

LINKS *Insider*

Your Weekly Round of the BEST of Golf



The Best Public Course in South Florida?

Few homes, firm conditions, traditional design elements, and more make Naples Beach Hotel and Golf Club a seriously good golf course.

When Hurricane Irma shifted west this past September, Naples, Fla. was in the middle of the path. Naples Beach Hotel and Golf Club braced for the storm by shuttering windows and removing anything loose from the golf course.

Once the storm passed and the resort team returned to assess the situation, they were relieved to find most of the damage was only superficial. Nearly all of the work done during the club's 2016 renovation remained intact.

"It's a mess, but it's a largely superficial mess," said General Manager John Parsons in the Naples Daily News. "We're lucky we're not under water. This is ugly, but this is ugliness that's repaired in one season."

Amazingly, cleanup at Naples Beach only took three weeks before the course was open for play. Staff and the community rallied together to recover after the brutal storm.

It was that community and the resort's ties to it that stood out during my stay at Naples Beach Hotel and Golf Club prior to Hurricane Irma. The hotel has been owned by the same Naples family since 1947 and the local connection is clear during a visit. I arrived on a nondescript Sunday and I found live music, hundreds of people dancing, and only a few remaining seats for dinner. I assumed a company was having a conference, but to my surprise, everyone at the bar was local to Naples. Every Sunday evening the hotel throws a party and the locals have been coming for years to drink and dance by the beach.



I visited Naples to play the renovated Naples Beach golf course. The original course was built in 1929 and at the time was only the second course in Naples (the first was a nine-holer with sand greens). Over the years the course was renovated several times following various hurricanes, and the result was a disjointed layout that suffered from mediocre conditioning.

In early 2016 ownership at Naples Beach hired course architects John Sanford and Jack Nicklaus to redesign the layout. Nicklaus's connection to the course? It was where he broke 40 for nine holes for the first time as an 11-year-old in 1951, only one year after he'd taken up the game.



The result of Nicklaus and Sanford's work is a completely new routing with fewer trees that makes significantly better use of the land.

Sanford included traditional design features such as a Redan green and numerous double greens that aren't typical at Florida resort courses. The new design also has fewer bunkers than most Florida designs and the architects used small lakes throughout the property to frame and divide holes instead of rough or trees. Homes only line the outside perimeter of the property, so the result is a very open feel with long views.



Due in part to the course's oceanside location and in part to its openness and lack of trees, the site can get very windy. Those same winds dry out the course, provide some serious challenge, and create firm and fast playing conditions. Many sets of tee mean the course won't be too long for anyone and it was refreshing to see a renovation that made a
