

The West's Best: "T" is for Trump

by FG Staff and Contributors Reno, NV

Some call it too penal. Some say it's too tricked up, that the waterfalls don't fit, or the greens are too severe, the sand is too white or blah blah blah.

We've heard it all, but having played it more times than most journalists, we beg to differ on all counts. Trump National Los Angeles rocks. And rolls. And bowls us over every time we play it, whether we shoot in the 70s, 80s, 90s or, yes, even in the triple-digits.

We understand the criticisms and are tempted to applaud them, just to solidify our (somewhat) contrarian position that Trump has worked miracles on this Palos Verdes cliff overlooking the Pacific.



Trump National's architect of record checks out his handiwork on No. 18 green.

Perhaps if his name wasn't on the gilded sign at the front entrance, or on the shirts and hats in the pro shop, or the water bottles, or especially on the scorecard as the architect of record, and perhaps if he hadn't sunk more than \$250 million into bringing the former Ocean Trails up to his standards, he would catch more of a break from the naysayers. But like all mega-whatevers – billionaires, TV stars, trendsetters and skilled self-promoters – Donald Trump is a magnet for controversy. And this golf course has been nothing if not controversial from virtually the day it opened, when the 18th hole collapsed toward the sea, setting the previous owners up for certain failure... and creating an opportunity for a guy with the muscle and pocket power to take it over and make it better.

Trump certainly has done that.

By any measure, the golf course is much, much better than the Pete Dye original; it's a more engaging test of golf. The ocean views from every hole are still there. So are the environmentally sensitive areas lining most holes, which come into play only with the most egregious of offline tee shots. So is the constant 5 percent grade toward the epic final hole, the most expensive chunk of golf real estate in human history. So is the original routing, though it's now nearly a thousand yards longer, and the final holes bear little resemblance to the old links-style layout. Greens are bigger. Bunkers are much bigger, filled with bright white limestone and crushed marble and sharp-shaped like Augusta National. Sightlines are better, more defined. New tee boxes are tucked into hillsides atop retaining walls of Palos Verdes stone, or carved onto pedestals of earth against a background of blue-gray sea. It's simply a new golf course, and that brings up a vital point: This is no longer the work of Dye or Tom Fazio, who laid out Trump's three East Coast courses and consulted here early on.

"Is it a Pete Dye design? No. Is it a Tom Fazio design? No. It's a Trump Signature Design golf course," says General Manager Mike Van der Goes.

The Man himself concurs, then explains why he went from design apprentice to the project's lead architect.

"I could have just fixed it up a little bit and opened it a year ago, but I decided not to do that," Trump told Fairways + Greens in 2005. "It's a Donald J. Trump design, you know."

He visits the site as often as he can, tweaking the brand of game it demands from pros and average Joes alike – including the LPGA stars who competed in the Office Depot Invitational in October 2005 and the guys and gals duking it out in The Golf Channel's latest "Big Break" installment.

"Mr. Trump, being able to play a lot of the golf courses you and I only wish we could, and having the circle of friends that he has, has a wealth of knowledge on what a golf hole should and can look like. He takes those visions and experiences and brings them back here," Van der Goes says.

With so much moolah and experience on the line at Trump National, the man himself admits he had more leeway to build it to his personal vision.

"Frankly, no architect would tell you to do what I did, especially on the first hole. Like using Palos Verdes stone to put that No. 1 tee box 40 feet up the hill. It's too expensive, but I did it anyway, I did the right thing. That tee used to be down in a well; now it's almost 100 yards farther back and high up, above the ocean."

And we can't overlook the waterfalls. After all, they'll be overlooking us: After hitting right into them from the No. 1 fairway, No. 4 tee (a new addition for 2006) or No. 17 tee, golfers drive their carts under their upper reaches, à la Disneyland, and marvel at the manmade wizardry of it all – of pumping 7,000 gallons per minute into a pond below the green, and somehow making it look natural enough to fit in with the

rest of the landscape. Some people will find it kitschy, but we call it cool.

Of course, Trump agrees with us and is quick to defend his manmade additions. Just don't call them artificial.

"It's not artificial – it's real stone," he told FG during a visit in November. "The material came right out of the ground here. I would not use artificial because it wouldn't look the way it looks. And it's Palos Verdes stone, which is one of the most expensive stones. People send it all over the world when they're building houses – it's a beautiful stone. If properly placed and properly executed, and using the real stone from the area, like Palos Verdes stone in this case, I think waterfalls add a tremendous amount to the golf course.

Just take a look at the opener, which we believe is second only to Jack Nicklaus' No. 5 renovation at Pebble Beach when it comes to upgrading a golf hole.

"The first hole is a hole that would be a nothing hole without the waterfall – it just wouldn't be the same thing," Trump says. "The 17th hole is more for beautification than it is for anything else. It's an exciting hole – it's a beautiful thing seeing all of that water, 7,000 gallons a minute, dropping down as you're hitting your shot 230 yards away."

And he laughs about his detractors, who he finds usually have something to say about his waterfalls in one breath and are snapping pictures in front of them the next.

"Waterfalls are very simple," he says. "They're highly expensive, and the people who complain about them are the people who don't have the money to build them. And I've noticed my competitors are oftentimes complaining about the fact that I have waterfalls. Now I don't have them at all my courses – I don't have them at Bedminster – but I do have them wherever it's appropriate.

"I have found that waterfalls are a tremendously expensive asset. But they add color, they add flavor, they add beauty to a course. I can't imagine that anyone would complain."

Most importantly, they add excitement.

"Because we're on the coast, we're not allowed to have it as a private course," he says. "When people come here, they want excitement, and the ocean is exciting and beautiful, but a waterfall adds a certain life to a hole or a course that you wouldn't have without it."

And despite the grumblings of the minority, Trump believes his creations are more powerful than the crashing waters themselves.

"It was very expensive to do, and it took me an extra year to build it because it was a very long process to get them approved," he says. "But in the end, it's a much better course because of them, and I think we're successful because of those waterfalls. When you're on the ocean, you're going to be successful anyway, but I think we have a much better course because of them."

Waterfalls or not, Trump National is a damn good golf course, and, from the tips, as brutal as they come at par 71. Three 4-pars measure more than 500 yards, two of them into the prevailing southwest breeze. No. 5, for instance, asks for a 240-yard carry over two barrancas.

No. 18, meanwhile is 512 yards from the pros' tees, open to a very choice few players. Again, it requires a monster carry to a tiered fairway, with a half-dozen bunkers to the left and a hillside to the right. Then it's at least 200 yards home, to the most heavily bunkered green on the course. Can you say, "Perfect for TV?"

Other photogenic holes abound. No. 10, a short par 4, runs along a cove west of the clubhouse, its back tee nudging up against a large, grassy park where weddings and other special events take place. No. 11 was transformed from a ho-hum short par 4 to an outstanding, well-bunkered par 3. The green on No. 12 is a triple-tiered beast with a three-club stretch from front to back – the perfect place for cameras to catch three-putt groans or birdie-bomb smiles.

"The greens at 14 and 12 are two of the tough ones," Trump says. "At 12, you don't have to put the pin up on top, in fact it's easy if you put it in the middle since everything moves down there. But I've never seen greens like that. They're incredible. It's almost like torture."

Who knew pain could be so sweet?

Trump National is the public version of his private clubs. Challenge and beauty are the bedrock of this transformed slice of coastline, but when the round is done, everything must be first-class and firmly within the Trump milieu, right down to the gold leaf-painted ceilings in the new high-end restaurant, the food itself, the valet service and the practice area – which boasts an ocean view that rivals those on the course itself.

Factor in the course's immediate cachet among the Hollywood set (Mark Wahlberg was spotted having an after-round lunch with his buddies, including the real-life "Johnny Drama"), and we've got plenty of reason to tip our hat – and give No. 1 status – to Southern California's newest golf architect. FG