



From left, Byron Nelson, Rec Park chief George Lake and Ben Hogan before one of the Southern California PGA Championships that were held at Rec between 1941 and 1968. When the course opened on April 30, 1910 at a cost of an estimated \$3 million, it was just nine holes with a lake over 116 acres operated by the Virginia Country Club.

Contributed

REC

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Drake. Club officials C.J. Curtis and Llewellyn Bixby engineered a lease for the land from the Alamitos Land Company that by today's standards would cause a congressional investigation.

Over time, the course was expanded to 18 holes, grazing sheep were relocated from the fairways, and the land company built the clubhouse. Virginia Country Club quickly became a popular spot with more unique features than most clubs of that era.

The land was notable for a grove of gum trees that made the course feel cozy even with nice vistas, a variety of other trees, and the "Splash Hole." The 16th was 260-yards long, but with the tee box set on pier-like stilts in the middle of the lake. Golfers had to drive 120 yards over the lake to reach the short uphill fairway that led to a sloping green.

The magazine "Worth While" in 1918 wrote that the Splash Hole "was the most picturesque and unique tee in California ... set on stilts on a lake with a 120-yard carry to the land ... with the green on a hillside near the clubhouse."

Greens back then were actually patches of sand mixed with crude oil. Noted architect Willie Watson in the late teens was hired to give the course more of a personality. He installed deep bunkers along the fairways to make the 5,273-yard course more daunting, even with the Splash Hole. He created a 601-yard par-6 hole at 11, two holes (14 and 15) with deep gulches, and a narrow 18th whose fairway was 40 yards wide at its largest point.

A story in a 1921 edition of the Long Beach Independent said "it is a sporty course, with

rolling hills and bunkers that are deep but add to the pleasant setting. The ground is covered with fine turf and should look that way every day with Long Beach's temperate weather."

There were issues, of course. Even though the course was located near a streetcar line, it was three miles from downtown and patrons from the street cars still had a bit of a walk to the course. The solution: Buggy service from the streetcar stop to the course.

Virginia Country Club began looking for a new home when its 10-year lease was near its end, and eventually resettled at its current site in Rancho Los Cerritos. The city took over the lease and a few years later struck a deal with Los Alamitos Land for the course and 400 total acres that is now known as the Rec Park complex, which includes Blair Field, Joe Rodgers (softball) Stadium, the Billie Jean King Tennis Center, the Long Beach Lawn Bowl site, ample picnic grounds, and Little Rec, the nine-hole course on the south side of Seventh Street.

The city installed green "greens" in 1926 and within a few years the now-public course was handling 90,000-plus rounds a year. The Splash Hole was a casualty to the new layout in 1928 as the course committee sought to extend its length. The Splash Hole is believed to have existed on what is now the 13th fairway, which tees off from the corner of Seventh and Santiago and has an uphill swell.

● Rec Park was an incubator for some of the best golfers of several eras. Quite typical for Long Beach, Adelene Jones founded the Rec Park Women's Club in 1928, a year before there was a Men's Club. The likes of Betty Hicks, Marlene Bauer Hagge, Jane Lange Burnsed and Millie Stanley used it as their platform for national success on the women's tour.

Jones was such a devotee that she played the course regularly up until she turned 90, and

never used a cart.

George Lake was the imperial President and head pro at Rec Park for 43 years, starting at the beginning of World War II and taking the course into the modern age as an institution among public parks. With the help of friends Hogan, Nelson, Sam Snead and other pros, he laid the groundwork for Rec Park hosting the Southern California PGA Championship every year but one from 1941 to 1968, finding sponsorships that raised the purse to \$10,000 or more, big-time money for a regional event.

This prominence sparked more development in the sport locally, with the opening of Skylinks and Heartwell in 1959 and El Dorado in 1962.

Lake also started a junior program out of Rec in the '40s that was the largest in the nation and the impetus for the Southern California Junior Golf program.

Snead shot a 63 in 1947 at Rec Park that was the course record until Paul Goydos broke it with a 62. Tony Edwards shot a 58 that is now the course record.

Goydos can't count the number of rounds he's played in his life at Rec Park, especially since it was a short walk from his house while he was attending Wilson and Long Beach State. The PGA standout wasn't the first to call Rec Park the "Bonyard," but his reference to Rec Park as that in John Feinstein's superb golf book "A Good Walk Spoiled" added to its public charm.

"I think the only time the course gets quiet these days is when Paul comes back to play," Livingston said, sort of like when the Pope appears on the Vatican balcony.

There's nothing religious about Rec Park other than the faith fans have in its timelessness.

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