



Jerry Laizure

All spruced up and looking good, the Jimmie Austin OU Golf Club hosted a national championship and is ready for more. **BY JAY C. UPCHURCH**

The Jimmie Hits the

OU's Perry Maxwell-designed golf course underwent a major upgrade in 1996, but when new golf director Rodney Young arrived in 2007, he inherited a big job in readying the facility for the 2009 U.S. Public Links Championship, the University's first USGA hosting opportunity.



They used to call it “The Ranch.” And for good reason.

Each year, when the cool of spring gave way to sweltering summer heat that sucked all of the moisture right out of the Oklahoma ground, the University of Oklahoma Golf Course turned hard and brown, and a bit unfriendly. Good drives often fell victim to bad bounces, and normally routine iron shots played from the parched fairways were—well, anything but routine.

Renowned course architect Perry Maxwell designed and built the course around Bishop Creek, between the south edge of the OU campus and the U.S. Naval Air Station in 1951. But without the aid of a proper irrigation system, the layout never truly matured into the masterpiece many felt it could be.

Most of the water that did get distributed around the course was reserved for the putting greens that appeared like emerald oases at the end of overcooked fairways that were often barely distinguishable from the wispy ranned rough.

Despite earning a reputation for being less than enticing over the years, the course remained home turf for the OU golf programs and retained a certain amount of underappreciated charm, thanks to its Maxwell legacy. But besides hosting a handful of high school state tournaments over the years, the course was rarely thought of as a legitimate championship venue.

That perception, however, has changed dramatically since the course—now known as the Jimmie Austin OU Golf Club—was the focus of a \$4.5 million renovation project in 1995. Over the next decade, the course consistently ranked high among public university golf facilities, a fact further enhanced by an additional

\$750,000 upgrade in 2008 that included the complete resurfacing of all 18 greens, reconfigured bunkers and a state-of-the-art drainage system.

The latter project was part of a master plan designed to help get the OU course ready to host its first ever United States Golf Association championship this summer. During the week of July 13-18, the Jimmie was introduced to a national audience when it welcomed a world-class amateur field for the 2009 U.S. Public Links Championship.

As hoped, it played to reviews that would have made Maxwell proud.

“There was nothing wrong with Mr. Maxwell’s layout—it was really good,” explains Robert O. Smith, who lettered for the OU men’s golf team in the early 1960s and later served as head professional at the OU course from 1978-87. “But the course always suffered from a lack of proper irrigation, especially during the summer and into fall. We did the best we could with what we had to work with, and the rest of the time, we prayed for rain.”

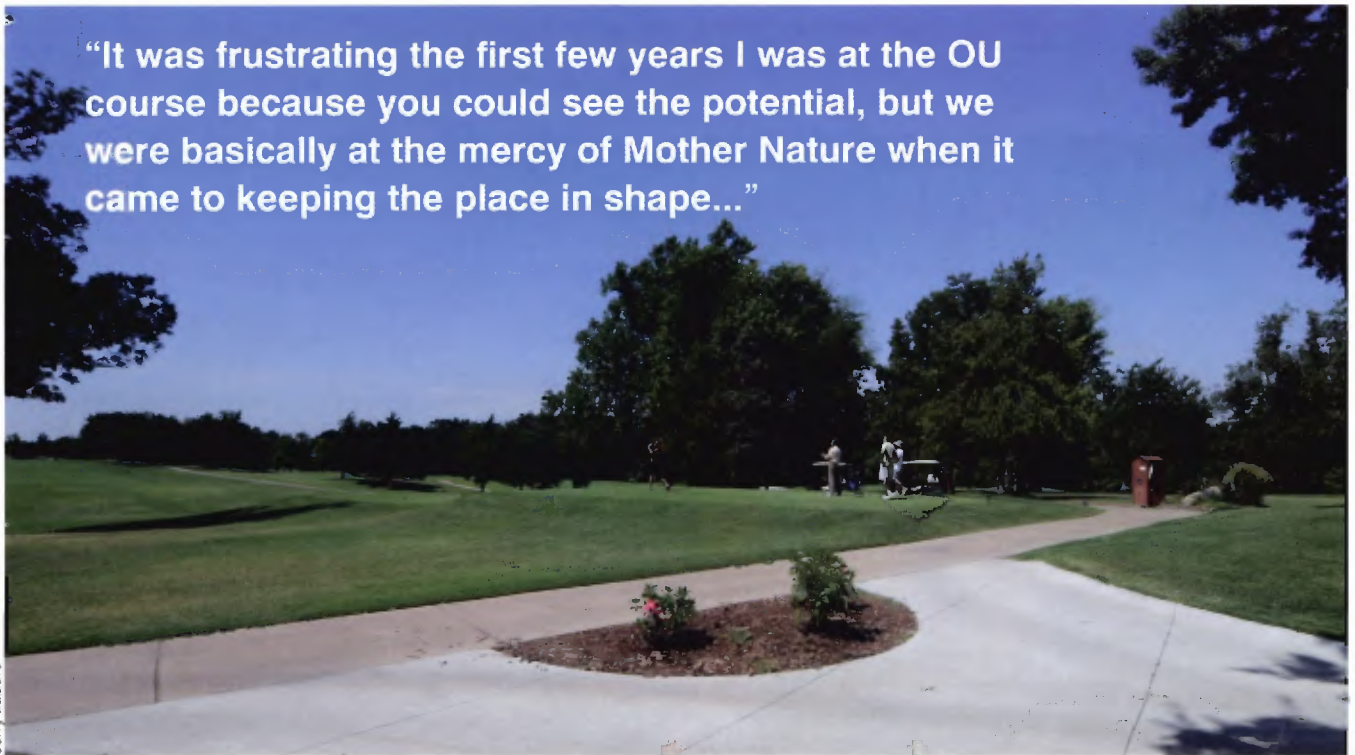
For years, there was talk of upgrading the course by way of an irrigation system, and in 1982, University officials approved a plan to dam Bishop Creek and use the reservoir as part of a new watering system. But before the project could be put into motion, a group of professors from the OU botany department successfully argued that damming the creek would adversely affect the area’s fish and wildlife.

The decision effectively sentenced the course to a dozen more long, dry summers, until finally, in 1994, the old course got a reprieve from the OU Regents. Motivated by the fact Oklahoma State was in the process of build-

Big Time

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More than \$400,000 in private donations went into renovation of the OU clubhouse, golf shop and fine tuning the course itself. The result brought rave reviews from the country's best amateur players and from the sponsoring United States Golf Association.

ing a championship-caliber course called Karsten Creek, the Regents approved plans for a renovation project that included a \$700,000 irrigation system and helped breathe life into the facility as never before.

“We called it ‘The Ranch,’ but there really was a fantastic golf course waiting there to be discovered. All it needed was a little water and the vision to move in the right direction,” says Andrew Magee, a three-time Sooner All-American (1982-84) and long-time PGA Tour veteran.

While Karsten Creek, located just west of Stillwater, earned a reputation as a top-flight facility almost immediately upon its completion in 1994, the OU course took a more gradual path to celebrated status—almost a half century more.

“I believe the course showed this summer with the Publinks that it can hold its own as a championship-caliber course. You’re talking about some of the best amateur players in the world participating in that event, and only a handful were under par during the stroke-play portion,” says Richard Buchanan, who spent 15 years (1987-2002) at the course as both an assistant and head pro.

“It was frustrating the first few years I was at the OU course because you could see the potential, but we were basically at the mercy of Mother Nature when it came to keeping the place in shape. Once they completed the renovation project, you knew that was going to change everything.”

OU hired course architect Bob Cupp to revamp the old Maxwell layout, which he did over an 18-month period from February 1995 to August 1996. When Cupp finished, the course had a completely new look and feel, yet still retained a sense of the original design.

Less than a year after the makeover, OU hosted the NCAA



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Rodney Young’s entire staff and 327 volunteers combined efforts to make the 2009 U.S. Publinks event an unqualified success.

Men’s Central Regional Championship. Although the course had yet to fully mature, the majority of reviews were highly favorable, thus setting the stage for possible future championship events.

“We’re here first and foremost for OU’s golf teams, to provide a quality place to practice and play,” says OU Director of Golf Rodney Young. “But we also want people everywhere to know we have great golf here in Norman, and I think having the opportunity to host the Public Links Championship and to

bring that kind of exposure to our course, the University and to Norman obviously helps accomplish that goal.

“As we continue to improve the course and its facilities, our continued goal will be to host championship-type events like possibly a U.S. Amateur or Mid-Amateur, or maybe a U.S. Women’s Amateur. There are definitely some opportunities out there now that we have proven what we can do.”

Young took over the OU reins from Stan Ball in January 2007 after spending eight years as head pro and general manager at Desert Willow Resort in Palm Desert, California. The Enid native returned to familiar turf—he spent his freshman season with the Sooners before transferring to Cameron University in 1986—knowing present and future expectations for the OU course were enormous.

So far, Young has been up to the challenge.

“Rodney has performed remarkably since returning to OU. He’s cultivated and developed a strong staff and led the resurgence of all aspects of the Jimmie Austin OU Golf Club,” says Chris Kuwitzky, OU associate vice president for administrative affairs and chief financial officer, administration and finance. “His efforts, along with those of countless others, culminated in the University hosting the Amateur Public Links Championship this past July. It was a great success for OU, its golf course and the Norman community.”

According to United States Golf Association officials, the OU Golf Club did a superb job of organizing, fundraising and hosting the Publinks.

“Everything was terrific, from the quality of the site to the quality of the volunteers and right down to every little detail,” offers USGA official Bill McCarthy. “Rodney and his staff truly stepped up to the plate and did a fantastic job. Ultimately, those folks are responsible for the overall success of the championship, and in this case, that was certainly true.”

In the months leading up the 84th edition of the Publinks, Young’s support crew raised more than \$400,000 through donations that went to help renovate the OU clubhouse, golf shop and various aspects of the golf course itself.

In all, 327 volunteers signed on to help make the event an overwhelming success, not only in the eyes of the USGA and the public, but also where the competitors were concerned.

“You expect USGA events to be top-notch, but I was extremely impressed with the entire event at OU. They took unbelievable care of us, and the golf course was fantastic,” says Nick Geyer, a senior at the University of New Mexico. “From the moment I arrived until it was time to go, I have nothing but praise for everyone involved in putting together such a great tournament.”

The overall strength of the golf course and the surrounding facility is always the No. 1 consideration for the USGA when



Robert Taylor

The Dick Askew Scoreboard
Funded by
the Charlie Coe Family Fund
and
former members of the OU Golf Teams
In appreciation of
Dick's longtime support and friendship
of the Jimmie Austin OU Golf Club
and
the OU Golf Teams.

OU golf has no greater booster than alumnus Dick Askew, who not only was honored by the naming of the new scoreboard, but also operated it during Publinks.

selecting a host site for one of its championship events. If there were any questions about how the Jimmie would hold up against one of the best amateur fields of the year, they were quickly put to rest, according to McCarthy.

“We already knew the layout was terrific and would present a good challenge—and they did a great job getting it ready for API play, along with the entire facility,” adds McCarthy. “Honestly, in terms of amateur golf, I believe the Jimmie Austin is perfectly capable of hosting other big events.”

As for Young, he was more than happy to share the credit with his supporting cast.

“The success we experienced was a result of everyone here on staff working together to make it happen. We also could not have done it without the great support we received from the University, the city of Norman and the local business community,” says Young. “We were aggressive in the way we approached it, and we are definitely proud of the way it turned out. And now that we have done an event of this magnitude, we’ll be even more prepared, more tournament-ready for future events.”

The Jimmie has already secured the Big 12 Conference Women’s Golf Championships, set for April 22-25, 2010. Tune into the course Web site for more exciting tournament news at www.ougolfclub.com.

Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of *Sooner Spectator* magazine and writes freelance OU sports articles for *Sooner Magazine*.