in Houston in November, and Naples' Mary Jane Hiestand made it all the way to the final before losing.

Quail Creek is ready to take another step back on that path.

This week, Hunter revealed that the Florida Women's Open and Women's Senior Open -- both of them Florida State Golf Association events -- will be played at Quail Creek from Aug. 10-12. The Women's Open has a maximum field of 156 players and a \$50,000 total purse.

Naples' Emma Bradley, an Ole Miss commit, tied for sixth last year as an amateur, and Hiestand, a Hideout member, was fifth in the Senior Open. LPGA Tour player Sandra Changkija won the State Open, and former tour player Barb Bunkowsky was the Senior Open champion.

"We're excited to be back in it," Hunter said of hosting a tournament of that scale. "We're excited to hear and to see what the changed golf course will do with those top players."

Quail Creek's resurrection goes beyond getting the Florida Women's Open. The club's tennis shop was severely damaged by Irma, but the club is turning that around by becoming what it believes to be the first in the country to build an integrated facility that will house everything -- golf, tennis, and fit-



Quail Creek Country Club golf superintendent Kevin Leo (left) and general manager/COO Don Hunter pose in front of a downed tree on Oct. 9, 2017, after Hurricane Irma hit Naples on Sept. 10, 2017. SUBMITTED

ness -- with it designed to incorporate all three with its members.

"We're putting it in the way of the player," Hunter said, more referring to the opportunities for fitness. "It's all about convenience. When it's separate, it's so easy not to do it. You put it in their path and then they're spending 15 more minutes, 20 more minutes at the end of their round. It'll change everything."

"This is where we're headed."

As part of an \$18.5 million capital project, the existing tennis and fitness centers, golf pro shop, halfway house and cart barn will be demolished, with the new sports and fitness center taking their place. A tennis exhibition court as well as pickleball courts also are among the additions.

Before all of that even was a thought, Dero, the director of golf, was the first of dozens of employees with a chainsaw in their hands as the Irma cleanup that including removal of 4,000 downed or damaged trees started. Leo, the super-

intendent, prepped the Quail and Creek Courses as much as possible before the hurricane, and then everyone worked tirelessly to get them ready for play. Both courses were fully open Nov. 28, 2 1/2 months after Irma hit.

"We had a lot of work to do -- vegetation removal," Leo said. "We started September 11th and we opened up nine holes 36 days later, another nine two weeks later, and both courses were open for Thanksgiving in November."

"The membership and the homeowners association here at Quail Creek, they got together and it was all for one and one for all. They really united -- the membership, the management, the homeowners association. We had to do it. The (maintenance) shop was Hurricane Central for months."

The Quail and Creek Courses now play a little differently due to what Hunter and Leo don't want to call a renovation. So it's more of an "Irma-va-tion." In addition to the loss of the 4,000 trees, all of the bunkers were wiped out and had to be rebuilt.

"The course does play a little different, in many cases better," Hunter said.

"The turf quality is better from the 'vegetation removal' from Hurricane Irma," Leo added with a chuckle.

Partly to speed up getting the courses reopened, the bunkers were rebuilt with larger, bigger faces. And that makes them easier to see from the fairway.

"It was a significant design change," Hunter said.

"(The course) plays better," Leo said.

Everything is more open with those trees gone, and in order to get the tree debris out, Leo carefully planned access trails that minimized further damage to the turf. And now those trails have stayed, giving golfers and even the maintenance crew more routes to get around the courses.

"We're left with a better product through the process," Hunter said. "All of (Leo's) planning was basically a win-win."

In the days of Irma's approach, everyone at least had to be ready for a lose-lose. Some models had a Category 5 storm coming with horrific storm surge. Thankfully that didn't pan out to that degree, but there still was plenty of damage.

"(Leo) runs 100 percent on stress and turns it into positive energy, where a lot of people don't do that," Hunter said. "So he was in gameday mode."

Dero, who was staying at a member's home, was far away from the club's gate. He started cleaning up from there, while Hunter and Leo started at the gate.

"(Dero) started cutting from that side until the gate, and we started from the gate toward Mike," Hunter said.

Hunter said about 30 percent of the club's employees had stayed through the storm -- "Of the 30 percent, 100 percent were hands on deck," he said. "We had dishwashers and busboys picking up sticks, running rakes."

This wasn't the first time Mother Nature had unleashed its fury. In late August, the courses were hit by a deluge of 13.5 inches of rain. That didn't put hosting the USGA Women's Mid-Am in serious jeopardy, but added to the workload to make it happen. Then Irma took that completely out of the equation.

But Leo, for one, is tired of thinking about it.

"It's been a good season," he said. "In Naples, everybody seems to be good (with their golf courses). Everyone's having a great year. It's almost like you could use Hurricane Irma as a crutch. But I was saying a month and a half, a month ago, I'm done using that excuse. Hurricane Irma is in the rear-view mirror. We're in a good spot."