

Ace in the Hole

Donald Trump says his new course in Rancho Palos Verdes will be the best in the state. After spending more than \$260 million rebuilding the site that was sunk by a landslide, it would be wise not to bet against him.

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Donald Trump has a vision, and it comes with a view.

As he stands on the 18th tee of his new course — Trump National Golf Club, Los Angeles — the pounding surf of the Pacific Ocean is below to his left and the rest of his 260-acre property spreads out to his right. He imagines Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson in a PGA Tour event hitting tee shots over the coastal canyon, into the teeth of the ocean breeze, and toward a green 520 yards away.

The 18th tee is a fitting place for Trump to survey his property, which could be the most expensive golf course ever built — \$264 million and counting. It's fitting because, like most of the course — which began as the Pete Dye-designed Ocean Trails — the finishing hole and new course have been redesigned by Trump with new tees, wider fairways and new bunkers. The 18th hole alone cost \$61 million to build, making it, as Trump likes to say, “the most expensive chunk of golf real estate on the planet.”

But the symbolism of the 18th hole lies deeper than its cost. For this is the place, and the hole, where one dream died and another was born. The failed dream was that of a man and his two sons who fought for 30 years to get a golf course built on a pristine stretch of coastline atop the bluffs of Rancho Palos Verdes before it came crashing down in a landslide. The ongoing dream is that of a man fueled by ambition and grandiose visions of turning the same pristine stretch into “the most spectacular course in California.”

“No one has ever seen anything like this,” Trump said of the course, which opens for public play this month. “There is nothing that you can compare it to because no course has this much coastline.”

It's hard to disagree. Ocean views greet golfers at every hole, and Trump's team has moved millions of yards of dirt, built massive retaining walls, elevated tee boxes and created a new golf course out of one that was spectacular to begin with.

“Pete Dye built a good golf course, but what we've done is build a great course,” Trump said. “This really has nothing to do with Ocean Trails. It's completely new. We ripped down that course and built a new one. We used much of the routing they had but it's wider, nearly 1,000 yards longer and everything is new, from the tees and fairways to the traps and the sand. It's the first Donald J. Trump signature golf course. I couldn't have asked a designer to do this, because they would never have asked any client for as much money as this has taken.”

Trump, an avid golfer since college and the owner of private courses in Florida, New Jersey and New York, believes that, from the back tees — which measure more than 7,300 yards — Trump National, Los Angeles “is the hardest course I've ever seen and I have one in New York rated 155.”

A variety of tees reduce that length to more manageable distances, but regardless of where players choose to hit from they'll pay the same price: \$195 Monday through Thursday and \$300 on weekends and holidays.

Trump, who purchased the financially embattled course for \$27 million in 2002, loves to talk and dream big. The same panache and sense of drama that has invigorated his other real estate holdings — from international properties to the \$5 billion Trump Place development in New York — and business ventures, such as his hit TV show “The Apprentice,” infuses his newest golf course, from the less-than-subtle name to the cascading waterfalls he's built on the first and 17th greens. He's completely overhauled the clubhouse, is in the midst of selling multimillion-dollar housing lots, has plans to build golf villas that will turn the property into a seaside resort, and is committed to building a 350-yard driving range that will cost \$300 million — sort of.

“You can't have a great facility without a great driving range and I was determined to have one, so we basically wiped away 30 housing lots — which would get \$10 million each — and we're putting in a driving range,” Trump said. “That makes it the most expensive driving range the world has ever seen.”

In other words, Trump loves throwing money at the problem.

“Everything is the highest quality and I'll put this course against any other in the state. Even Pebble Beach,” Trump said. “I love Pebble Beach and have great respect for it. It's one of my favorite courses. But this course is better than Pebble Beach, I'm absolutely convinced of it. I don't think there's a piece of land like this in the country, and definitely not in one of the great cities of the world like Los Angeles.”

While the golfing public will ultimately decide whether Trump National Golf Club, Los Angeles, is California's greatest course, it clearly ranks among the most fascinating ever built. Its long, colorful saga began long before Trump stunned the golf industry — and employees at Ocean Trails — by walking into a meeting in July 2002 and announcing to the staff that he was their new boss.

For decades, the land was a contentious battleground on which many political, legal, environmental and

business clashes were waged. Questions over the land's use helped spark the state's coastal environmental movement as well as Southern California's slow growth movement, and even affected a major change in the way the state's cities are incorporated.

The site was a 200-acre garbanzo bean farm when Edward Zuckerman, a Los Angeles lawyer turned real estate developer, purchased it in the early 1950s. Zuckerman, a founding member of Brentwood Country Club and a past president of the Southern California Golf Association, planned to shape the land into a golf course and real estate development.

In 1970, Zuckerman began making overtures about building 1,200 apartment units, a 200-room luxury hotel and a nine-hole golf course on the property, which, at the time, was located in unincorporated Los Angeles County. But environmental and slow growth activists mounted a successful legal challenge that led to the incorporation of Rancho Palos Verdes in 1973. The new city imposed a moratorium on coastal development and created more stringent zoning guidelines, effectively killing Zuckerman's proposal.

For 10 years the golf course idea lay dormant until Barry Hon, an Orange County developer, acquired a 100-acre parcel just east of Zuckerman's property. Hon and Zuckerman joined forces and submitted a proposal in 1989 that would include a championship golf course and approximately 125 housing lots. The estimated cost: \$95 million. Pete Dye, the dean of modern golf design, was hired. But environmentalists, led by the Sierra Club, fought against the plan, which was rejected in 1993 by the California Coastal Commission for not including enough public access, such as hiking trails.

A retooled proposal, now called Ocean Trails and owned exclusively by Edward Zuckerman's two sons, earned approval in 1994. But the court battles continued — most around the fact that the endangered Coastal California gnatcatcher, a small migratory bird, called the site home. Groundbreaking began four years later on a course that its original designer wasn't happy with.

"We were given 300 gorgeous acres to build the equivalent of Pebble Beach, but by the time it came to building, they'd taken a lot of it away to save the gnatcatcher, or bike trails, or this and that, and we were forced to jam it in on a much smaller parcel," Dye told this magazine a year ago.

"I fought the environmental people until I was blind out there. Before the golf course was there, it was just a bunch of bike trails and dust; it was a mess. We could have created a more environmentally sensitive area, but when they caught wind a course was going up, all of a sudden it was all about saving those 11 gnatcatchers, even though anyone knows that any gnatcatcher with any sense left L.A. and moved to Mexico because of the pollution. It was ridiculous. I hated to see such a great opportunity wind up being pushed together on a tight piece of ground."

Forced to work with very tight fairways, Dye still managed to create a course that drew rave reviews by those fortunate enough to play it. In the spring of 1999, nine holes were completed and a televised celebrity golf tournament was held. An opening date of July 2 was set by the two sons of Edward Zuckerman, who had a beautiful golf course that left them millions of dollars in debt.

But on the morning of June 2, a landslide moved 17 acres of earth beneath the 18th fairway toward the ocean. The landslide ruined the Zuckerman's real estate deal, driving them further into debt. Ocean Trails opened as a 15-hole golf course (the 18th had to be reconstructed and two other holes served as staging areas for the dirt) in October 2000. But the financial hemorrhaging continued for the Zuckermans, who eventually lost the course in bankruptcy court in February 2002.

Trump, who had visited Ocean Trails in March 2001 and talked to the Zuckermans about buying in as a partner, purchased the 15-hole course for \$27 million in August 2002. He said shortly after his purchase that he expected to spend approximately \$25 million lengthening and toughening the course, building a driving range and sprucing up the clubhouse. But those preliminary reports don't come close to matching what he's actually done. Pete Dye's 6,400-yard course now stretches to 7,320 yards, and the narrow fairways that frustrated him have been greatly widened.

"This course bears absolutely no relation to Ocean Trails," Trump said. "It's brand new. We have all new fairways, new traps, new sand, new everything. We have done things here, like the waterfalls and these massive retaining walls to elevate the tees, that no one has ever done before. It has cost a lot of money, but I told the city when I bought it that it could either be a really good golf course or we could close for two years and make it into a great golf course. And that's what we have. But we couldn't have done it without working with the Coastal Commission, which has been absolutely great."

And, by all accounts, Trump has been involved in nearly every detail, from installing a 30-foot Italian fountain at the clubhouse entrance to "suggesting" how the grass should be cut.

"We did all the work internally but Donald Trump's ideas are everywhere," said Ashley Cooper, a managing partner for Trump Golf Management, a company created by Trump to oversee the management of his courses and acquisition of new properties. "He has great input on every golf course we do because he has an extraordinarily good eye and his insights are great. He master planned the real estate, redesigned the clubhouse and was involved in everything."

Although the grand opening is set for this month, Trump's course will continue to undergo changes. It is scheduled to host the LPGA's Office Depot Championship in September and you can bet that it will make a few more appearances on "The Apprentice." (At the end of the first season, winner Bill Rancic was offered a choice between managing the course or overseeing a building project in Chicago. He chose the Windy City.)

And Trump's plan to turn the property into a golf resort, complete with a day spa, world-class practice facility and golf villas, will merely continue the ongoing transformation of this spectacular piece of coastal property.

"Like I've said, this is fun. I do other things for money," Trump said. "I mean, who else gets two miles along the ocean? You can't even build a house anymore along the ocean, and I've got a golf course. And it's always been about the golf here. Even when the mansions are completed, they won't interfere with the golf. You won't even be able to see most of them from the golf course. If there was anything planned that would hurt the course in any way I wouldn't do it because everything up to this point has been to make the greatest, most spectacular golf course that you've ever seen. It's been an amazing experiment, and I don't think anyone's going to be disappointed."