

Bay Breeze set to open this month

BILOXI, Miss. — Watermark Golf/Nathan Crace Design announced recently that more than two years after Hurricane Katrina made landfall, the newly-renovated Bay Breeze Golf Course at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi has set a re-opening date of November 2.

One would be hard pressed to find anyone in Biloxi who does not remember the impact of Katrina on August 29, 2005 all along the Gulf Coast from the Florida Panhandle to New Orleans, with the Mississippi Gulf Coast taking the brunt of the storm's fury. Sandwiched between Biloxi Beach and the Back Bay of Biloxi, Keesler dodged a bullet from the Gulf's storm surge as a result of the railroad tracks that form a natural dike along the south side of the base. The north side, however, was a different story as flooding along the Back Bay inundated the base when the storm surge rose to record elevations. With five holes hugging the tidal marsh along the Back Bay, some areas of the golf course were under as much as eight feet of water, the clubhouse was destroyed, the irrigation system rendered useless,

and everything from fiddler crabs to refrigerators could be found in the irrigation lake when the waters receded.

"I wasn't on site immediately after the storm," explains Nathan Crace, golf course designer and

principal of Mississippi-based Watermark Golf. "But talking with those who were and seeing the pictures from all up and down the Coast — at the base and elsewhere — it's not hard to imagine how bad it was. Hopefully that was a once-in-a-lifetime event."

After months of clean-up and assessment on the base, a decision was made to take action to repair the damage. It was in the spring of 2006 that the Air Force came calling about the damage to Bay Breeze — actually, Engineering-Environmental Management, Inc. (e2M) in San Antonio came calling. e2M had been hired by the Air Force Center for Engineering and the Environment (AFCEE) to study the damage to the course and develop a plan for repairing it to "current industry standards." That plan included the irrigation system, some fairways, and all of the green complexes.

"The 'current industry standards' clause in a federal project is a key component," Crace explains. "Without that, we would have been forced to spend money to restore the old push-up greens that were failing before the storm anyway. No course owner that I know would have wasted money to simply rebuild exactly what was here prior to Katrina. So by rebuilding to 'current standards,' we were able to essentially raze the entire green complex on each hole and build the new greens to USGA specs and build new bunkers. It was a good decision and better investment for the Air Force."

However, Crace was constrained with keeping a specified aggregate total of square feet of green surface and square feet of bunkers. Add to

that the fact that a few of the holes were existing on closed Air Force landfills and that no dirt could be hauled-in to any of the repaired green complexes (only the dirt in each green complex could be used) and it's easy to see why attention to detail was of great importance in the planning and design phase. Working closely with e2M and AFCEE, Crace developed a plan that has those who have seen the results raving about the new green complexes.

"I couldn't be happier with the results," exclaims Tama Manu, Director of Golf at Bay Breeze. "Nathan was telling us during the design meetings how nice it was going to be, but it's even better than we imagined it could be."

The list of people singing the course's praises before it opened was not limited to the course staff, base personnel, or project staff at AFCEE. A number of staffers from area courses who have had a sneak peek at the finished product are also talking about the vast improvements to the facility.

In light of what they have seen, some are concerned about the new competition — saying that a number of retired military personnel (who would have easier access than the general public to get onto the base and play the course) have stated that they may be leaving their current clubs to join Bay Breeze when it re-opens.

"I've heard that too, but I don't know the extent to which that's going to happen," Crace says. "As flattering as that should be about our work, I have friends in the industry who work at those other courses and I don't think that their courses will be hurt because of what we have accomplished here. There are still plenty of golfers who live on the coast and visit each year. Even if Bay Breeze was a publicly-operated course, I don't see it causing a paradigm shift here."

In light of the accolades the course has received prior to opening, Crace said that even he was surprised with how well the finished product turned out after only 10 months of construction and grow-in. He gives high praise to the staff at e2M and AFCEE, the golf course contractor (Eagle Golf & Athletics), the golf course superintendent (Stephan Trochessett) and his crew, director of golf Tama Manu, and the countless other members of the project team (both military and civilian) who came together to make the project the success it has become.

"There were a lot of talented people working on this project," Crace explains. "There were so many, that if I tried to name everyone I would probably leave someone out. I can say that there wasn't one time when a member of the project team was called on to handle something or address an issue that it didn't get done."

Asked if he would do anything differently looking back, Crace says that he is thrilled with the results and hopes the course will receive recognition for the drastic transformation it has undergone, especially in light of Hurricane Katrina.

"Anyone who knows me will tell you I am optimistic about each of our projects," says Crace. "But at Bay Breeze, even my expectations were surpassed — and that's something for our firm to be excited about too."

For more information, contact Crace or visit the Watermark Golf web site (www.watermarkgolf.com).

On the site, there are before and after photos of Bay Breeze (www.watermarkgolf.com/baybreezegc.html).

