

Sudden

After quickly proving that golf was the proper purpose of a well-worn industrial site, **Chambers Bay** earned the ultimate endorsement of its new identity: a date with the U.S. Open.

By Joe Barks, Editor

Impact

Changing the Landscape, Part One: GOLF OR GO-CARTS?

Tony Tipton, a Project Manager for Pierce County in Washington state (directly south of Seattle), was in municipal planning heaven. In 2003, county officials gave Tipton a blank map of a 950-acre plot of land that included two miles of beachfront with gorgeous views of southern Puget Sound, and a simple direction: "Figure out what should go here."

Even better, Tipton knew he could reject anything that had an industrial flavor as undesirable from a "been there, done that" standpoint. The land's history included heavy use by paper and lumber mills for well over 100 years. Most recently, an open-pit sand and gravel mine had operated there, through a recently expired lease from the county (which had bought back the site in 1992). The contrast between what was left from the all-grey mining operation and the spectacular surrounding scenery was striking. Tipton's job was to find the best way to put all of the missing color back into the foreground of the landscape.

"Feasibility studies for a golf course on the site had been done in the late '90s, and the county got close to moving forward with those plans," Tipton reports. "But then 9/11 hit and pushed everything back."

A site that as recently as 2002 held nothing but colorless mounds of sand and gravel (right) now features a spectacular links course that will be displayed to the world through the 2015 U.S. Open.



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY CHAMBERS BAY KEMPE RESORTS. COURSE PHOTO BY AIDAN BRADLEY



General Manager Matt Allen has brought his Bandon Dunes experience to help Chambers Bay build on the inspiration it's already drawn from the famed Oregon course.

"When we picked it up again, we came up with a list of literally hundreds of ideas—everything from a motocross ATV park that could make easy use of the existing sand and gravel, to something boating-oriented that would take advantage of the marine access, to things like racetracks and ball fields," Tipton continues. "But we kept coming back to the fact that there was no public golf course in Western Washington sitting on prime water frontage like this.

"Plus, we saw other advantages of using the site for golf," Tipton adds. "We could utilize byproducts like reclaimed water and pelletized fertilizer from a nearby county wastewater treatment plant. And as part of developing the course, we could include other desirable open-space use, such as walking trails, public beaches and amphitheaters for community events."

Also giving golf a strong push to the top of the list was the buzz making its way up the coast from Oregon at that time over the phenomenal success of Bandon Dunes Golf Resort since its opening in 1999. While Bandon was a privately funded development



As many as 2,000 people now stroll through the Chambers Bay property each day—and with the course even more alluring than the trails, permanent signage (below) is needed to remind hikers that it's "walking path only."

(C&RB, September 2005), Tipton was encouraged by Pierce County Executive John Ladenburg, credited as the project's primary visionary, to pursue the parallels between the county's site and how Bandon Dunes was capturing the golfing world's fancy by offering public play on spectacular links-style courses carved from a very comparable setting.

The similarity with Bandon Dunes exerted a strong influence on Pierce County's eventual decision to sell \$21 million in tax-exempt bonds for the development of a public course to be named after Thomas Chambers, a settler who staked an original claim on the site in 1849.

"The county put up the property, and no general tax contributions were included," Tipton says. "We could have set out to build a \$50 million, parkland-style course with full clubhouse and other amenities. But because we were going to borrow 100% [of the development costs], we decided the market, and our citizens, would be better served by a links-style, walking-only course that would not only be more unique, but also better suited to the site.

"You have to remember, this site had been so industrial and off-limits to most of the public, no one had any idea it even existed, let alone what it had once been like," Tipton says. "We wanted to give it back to everyone in a way where, whether you were a golfer or not, you could just go there and immerse yourself in how it had originally been."



Changing the Landscape, Part Two: FESCUE TO THE RESCUE

While Pierce County held down the original cost and scale of Chambers Bay, it didn't skimp on finding qualified experts to help it develop a course that would have an instant, world-class impact. No less a designer than Robert Trent Jones II was selected to find a way to evoke Scotland from all of the sand.

The Garden and Leisure Furniture Specialists
Country Casual[®]
 TEAK GARDEN and SITE FURNITURE
 Over 30 Years of Quality and Design

SOURCEBOOK
www.countrycasual.com
 800-284-8325

T0811A6003

Chambers Bay AT A GLANCE

- Location: University Place, Wash.
- Opened for play: 2007
- Annual rounds: 36,000
- Ownership: Pierce County



- Management: KemperSports
- General Manager: **Matt Allen**
- Superintendent: **David Wienecke**
- Head Golf Pro: **Nyk Pike**
- Sales & Mktg. Dir.: **Jamie Fay**
- F&B Director: **Anthony Shipman**
- Chef: **Stefan Ferguson**



Although examples to follow were not exactly next door, Superintendent David Wienecke learned ways to bring Chambers Bay's fescue to life.

And not surprisingly, the county's search for a management firm to operate the property led to a contract with KemperSports, which now had Bandon Dunes' success prominently on its corporate resume.

Even with all of this high-powered support lined up, though, David Wienecke still felt quite alone in July 2006, when he arrived in Pierce County as Chambers Bay's Superintendent and KemperSports' first hire for the project. Despite a sterling background with Braemar Country Club in California and as a regional turf management expert for the United States Golf Association (USGA), Wienecke wondered, as he surveyed the site, if he might have literally gotten in over his head. "It was nothing but a big pit and huge piles of sand," he recalls.

Pierce County had decided that the site for the golf course itself would be "reduced" to 250 acres, and Jones' design called for keeping over two-thirds of that space as sand dunes. Wienecke also wouldn't have to worry about tree care—only one, retained to be the course's signature "Lone Fir" (see cover and photo, pgs. 16-17), was left in playable areas.

That left about 80 acres of turf to grow in—and Wienecke would get a new, state-of-the-art irrigation system and a plentiful supply of free, reclaimed water from the county treatment plant adjacent to the course. So what was the worry?

Nothing at all, unless you happen to be a superintendent who finds it useful to be able to see, touch and learn from living examples of what you're trying to create from scratch. But in this case, as Wienecke wrote in August 2006 in his first "Superintendent's Update" on the Chambers Bay web site, he was setting out to plant a 100% fescue course, but "the nearest golf course with a similar look and playing conditions is Bandon Dunes...and the next nearest is in the British Isles."

As he got into the grow-in, Wienecke found that even the connection to Bandon Dunes only went so far. "There's more wind there, and the temperatures are more moderate," he notes. But even as he found that he was truly venturing into new territory, he and his staff learned, through persistence and experimentation, how to bring a special playing surface to life.

"It's exceeded our wildest dreams," Wienecke said this October, when asked to assess how what he planted in 2006 has taken hold. "I've tried to incorporate as many Best Management Practices from other courses as I thought would apply

ritory, he and his staff learned, through persistence and experimentation, how to bring a special playing surface to life.

GREAT DESIGNS ARE BUILT FROM GREAT RELATIONSHIPS

Currahee Club Toccoa, Georgia

CLUBHOUSE DESIGN RENOVATION MASTER PLANNING

ARN ARCHITECTS

404.892.4510
www.ncgarch.com



The Chambers Bay developers retained walls from the gravel mine (below) that now stand as unique “Stonehenge”-like structures along its 18th hole, adding more distinctive character to the course and a connection to one of the site’s previous lives.

here, and we’ve learned other things on our own.”

Some of those lessons now represent bold new turf management practices in their own right that have led to unprecedented levels of consistency and firmness, especially for such a new course.

“It’s become a whole different kind of course maintenance,” Wienecke says. “We change directions each time we mow. We’ve backed off on top-dressing, and don’t roll as much. Spot-treating with herbicide has been minimal. And while we have more water than we can use, the emphasis has been on deep and infrequent irrigation—even in summer, we’ve gone up to 15 days between waterings.

“From all of this, we have less fragile, much healthier turf,” he says. “After two years, we already have eight-to-12-inch roots, and a course that plays better and is more resistant to disease.”

Changing the Landscape, Part Three: COMING OUT IN THE OPEN

As the color was put back into the old gravel pit, it didn’t take long for not only the people of Pierce County, but the world, to begin to find their way to Chambers Bay. After the course opened for play in September 2007, staffers were amazed at how quickly a world map, posted in the back of the shuttle that takes golfers to its first tee, filled up with pins that were pushed into it by visitors who wanted to mark the states and countries they’d come from to play this unique and exciting new course.

Then came February 2008 and the convergence of what Head Golf Professional Nyk Pike calls “the perfect storm”: low off-season rates, unseasonably warm weather, and the stunning announcement by the USGA that it, too, had already taken full notice



of what the fledgling course had to offer—and liked what it saw so much, it didn’t see any need to make Chambers Bay go through the usual proving period before landing a major tournament: It would host the 2010 U.S. Amateur and 2015 U.S. Open.

With that, the lid came completely off any chance that Chambers Bay would remain an out-of-the-way secret. “After the [USGA] announcements, the tee sheets started to fill up, and it really hasn’t stopped since,” says Pike, who projects that rounds in 2009 will total 36,000.

At the same time, with the opening of walking trails that now bring as many as 2,000 non-golfers to the property each day, word spread that Chambers Bay also has a pro shop where you can buy some nice apparel if it gets a little chilly during your walk, as well as a surprisingly sophisticated spot for breakfast, lunch or dinner inside its modest (and intended from the start as temporary) clubhouse.

In fact, while the current kitchen is barely larger than a two-car garage, and weddings and other larger events must be held in a semi-permanent tent, and regular dining room seating capacity gets cut by more than half if the weather's not nice enough to use 15 tables on the outside patio, Food & Beverage Director Anthony Shipman and Chef Stefan Ferguson already have the dining and catering operation up to a \$1.5 million annual pace. And a large proportion of these added revenues is coming from regular visits by local non-golfers who've discovered that the sunset views over the Sound at Chambers Bay are now a free part of one of the best cocktail/dinner bargains in the area.

Changing the Landscape, Part Four: ON TO BIGGER THINGS

"As surprising as it's been to do so much revenue in food and beverage, there's a huge opportunity to do more," notes Chambers Bay's General Manager, Matt Allen. "Every day after golf, we're turning away [people who have played], because we're already predominantly full with local residents."

Allen took his current role in May, after 10 years as Golf Operations Manager at Bandon Dunes (not coincidentally, other key staff members, including Pike and Sales & Marketing Director Jamie Fay, were also brought to Chambers Bay after gaining extensive experience at Bandon).

And while he had a first-hand view of, and important role in, Bandon Dunes' phenomenal success, Allen says the impact that Chambers Bay has

already made "is like nothing I've ever seen." Since arriving, however, he has focused on making it clear to the staff that going forward, Chambers Bay hasn't seen anything yet, either—not only in terms of what hosting major tournaments is all about, but also for what the next level of the club's development (including plans for a full-service clubhouse, as well as a possible lodging component) will entail.

"We have to find ways to take the steps to expand as we need to, at the same time we make it possible to pay off the debt that's already been incurred," he notes. "That only promises to get more challenging in the current economic environment. The [major tournaments] will also involve a huge raising of the bar in agronomy, customer service, F&B, and every other aspect of our operations."

Based on the results to date, though, there's no reason to believe Pierce County will ever see a need to go back to the drawing board. "We certainly wouldn't want to be in the golf business today if we had the wrong piece of property or were in the wrong market," says Tony Tipton.

"But when we're already doing three times the level of food and beverage we thought we would, golf rounds are already near the full projected levels, we've seen how well the non-golfing public has taken to the property, and we've already gained such tremendous national and international exposure for the area, with the promise of much more to come—yeah, I'd have to say that for us, a golf course is proving to be a very viable business opportunity and ultimately the right choice for this site." **C&RB**

Duffy's
TRI-C CLUB SUPPLY INC.

Younger Members
want it ...

Older Members
will love it!

Upgrade your Locker
Room amenity
selections with
REDKEN FOR MEN
Professional
Hair Care Products!

Tri-C Club Supply
Call Duffy for Catalog
of Locker Room, Spa &
Shoe Shine Supplies!

Since 1978

1-800-274-8742

www.DuffyTriC.com