

Play golf the Byron Nelson way at Riverhill Country Club near San Antonio, Texas

By *Mike Bailey, Senior Staff Writer*

KERRVILLE, Texas -- Byron Nelson didn't do much design work, so if you're lucky enough to have the legendary golfer's stamp on your golf course, you know you've got something special.

Such is the case at [Riverhill Country Club](#), a private facility located about an hour west of San Antonio that is open for stay and play packages for nonmembers. Riverhill was designed by Nelson and the late Joe Finger, a prolific Texas golf course architect who is credited with scores of quality courses around the world.

And if you're thinking Nelson didn't do much design work because he wasn't any good at it, think again. Nelson is credited with the prestigious Preston Trail Golf Club in Dallas, which was recently renovated by Tripp Davis.



Besides, anyone who could win 18 PGA

Tour tournaments in one year, a record that will likely never be broken, knew a lot about every aspect of golf -- equipment, the swing and certainly what makes a good hole. Riverhill, which underwent a caterpillar-like metamorphosis in its 40-plus year history, was the big beneficiary.

Riverhill Country Club: A unique history

Riverhill Country Club was purchased last year by Southern Golf Properties, which is restoring the club and golf course's glory and then some.

Renovations to the course, the clubhouse, locker rooms and a century-old mansion are proving beneficial to the club's 500 or so members as well as golfers who are looking for a great weekend getaway.

But its beginnings are somewhat more humble than what sits on the former 600,000-acre ranch once owned by Gus Schreiner.

The club was founded in the 1960s, and the original golf course was just nine holes. Over the years, it had a number of different names, including Forrest Hills Country Club and Tamanaco Country Club. The club became Riverhill after Lloyd Brinkman, who bought the club in the early 1970s, returned from an area near Milwaukee that bore the same name. He said that the topography of Kerrville, an affluent retirement community on the edge of the Texas Hill Country, suited the name perfectly.

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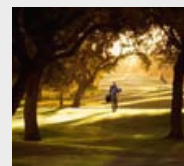
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In 1973, Brinkman sold the club to Sherman and Stuart Hunt. One of Stuart Hunt's friends was Nelson, who agreed to design the course with the stipulation he bring in a professional architect, which he did in Finger. They also wanted to be able to lay out the golf course first, then fill in the development around it.

What Nelson saw, and what you will see today, is a rolling piece of property with lakes, streams and elevated vantage points that provide views as far as the eye can see. The course opened in 1975 as a par 72, playing more than 6,800 yards from the tips.

During a 1974 preview, former sportscaster Chris Schenkel said: "This club is going to be as prominent nationally as Augusta in Georgia or Garden of the Gods in Colorado."

Schenkel might have been off the mark in his prediction, but it just goes to show how highly the club and course were thought of at the time of its opening.

Riverhill Country Club: A special place for the Nelsons

Byron Nelson played his last round of golf, at the age 92, at Riverhill Country Club in 2004.

He and his second wife, Peggy, to whom he was married 20 years until his death in 2006, honeymooned there. They had a second home there, too, on the 10th fairway, which is where Finger's widow, Julia, resides today.

Peggy Nelson cherished their trips to Riverhill Country Club, which Nelson said was his "favorite place to play."

"We began to take regular visits to our Kerrville retreat as the weather improved. We settled on the first week of the month, leaving the (home) ranch on Monday and coming back Friday," she recalled in her book, "Life with Lord Byron," which chronicles the couple's years together.

Riverhill Country Club is an excellent test

Nelson and Finger designed a golf course that the everyday player would enjoy from one or two tees up and the expert player would find challenging from the back tees.

Amazingly, both Nelson and Finger knew that equipment technology would render many courses obsolete, so they planned for the course to be renovated someday and put those plans to paper.

Those plans have been followed in the current renovation, bringing the course to more than 7,200 yards.

The golf course also has excellent Pennncross bentgrass greens. Before it was built, Nelson consulted agronomy experts who concluded the area's weather, typically cooler and breezier than it is in San Antonio, would support the cool season grass. He was right; the greens were thriving this summer without the aid of cooling fans. In fact, they may be some of the best greens in the state.

The golf course itself is a combination of doglegs, shots over hazards and holes that vary greatly in length. It may have one of the more interesting collections of par 3s in the country, with none of them looking alike.

The second, for example, is a 199-yard hole that plays over a gorge. The green is probably 100 feet wide. The 11th is 210 yards, nearly all carry over a portion of a lake. And the 16th is just 159 yards but has a look that resembles many of the great old clubs of the Northeast, such as Winged Foot Golf Club.

Riverhill County Club: The verdict

If you're looking for a serene golf experience, then Riverhill Country Club represents the perfect getaway, whether it be with a group of golf buddies or a couples retreat.

This is traditional golf with natural running streams and ponds, where you'll find plenty of deer and other wildlife as well as birdies. One of the best vantage points on the course is the tee on the par-4 seventh hole,

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which is probably 100 feet above the green. From there, you can see the entire golf course, as well as parts of Kerrville.

The golf course is also in excellent condition, including its greens.

There's also talk of switching the nines, which would put the starting hole closer to the golf shop and the grill. It would also make the finishing stretch a little tougher. The current ninth hole is a 464-yard par 4 that plays through a chute of trees to well bunkered green.

Perhaps just as impressive as the course, however, is the friendly service -- from the newly renovated Turning Point Grill, to the golf shop, locker rooms and restaurant in the mansion, you can expect to be treated like a member. Plus, the food is pretty good. I highly recommend the Reuben sandwich.

"When you come and stay with us, we give you a card that essentially makes you a member for the time you are with us," said Bryan Gathright, president of Southern Golf Properties.

You'll also find Nelson's locker in the men's locker room. Under glass, it features several personal items from the World Golf Hall of Fame member. Similar plans are underway for Finger's locker.

Stay and play at Riverhill Country Club

Packages at the course's 18th hole villas are available for around \$100 to \$150 per night depending on the configuration.

The villas, which have also been recently restored, feature high definition flatscreen TVs as well as a common room, where visitors can watch movies, play games or simply relax.

What you won't find, at least not yet, is wireless Internet in those rooms.

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Mike Bailey, Senior Staff Writer

Mike Bailey is a senior staff writer based in the Houston area. Focusing primarily on golf in the United States, Canada, the Caribbean and Latin America, he contributes course reviews, travel stories ... [read more...]

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