

A Story Worth Telling

By: Nathan Crace Date: December 26, 2004

When I received a FedEx envelope on December 7th, 2004, I noticed that the address label was handwritten from Ron Whitten at *Golf Digest*. A month or so before, I had talked with Ron for about twenty minutes on the phone about Copper Mill Golf Club in Zachary, Louisiana for what he said at the time was an article about “golf in Louisiana” for the January 2005 issue. He had recently played the course and wanted to ask me a few questions. So when I opened the envelope to reveal the letter within, it’s understandable that I had to read it two or three times for the content to fully soak in: “I’m pleased to let you know that Copper Mill Golf Club has been selected as *Golf Digest*’s Best New Affordable Public Course of 2004.”

I wondered, “Best new affordable public course where? In Louisiana?” It took a few seconds (though it seemed like minutes) for the brain synapses to make the connection that by virtue of supplying no geographic reference, it meant by default the entire United States! Copper Mill was *the* best new affordable public course in America? I picked up the phone and called Copper Mill General Manager Mark Simoneaux and, to my surprise, he had not heard anything from *Golf Digest*...yet...but it was still only mid-morning.

Mark and I had both thought for a couple of weeks that there was something more to the “story” Ron Whitten was writing than he had let on to me over the phone because soon after conducting our phone interview, one of *Golf Digest*’s top photographers had dropped in on Copper Mill unexpectedly to take some photos of the course. Mark thought it was strange too and asked the photographer if they just picked courses at random to photograph. Unbeknownst to Mark, the photographer was sworn to secrecy and he would not let on—only vaguely mentioning that he typically took pictures of courses in the top three or so of any given category.

Our immediate reaction was “Top Three Courses in Louisiana!” Once again, after further introspection, we counted down the Country Club of Louisianas, the English Turns, the Money Hills and other perennial chart toppers and were again befuddled. That’s when we settled on “Top Three Public Courses in Louisiana” and left it at that until we got official word. That had to be what it was all about...or so we thought.

Needless to say, the end result of all of the *Golf Digest* secrecy was both unexpected and—if only briefly—quite surreal. So to was the fact that out of a possible total of 50 points for criteria such as shot values, design variety, resistance to scoring, memorability and aesthetics, and walkability, Copper Mill scored an impressive 47.341 by the *Golf Digest* panelists. But for all the fanfare and attention the course has received after being named the “Best New Affordable Golf Course in America,” there is a more important story yet to be told: how the course came to be in the first place. It’s a story you won’t hear from Mark Simoneaux because he’s not one to toot his own horn. So I’ll toot it for him. I hope he doesn’t mind.

When I first heard Mark’s name, it was either 1996 or 1997—I can’t remember exactly. Mark had built a career at a chemical plant near Baton Rouge, owned a small driving range in Zachary, and dreamed of something bigger. Much bigger. He had his eye on a piece of property north of town that he felt had enough room for an 18-hole golf course and some residential home sites—or so he thought. We did some preliminary master planning for him and it turned out that the property had some low areas draining into Copper Mill Bayou (the namesake of the project—although it would not eventually be built on that property) that would require some permitting and also shorten the length of the course. Mark was undeterred and pushed forward seeking investors and developers who too would believe in his dream. We’ve all heard of people being driven by the goal of pulling off such a project, but at times it seemed like Mark had all of the odds against him and would not quit. I cannot tell you how many times he would call me at 10:00 at night and we would talk for an hour or so about some questions he had or an idea he was thinking of or some budget numbers he had been re-working. It was as if he spent every waking moment (and probably some sleeping ones) either thinking about Copper Mill or working on it.

Through about five or so years of pushing the idea, three different developers (who had jumped into and out of the project), and two separate pieces of property, Mark stuck with it because he believed. He found a second piece of property that proved to be a gem on Scenic Highway just 15 minutes north of Baton Rouge and almost by accident ran into Tony Bruce who (along with his son Ross) would develop the property as it is today. I could write a short story about all of the details that I know of and that wouldn’t even scrape the surface of what Mark could tell you. But my editors only give so much space each month. Suffice it to say, if not for Mark Simoneaux and his determination, the Best New Affordable Public Course would not be in Zachary, Louisiana.

The course has been inundated with publicity since the *Golf Digest* award, but Mark was left out of their story. Don’t misunderstand: the honor is definitely exciting for Copper Mill and those of us involved with the course and I think it’s a great course! But the story of how the course came to be through one man’s persistence and determination is an example of the proverbial American dream come true in storybook fashion. And it’s definitely a story worth telling.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect whose freelance “Lipouts” column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2004.