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Creighton Farms thrives, connecting members to golf's refuge from a changed society

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It's a beautiful, quiet morning at Creighton Farms.

The high-end club, located in the Northern Virginia exurbs of the nation's capital, is the centerpiece of a well-to-do residential development with mansion-sized houses, spaced out generously and mostly out of view of the Jack Nicklaus-designed course.

On the putting green, a club pro is filming an instructional video for a well-known swing-training aid company.

A short cart ride up the hill near the 10th tee, a handful of members and a few kids are warming up on the full-size driving range and short-game area.

Some members are sitting around a fire pit, chatting it up in a socially-distanced fashion.

Creighton Farms is thriving.

In a year in which so many people are hurting physically, financially and spiritually, golf has become a respite for millions of Americans. The sport has arguably never been more popular, with anecdotal evidence and retail sales data telling the story of people flocking to courses -- long-time golfers and beginners alike -- to enjoy some time outdoors with other people. The sport's sprawling venues provide some guarantee of safety from an unrelenting pandemic.

It's been hard to get a tee time at many public golf courses, and private clubs have been welcoming new members who have been fortunate enough to have stability through this long-term shift in our society.

Creighton Farms, owned by Southworth Development, is expecting to see a net 15 percent increase in total members in 2020. That's triple the percentage-basis growth the club has seen in each of the prior three years, drawing from residents in the development and non-residents from the outside. The club is nearing what they feel is the limit of non-resident members.

"We're very sensitive to our balance of resident versus non-resident members in order to ensure the quality of experience that our members and residents expect from a Southworth Development property, so our growth in 2020 has brought us close to our capacity for non-resident memberships," the ownership group said in a statement to GNN.

Creighton Farms also offers a national membership to those who live more than 40 miles from the club, and it includes full access to the club's facilities and a capped number of golf round each year for the member, their spouse and children under 23 years old.

Some of the community's residents are public figures, including a former head coach and former quarterback for the Washington Football Team, with both having moved on to other teams in different capacities. The former head coach is still a regular at the club, flying through the course in the offseason with a regular game.

We're in the early stages of the National Football League schedule now, though, so there won't be a money match today.

The Nicklaus design starts with a semi-blind tee shot on a mid-length par 4. Most golfers can bang driver and give themselves a short-to-mid iron into a green working away from the golfer. It's an immediate wake-up call that Creighton Farms isn't messing around.

Not every hole is so exacting, though. The next two holes, a short par 4 and a reachable par 5, give aggressive players an opportunity to put some circles on the card. Even the holes that are benign from tee to green, though, require a precise approach to score well. The hallmark of Nicklaus designs seems to be that approach play dictates more of your final tally than anything else. Put the ball on the green and then try to negotiate birdies at your discretion.

Creighton Farms favors the bold, though. The eighth hole is the most demanding on the course. The best path to making a birdie is taking on a narrow driving area that's largely out of view, then hitting a wedge to the green. The prescribed route is to drive to the fat of the fairway to leave a mid-iron to a target that's bigger than it appears from afar. Miss the fairway, though, and a player could be forced to lay up lest their approach comes up short and finds a penalty area.

The opening nine ends on a tricky par 3. Unsuspecting golfers might not know that, on occasion, the designer is watching them play. Nicklaus himself has a house allocated to him behind the ninth green, where he and his wife Barbara stay when they're at the club for events and other business. The house is currently on the market for $2.7 million, and it's prepped for the buyer to put in an elevator if they so choose.

The back stretch of Creighton Farms is similar to the front, generously sprinkling in holes that, at least on paper, could yield some birdies. The two par 5s on the back, Nos. 11 and 18, can give up eagles with two crisp shots, but they can also extract double bogey or worse from marginal effort.

The tee shot on the par-5 18th at Creighton Farms

The 12th, 13th and 14th holes are perhaps the epitome of how Nicklaus views short par 4s. Both holes have generous, albeit somewhat obscured, driving areas. All the work is on the approach. With a short-iron or wedge in hand, if a golfer can't hit to a small effective target, that confident stroll off the tee turns into a dejected shuffle off the green.

The par-3 17th hole is the most fun shot on the course. Playing to a green with a taco shape in the back two-thirds, the player can funnel the ball to the hole with a great approach. Even if they miss the green, as I did, they can use their imagination to funnel a second shot right to the hole (and nearly in in my case).

The beauty of a club like Creighton Farms is playing a premium course with a modest-sized membership. Rounds fly by, and the staff is happy to ensure a good time with quick service at the turn and while on the course. In a more normal time, the beautiful stone-faced clubhouse offers generous space for post-round gatherings, be they card games, casual drinks or an exceptional meal.

Right now, though, the appeal of club golf is joining a community of people who are equally longing for a place to gather safely that isn't our home. It's finding a place to play with family and friends without having to think for a few hours about the unfathomable toll this year has taken on us all.

When this pandemic subsides, though, and it will soon enough, golf will have to compete with all the things so many of us haven't been doing for nearly a year: going out for a bite to eat or a drink, as well as catching up with the people that aren't in our bubble. Creighton Farms hopes to be positioned as the conduit for that, too, for their growing community.