

WITHIN DRIVING RANGE

THE ROCK

A QUIRK IN THE EARTH'S GEOGRAPHY RISES OUT OF THE GEORGIA LANDSCAPE AS NOTICEABLY AS A PIMPLE. BUT STONE MOUNTAIN IS NO BLEMISH. AMONG OTHER THINGS, IT'S A GREAT BACKDROP FOR GOLF.

BY PATRICK JONES

NO. 11 ON THE LAKEMONT COURSE AT STONE MOUNTAIN

1ong-time Atlantans simply refer to it as “The Rock.” Unfathomable geological forces early in the Earth’s formation gave rise to Stone Mountain an estimated 300 million years ago. As the world’s largest granite outcropping, it rises almost 1,700 feet above the surrounding landscape, rivaling Atlanta’s skyline for visual prominence. The igneous behemoth, 16 miles east of downtown, has attracted the curious from around the world.

In its recent history, the mountain has drawn multitudes to gape at its enormous carving featuring leaders of the failed, but not forgotten, Confederacy (a grown man can stand inside General Robert E. Lee’s ear), gaze at its nighttime laser shows and pursue its almost limitless recreational pursuits.

Golf is at the forefront of Stone Mountain’s outdoor opportunities. The park’s marketing

brochures accurately refer to its 36 holes as “Rock Solid Golf.”

Venerable architect Robert Trent Jones Sr. accepted the task of building the park’s first 18, the Stonemont Course, which opened in 1969. Jones, not unlike the carving’s primary sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, relied heavily on dynamite and jackhammers to mold his masterpiece.

“It must have been a complete challenge to build,” says Anthony Williams, director of grounds at Stone Mountain Golf Club. “In a lot of places they had to create a gravel base and raise up the fairway enough so there would be enough actual soil to sustain turf.”

Millions of cubic feet of granite on and around the mountain have been quarried for such notable causes as the U.S. Capitol.

Georgia native John LaFoy created an

additional 18, the Lakemont Course, which opened in 1991.

Marriott Golf took over management of the courses from Georgia's state parks system in 1998. One of its first remedies was to remove re-exposed granite – some of it cropping back up in the middle of fairways – that was ruining expensive grass mowers and sometimes causing golf balls to madly ricochet as if in a pinball machine.

Marriott Golf was also quick to correct a head-scratching course routing decision left unresolved for almost a decade. LaFoy's 18 holes opened in two phases. The first nine came online in 1988 and was blended into a 27-hole mix with Jones' existing layout. The problem arose when LaFoy's second nine opened in 1991. For reasons now lost in time, the Jones and LaFoy courses were not separated back into separate 18-hole entities by an architect. Instead, Stonemont consisted of nine holes of LaFoy golf and nine holes of Jones golf. Lakemont, likewise, was comprised of Jones and LaFoy's remaining nines.

Jones, who died in 2000, has been labeled the "Father of Modern Golf Architecture." He designed an estimated 400 courses in close to 35 countries, including collaborating with Bobby Jones on Atlanta's own Peachtree Golf Club. The splitting of one of his prized creations was a misstep that was in need of correction.

"He loved this golf course," says Williams. "We have quite a few communications from him on how much he enjoyed this project. I think that was one of the things that Marriott wanted to accomplish – to pay respect (to Jones) and to return the course to as close to his original concept as possible."

The Stonemont layout was restored in 1999, a year before Jones' death. In thanks, he wrote a letter to the Stone Mountain Golf Club, calling the setting "so magical that it truly seemed as though God, Himself, had created it with a golf course in mind." The course is the only Jones Sr. design in Georgia that is open for public play.

Jones embraced the rugged landscape to lay out a traditionalist's course that requires precision shot making.

"It is target golf," says Williams, who has made maintaining the Stone Mountain layouts a family affair. His uncle had been the course

superintendent for almost a dozen years.

One of Jones' signatures – love it or not – was to place trees in the middle of the fairway of a normally benign hole. On Stonemont No. 12, a downhill 388-yard par 4, shot-gobbling loblolly pines come into play.

"(The trees) completely change what would be a wide-open birdie hole into a, holy smokes, now what am I going to do hole," says Williams. "Am I going to punch it low and try to go under them, or am I going to try to get over them, or am I going to the right side or the left side. Everyone who plays this golf course comes away with (the comment), 'No. 12 is a bear.'"

No. 16 is picturesque. The Rock frames the tee shot in the backdrop on this 198-yard par 3.

LaFoy's aptly named Lakemont Course hugs Stone Mountain Lake for most of the front nine. As on the Stonemont Course, No. 1 is the toughest handicap hole on the course. Golfers are required to nail a forced carry over water on the opening tee shot of this 536-yard, par-5 hole. The engraved likenesses of Lee and his southern compatriots, Jefferson Davis and Stonewall Jackson, seem to peer down on the No. 1 green from their mountainside perches.

LaFoy incorporated a water-filled quarry into his design on No. 11. This memorable par 4 requires a precise approach shot over a five-acre pond that symbolizes Stone Mountain's past as one of the most prolific granite providers in the world.

The Stone Mountain Golf Club is a leader in environmental stewardship. It was the national winner in the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America 2006 Environmental Leaders in Golf Contest. It is a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary. There are 80 bird boxes on the courses for bluebirds, screech owls and other bird species that add to the golfer's experience.

"Tee to green, the golf is a great experience," says Williams. "But then when you look to your left and your right, you are seeing some amazing sights. We have great playing conditions. We are a public course with a very affordable price. But the overall experience of the mountain, and the wildlife, and the habitat gardens, and all the things we have incorporated to blend this golf course into its natural surroundings, is what makes this place so special. It is a unique experience." ■