

The Gold Standard

Panning for a Prime Layout

BY PATRICK JONES

Panoramic views of the Appalachian Mountains immediately grab you from behind the clubhouse at Gold Creek Golf Club outside of Dawsonville. Geologists estimate that these grandeur peaks have looked down on this part of north Georgia for more than 600 million years.

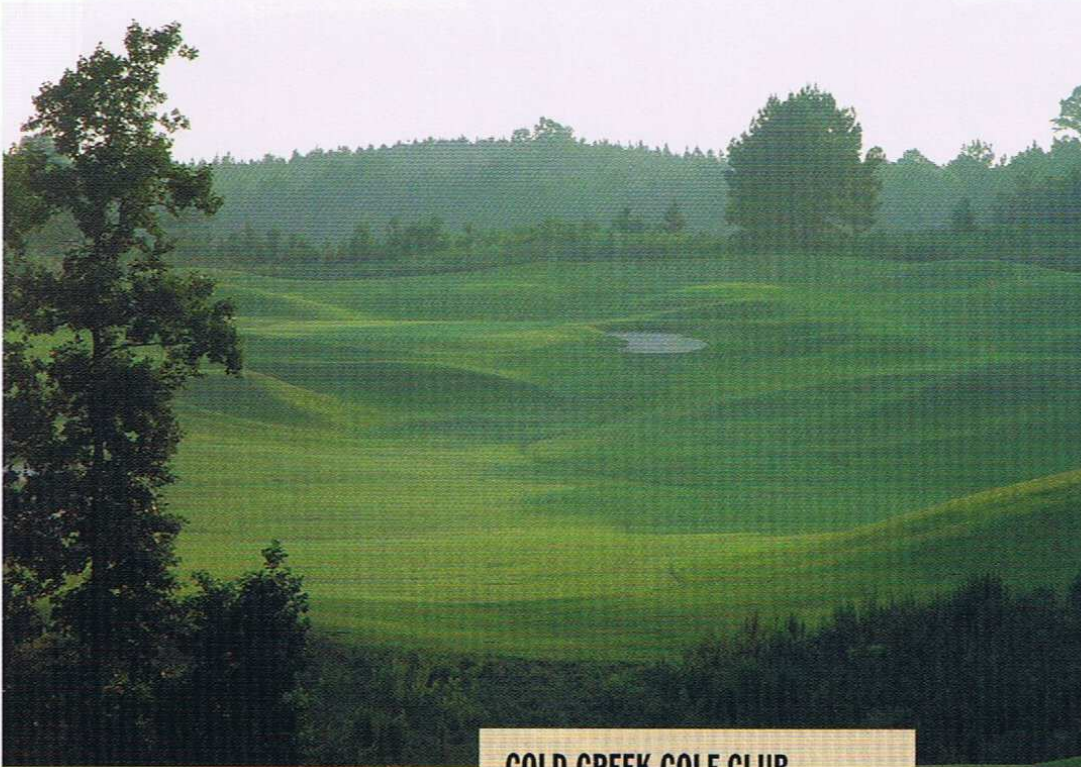
Things normally move slowly in this part of the state located 60 miles, but a world away, from downtown Atlanta. For eons, the pace of change in these foothills has been measured by the timeless grinding of tectonic plates that caused the earth's uplift. Evolution at Gold Creek, however, can best be described as approaching warp speed. Changes have come as fast and as furious as water tumbling down

nearby Amicalola Falls since the opening just over a decade ago.

Gold Creek originally opened as an 18-hole layout in 1996 and was immediately selected Georgia's "Best New Course" by a national golf magazine. An additional nine was later added to supplement the original Mike Young layout.

The three distinct nines were labeled with gold-themed names – Prospector, Nugget and El Dorado – in reference to the area's shiny-gemmed past. Nearby Dahlonega was the site of a major gold prospecting grab in 1828 that was just as frenetic as the more famous Forty-Niners rush that came two





was try to protect people's home values," says Bob Tablak. "So we tried not to close any holes behind anyone's house. That left us with 22 holes to choose from. It was about a year-long process. We ended up with what we think is a great golf course and with very little effect on the homeowners here. I think (the modifications) were very well received by the homeowners and the members. There was very little comment, actually."

The Atlanta-based

company DeVictor Langham Inc., which designed the third nine to Young's original 18, was asked back to weave the dismantled course back together into a seamless flow. The company specializes in land planning as well as course architecture, which made it the logical choice to pull off the project.

The previous three nines at Gold Creek all measured less than 3,500 yards. The new layout has been stretched past the 7,000-yard mark. For those with the game to handle it, the course is plenty to chew on from the rear tees. Its degree of difficulty measures in at 73.9/137. The blue, white, green (senior) and red tees are much more accommodating.

Another "long-term plan," according to Tablak, is to steer Gold Creek into a private membership club for the benefits of profitability and the ability to maintain the course at top-notch standards. Tablak reiterated that goal is still

decades later in California.

In its early years, Gold Creek strived to be everything to everybody: a daily-fee course, a neighborhood layout for homeowners and, on a grander scale, a stay-and-play facility that hosted golf getaways and executive retreats. In fact, numerous companies, including Coca-Cola, AT&T and Southern Company, took advantage of the property's 8,000-square-foot conference center and 74 guestrooms.

Since 2003, Gold Creek's focus has changed considerably under new ownership. California-based brothers Bob and Jeff Tablak took possession of the property and have refined its mission.

Gold Creek no longer markets itself as a resort destination. The Tablaks sold the conference center and overnight lodgings for purely academic reasons – literally. They now serve as classrooms and dormitory rooms for Southern

GOLD CREEK GOLF CLUB

Dawsonville, Ga.
706.265.2700 or goldcreek.com

Designer: Mike Young

Fees: Monday-Friday \$52; Saturday-Sunday \$62; Twilight rates Monday-Friday \$42; Saturday-Sunday \$47

Directions: Take Ga.-400 north to Highway 136 and turn left; travel about seven miles and Gold Creek is on the right side.

Community: Gold Creek is a 600-acre master planned golf community of single-family homes and golf villas in neighborhoods of varying home types and price ranges. There are sparkling spring-fed lakes and dramatic mountain views to enhance the lifestyle.

Catholic College. The liberal arts school is housed on a 100-plus acre campus adjacent to the golf course.

Additional alterations by the owners include returning Gold Creek to an 18-hole golf course, though the layout does not mimic the original. It was not as simple as lopping off nine of the existing 27 holes like an unnecessary appendage.

"The most important thing we did

several years down the road as the membership base is nurtured and grown.

Some critical elements have remained stable at Gold Creek throughout its somewhat tumultuous first 10 years. It features a spacious 12,000-square-foot clubhouse with scenic mountain views from the windows of its Eureka Café, which features Mediterranean and American cuisine. Not surprisingly, the eatery's name has changed, but it remains a great place to eat. At lunch, the basic golf-course fare of hamburgers and hotdogs is supplemented with the options of grouper sandwiches and mufalettas. Gourmet dinners are served as well as a Sunday brunch that offers homemade pancakes, omelets, and the Southern delicacies of fried

chicken and biscuits and gravy.

For golfers who have not played Gold Creek, or who have not played the course in recent years, Tablak offered aesthetic and financial incentives to make the trip. Those included well-spaced tee times, which means a relaxed golf experience without logjams in front or tailgaters pushing from behind, varying topography with great views, shots over water, a carefully selected staff that is "wonderfully friendly" and the free Pure Gold loyalty program that provides a complimentary round after every six, plus a free round on your birthday.

For Atlanta-based golfers making the trek up Georgia Rt. 400 to Gold Creek, try to build in some extra time for some sightseeing before returning back to the big city's

tumultuousness.

Dawsonville, rabid fans of stock-car racing will know, is the home of "Awesome Bill from Dawsonville" Elliott, a former Winston Cup champion who was perennially voted the sport's favorite driver and is revered in these parts for his left-turn prowess.

Less than a mile away from the Dawsonville town square, you can visit ThunderRoad USA, home of the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame. Admission lets you test racing simulators and soak up all of the Elliott family and NASCAR nostalgia you can shake a lug nut at.

Dahlonega is a mere 15 miles away. It is the favorite entrance to the mountains for those looking to escape gridlock and find solitude. Dahlonega's town square is a beehive of activity on the weekends and features numerous artisan shops, boutiques, general stores, a gold museum and gold-panning opportunities for those willing to sift through sand for a few keepsake flakes.

And, if time permits, slip off your soft-spiked FootJoys and put on your hiking boots. Amicalola State Park, featuring Amicalola Falls – a 729-foot waterfall that takes the longest plunge in the eastern United States – is only 15 miles away. You can view the falls from the bottom or drive up a steep paved road, park, stroll to a bridge and watch the water plunge off the mountainside from under your feet.

A few hundred yards higher up the hill is the 57-room The Lodge at Amicalola Falls. From its parking lot, thousands of Appalachian Trail "through hikers" have begun their 2,000-mile trek to Maine from nearby Springer Mountain, the trail's southern terminus. ♦



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