

## Nicklaus takes hands on approach to crafting Greenbrier course



Doug Smock, Sports Writer

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DOUG SMOCK | Gazette-Mail

Jack Nicklaus (second from right) talks about changes he recommends from a blueprint of the Oakhurst course. He is designing the ridgetop course along with Gary Player, Lee Trevino and Arnold Palmer.

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS — Jack Nicklaus looks at the contour map of the Oakhurst golf course and sees two holes with side-by-side tee boxes, both going up a West Virginia mountainside.

As drawn up, the proposed sixth hole veers left and the 16th heads straight to the ridgetop. On this site visit Friday, the “Golden Bear” envisions a little earth shifted around, a bunker added here and there.

He considered the terrain on the sixth. “You’re going to have a high right, low left on sixth,” a member of his design team said.

“Instead of the high point being back here, your high point is going to be just past your landing area [on the tee shot],” Nicklaus replied. “We’ll just move a bunker to the middle, or something like that. You can see everything you’re doing and direct it, develop a strategy for [the golfers].”

At that point, he was asked if he was getting rid of a blind tee shot. Yes, but there’s more to it.

“I think golf uphill is an uncomfortable game. Now, you’re not going to avoid it with hills ...” Nicklaus said.

One of his cohorts: “Minimize it.”

Nicklaus said: “Just minimize it, that’s right.”

“The Golden Bear” has done this before, a few hundred times on just about every terrain, with a large variety of scenic views. Along with fellow golf legends Arnold Palmer, Lee Trevino and Gary Player, he must blend everything together in perfect harmony.

And be realistic. Take the 18th hole, earmarked as a par 5. There was to be a lake to the left of a small green, making as difficult a landing area as you’ll see anywhere.

Forget it, Nicklaus said. Looking behind the pole that marks the 18th green, he saw the severely sloping ground and remarked, “There’s no way to put a lake here.”

At the Oakhurst site, the dirt is turning and trees are being removed to make way for 18 holes, a driving range and a clubhouse. Finding your way around is half the fun — a dirt and gravel road turns off from Montague Drive, just off W.Va. 92 at the eastern edge of White Sulphur Springs, and seems to run forever.

At times, it’s difficult to picture construction of a playable course. As Nicklaus puts it, it’s a difficult property.

But not too difficult. With 375 courses in 36 countries and 45 more layouts under development, he has just about seen it all. “I’ve got one at Moonlight Basin [Montana] that makes this look like a flat piece of property,” he said.

It’s all relative. Oakhurst’s terrain won’t be like the Old White TPC, home of the Greenbrier Classic. Old White is flat by West Virginia standards.

Overlooking the historic nine-hole Oakhurst Links, Oakhurst will vary in elevation from 1,900 to 2,900 feet — the sixth tee at Old White is about 1,900. The ninth hole will drop about 200 feet into an open pasture, a substantial drop.

This will not be a public course. Oakhurst will augment a new neighborhood in the sprawling Greenbrier Sporting Club development with 402 homesites and 98 condominiums planned — and a private ski area.

Greenbrier resort owner (and West Virginia gubernatorial candidate) Jim Justice’s vision is to draw more of America’s leaders (and employers) to the state, to buy second homes or even primary residences.

That, and to build a golf course suitable for a major championship. The area’s rural location may work against that, but having four names attached to the course’s design makes an unprecedented statement.

Player was in last month and Trevino, the resort’s pro emeritus, has arrived for the summer. At age 86, Palmer doesn’t travel much.

Player has designed more than 300 courses and Palmer more than 200. Palmer and Nicklaus collaborated on King & Bear course, at the World Golf Village at St. Augustine, Florida.

Sorting out which legend added his vision to which parts of the Oakhurst course will be impossible.

“We never get all four of us in one spot to do it,” Nicklaus said. “I think we’ll get there. This a difficult property, as you can see; it has some pretty good views.”

Literature for the course lists the layout as a par-72, 8,042 yards off the tips. That’s EIGHT thousand if you need it spelled out.

Even with all the 350-yard bombers in today’s golf, Nicklaus will pass on that number.

“Jim wants 8,000 yards available — no one’s ever going to play golf at 8,000 yards. I certainly hope they don’t, anyway,” Nicklaus said. “I’d take 7,300, 7,400 off the back tees, 7,500. One day, you could play one hole 480 yards; the next day, you could play it 380 yards. You do that and you still have a good championship golf course, and that’s what we’re trying to do.”

Nicklaus got a lot done on Friday. That contour map will have to be redone.

“Third hole used to be a par 4, now we’ve got it as a par 5,” he said. “Fourth hole used to be a par 5, not it’s a par 4. Fifth hole is a par 3, but it was the ending of a par 5 before.

“We just talked about how we had to go way up a hill on 6 and 16 and then they split in different directions. Maybe we’ll just pluck the ground right out of there [on No. 6] and give it a little different situation to the hole. I think we can do that.”

And then there are the views. Look in any direction, you have mountains in the distance. Shoot, the gaze down the driving range will test the concentration.

The scenery was part of Nicklaus’ dilemma on the sixth and 16th holes, and all around the ridgetop. There are many other considerations on a new course, such as how to build around existing water and how much water to add (perhaps by feeding dried streams), where to place bunkers, how to keep play flowing.

Much work remains, with four grand designers to do it. Some time in 2017, they hope to see a finished product.

“The issue is how do you best utilize the land, how do you move the dirt and make it efficient to play golf, and make pretty vistas in your golf course,” Nicklaus said. “Put it all together and that’s what you want.”