



New Look for Royal Fox

By Neal Kotlarek

In an era when other area country clubs are struggling to survive, Royal Fox Country Club in St. Charles is nearing the completion of a regal renaissance. Opened in 1990, the private club underwent an evaluation by membership, staff and the new ownership group early last year with the singular goal of upgrading every aspect of the facility, from the golf course to the clubhouse to the food service to the club's other amenities.

The resulting action plan was specific: Spare no expense to make Royal Fox the premier country club and residential community in the western suburbs and the only dual private club membership opportunity with privileges at their sister club in Long Grove, The Grove Country Club (formerly Hillcrest Country Club).

"Royal Fox is a unique club in many ways," explained club general manager and PGA Professional Brian Tulk during a late February sneak preview of interior clubhouse renovation. "Much of our membership lives either on the club grounds or nearby. Thus, the club is virtually an extension of their homes. They can utilize the picturesque surrounding areas for evening walks and many use our fitness center in the mornings. Whether the members are meeting other members and their families to watch a ballgame in the evening or stop in for the happy hour after work, we want the experience to be special."

That said, the new ownership group which bought the club last year felt it was time to reward long-time members and to make the complex an extra-special experience for guests and new members.

"The first order of business when I started in April of 2017 was to organize a business plan to make top-down changes and improvements, which included the acquisition of a brand new equipment fleet to provide our superintendent the resources needed to improve the daily turf maintenance operations," said Tulk. "Mike Siefken, the golf course superintendent, has made it a top priority to deliver tournament conditions every day."

The centerpiece of the club is a championship golf course designed by local legend Dick Nugent, whose credentials include the public Harborside International in Chicago and the private Dunes Club in New Buffalo, Mich., ranked by many experts as the finest 9-hole course in America. Nugent, who died New Year's Day at age 86, utilized the property's naturally rolling terrain to construct a 6,816-yard, par-71 gem that over the years has hosted seven Illinois Opens and multiple CDGA qualifying events.

If Charles Dickens would have written about the course, he surely would have called his work "A Tale of Two Courses," as the tree-lined and bunker-filled front nine gives way to a water hazard-laced back nine. The stars of the front nine are two delightful par 3s. The 200-yard fifth hole calls for a hybrid or fairway wood to a massive tiered green surrounded by six bunkers. The putting surface on No. 8 is more open with only three bunkers fronting this formidable 220-yard challenge. A par on either hole feels like a birdie.

If time constraints keep you from playing the final four holes known as The Bear Trap on the PGA National's Champion course,



you can face a startlingly similar sequence of finishing holes at Royal Fox. The 378-yard 15th plays much longer due to water along the entire left side of the fairway and deviously-positioned fairway bunkers to the left and right of the landing area. The 427-yard 16th calls for a tee shot avoiding water down the left side of the fairway and a creek crossing the landing area 240 yards from the tee. No. 17, a manly par 3, demands a formidable tee shot over a large pond to a large tiered green also protected by an L-shaped bunker on the back side.

Finally, the 550-yard 18th is a true three-shot par 5, as the tee shot must be kept away from a large pond that rests along the

left side of the fairway 80 yards up to the green. From there, the putting surface is surrounded by both more water and three snaking bunkers, the green complex atop a bulkhead-fronted bluff. If no one has ever referenced this as Nugent's Revenge, I just did.

While the design of much of the course remains intact, irrigation and drainage upgrades have been vastly improved to ensure that the layout quickly recovers from drenching storms. Phase One of the course project involves bunker renovations, cart path pavement and replacement of the invasive grasses around the fairways and greens in the transitional areas where multiple

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varieties had taken root. Phase Two will incorporate grass bunkers and waste bunkers into the final design.

Even long-time residents and guests of the club will be staggered by the massive renovations performed across the interior of the clubhouse. "Our 30,000-square foot clubhouse is the epicenter of Royal Fox," said Tulk. "We studied every aspect of the building, from the patio to the veranda to the dining areas to the banquet facilities to the swimming pools and to the lounge. We saw different ways we could improve each area from a service and logistical approach and also to enhance the member experience."

The renovations to the Thomas Jefferson Monticello Estate-inspired clubhouse literally started from the ground floor up as the entire lower level of the building was gutted. The new layout includes a 19th Hole Lounge, new golf and social locker rooms, an improved fitness center and expanded pro shop, with all improvements totaling over \$3 million.

While much of the main upstairs area has remained intact, it will receive a facelift and the interior decorating team has their priorities in place.

"The upstairs Saloon is definitely the member's focal point of the clubhouse main level, providing expansive views of the golf course and a birds-eye view of the 18th green. We wanted to build on what works and modernize other areas that need updating," said Tulk.

Last year, the clubhouse roof was entirely replaced. Additional enhancement projects since include upgraded lighting, renovated restrooms, restaurant equipment, furniture upgrades, paint, tile and carpet are either already in process or planned for this spring. "Our private party and banquet business is thriving at both clubs and we've added a new director of sales to continue to grow," said Tulk. Several upgrades are also planned for The Grove this year and next.

"Our improvements haven't stopped with the golf course and clubhouse," said Tulk. "We have also recruited top talent to manage our golf courses and dining operations, starting with the addition of our new Executive Chef, Michael Lannon, who previously spent seven years as the Executive Chef at Naperville Country Club."

In April, Alex Mendez will become head professional at Royal Fox after a

long stint at Butterfield Country Club. He takes over from Chris Ettner, who moved to The Grove Country Club. Ettner will work alongside the club's new Director of Golf, Fred Reeder, who spent 20 years at the prestigious Point O Woods Country Club in Benton Harbor, Mich.

"We are truly excited to begin this year with several staff additions, program improvements and facility renovations we feel will set us apart from other clubs in Chicago," Tulk said.

Along with multiple dining areas and an outdoor swimming pool, the club maintains an active social calendar for couples, families and avid golfers. The Royal Fox Junior Coaching Programs are geared to juniors 6-13 and promote team building athletic skills. Regularly scheduled events include a Memorial Day & July 4th Pool BBQ Party, Mother's Day, Easter, Thanksgiving & Holiday Brunches, Father's Day Cookout, nightly specials and a variety of specialty wine and beer pairing dinners. The player development programs include golf clinics for all players throughout the season.

"Royal Fox and The Grove country clubs are unique in the Chicago metro area as both clubs are known for their premier golf and social events," said Tulk. "The club has a built-in reciprocity program with The Grove that allows players to experience a second club. We also have an amazing social environment that truly makes members feel like part of an extended family. Third, we are a family-oriented club with lots of programs and events geared toward every member of the family."

Regular golf membership at Royal Fox Country Club provides unlimited golf and amenity access to members and their families to both Royal Fox and The Grove, with a limited time offering to spread the initiation fee over time. Membership includes the primary member, spouse and children under 25. Young Executive memberships (under the age of 35) are available for individuals and families seeking a networking hub and social gathering space. Social memberships are also available and provide limited access to the golf course.

Royal Fox Country Club
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