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Cornerstone Colorado Taking Shape on Uncompahgre Plateau

By Martinique Davis

MONTROSE COUNTY, Aug. 16, 6:47 p.m. - Perched high atop the Uncompahgre Plateau, overlooking Grand Mesa to the north and the towering Mt. Sneffles range to the southwest, are nine stunning holes of golf. Tucked into pockets of old-growth aspen forest and situated on high, open plains dotted with Gambel's Oak, these nine holes represent the keystone of Western Colorado's newest private resort club, Cornerstone Colorado.



Cornerstone, 6,000 sweeping acres located just outside of Montrose, is a private residential community and resort club. Its Greg Norman-designed championship golf course will be one of the resort's most dazzling features. (The first nine holes opened to members in July, with the complete course to open by next summer.)

SCENIC SHOT - Cornerstone Colorado currently has nine holes of its Greg Norman-designed 18-hole championship golf course open to members. (Courtesy photo)

"It is truly about the golf experience here," says Cornerstone's head golf pro, Sean Tannehill, just before knocking a long drive down the first fairway. Tannehill has been a familiar face in Telluride for the past 12 years, working as director of golf at the Telluride Golf Club in the summer and as director of guest services on the mountain in the winter. His move to Cornerstone last fall realized one of his life goals: To work in an environment where golf is considered paramount, and never overshadowed by other interests.

A round at Cornerstone is an indulgence, even for professed golf aficionados. Every twosome is assigned a professional caddie, trained under the Professional Caddies Association. All holes have been designed following Norman's "least disturbance" design philosophy, meaning that the naturally striking features of the landscape have been incorporated in the course layout wherever possible. That philosophy comes into play beautifully on the course's fifth hole, where golfers take aim at a raised green situated on the rim of the plateau. A long approach shot leads to a tricky sand shot out of one of the lurking pot bunkers behind the green, or worse, a ball lost into the abyss separating the plateau from the valley floor below. While intimidating for golfers known to hit an errant chip shot, the number five green's breathtaking scenery makes up for any double bogeys.

Wide, gracious Bentgrass aprons envelop the greens, and, on the number one green, offer an ample welcome mat between the deep bunker on the left and the aspen grove to the right. With at least five tees on each hole, the course accommodates players of all levels. On the par 4 number two hole, a player teeing off from the championship tees will need to hit a 270-yard, dogleg left shot just to carry the fairway, but from the forward tees, it's a straight shot down the undulating fairway to the large green nestled amid towering aspens.

A maintenance crew of nearly 50 works under Tom Huesgen, the famed golf course superintendent who oversaw course maintenance at the prestigious Pebble Beach Golf Links for ten years. During his time there, Huesgen prepared golf courses for the U.S. Open and PGA TOUR events. Elements of Huesgen's attention to detail are seen throughout the Cornerstone course, from the elegant wooden rakes placed in the sand traps, to the rims of the cups, which have been painted white for better visibility.

The course is marked with a number of subtle yet distinguishing features, including rustic wooden bridges spanning trickling creeks, ancient volcanic rock scattered along the Kentucky Bluegrass fairways and luxurious white sand bunkers reminiscent of Hawaiian beaches. The top-of-the-world vistas are Cornerstone's trademark, as is the solitude of the place.

"We don't have a tee sheet," says Tannehill, "and probably won't have one for the next ten years. There's just no need." Twenty tee times would be considered a busy day at the Cornerstone Pro Shop (currently housed in a designer yurt since its permanent home is still under construction). And never, from any hole, can another cart path be seen.

It was the Cornerstone's breathtaking beauty and isolation that initially sparked the interest of its Director of Golf, PGA professional Mark Wood. When asked what drew him from his longtime home at the Hamilton Farm Golf Club, in Gladstone, N.J., to a still-unfinished golf course in a secluded corner of Colorado, Wood is quick to answer. "Look around," he says emphatically, scanning the view from the course's parking lot.

Cornerstone's potential was also a leading reason for why Wood, consistently named one of the country's top 50 teaching professionals by Golf Magazine and Golf Digest and a coach to touring pros Bo Van Pelt and Dudley Hart, decided to move with his wife, Kathy Hart Wood (also a leading teaching professional), and three daughters to Colorado for the summers.

“The Norman design team was very amenable to the staff putting our thumbprint on what was being done on the course,” says Wood, who joined the Cornerstone team last fall.

Wood helped design a practice facility in Florida, nationally recognized as “One of the Coolest Places in Golf” in 2000; the practice facility currently in the making at Cornerstone will undoubtedly be a step above the one in Florida, he says.

Cornerstone’s practice facility is slated to cover a total of 33 acres (most driving ranges are three to four acres in size), with a “very elaborate” teaching center, including six video cameras positioned to capture every angle of a golfer’s swing; plasma televisions for video feedback; and bay doors that can be raised so students can continue to practice their drives even in inclement weather.

A large pitch-and-putt course is planned near the pro shop, slated to open in the spring of 2008. The 6,000-square-foot clubhouse will be the command center of Cornerstone’s golf operations, as well as a mercantile, with a wrap-around deck and restaurant manned by award-winning Executive Chef Peter O’Brien.

While many of Cornerstone’s most significant elements – a completed 18-hole golf course, state-of-the-art practice facility, clubhouse, and 27,000-square-foot Cornerstone Lodge with pool, spa, lounge, and fine dining – are not yet realities, that hasn’t stopped more than 40 people from joining the elite club, nor has it hampered the momentum of the Cornerstone vision.

“Unfussy luxury” is how Director of Marketing Ruth Ann Hattori describes it. “At the Cornerstone, the ambiance is very down-to-earth, but service is very much dedicated to attention to detail.”

The member experience goes beyond participation in Cornerstone events, to immersion in the Cornerstone lifestyle. Members are invited on “Virtual Club” outings once per month during the off-seasons, to professional golf tournaments, beach and city vacations, even the Super Bowl. Children are very much a part of life at the resort, with weekly Camp Cornerstone activities like fly-fishing, camping or riding horses at Cornerstone Stables. During the winter, members may use the Cornerstone’s “Mountain Club” facility for après-ski gatherings, located in the Mountain Village core at the base of the Telluride Ski Resort.

While the sale of home sites has been limited thus far to “visionaries and independent thinkers,” Hattori says, the imminent completion of the resorts many features, including four “Golf Foursome” cabins available for purchase or rental, will, she believes, make Cornerstone Colorado into one of the preeminent private resort communities in the Southwest.

“The completion of those amenities will help make it a more tangible purchase, and open the community to a broader audience,” says Hattori.

Construction of the infrastructure is well underway, but a massive community is not what Cornerstone developers, Hunt Realty, have in mind.

“From a real estate point of view, the 3,000 acres of open space is very significant,” Hattori says of the 412 planned “homesteads,” which range in size from one-quarter acre lots to 130-acre ranches. An essential part of the Cornerstone vision is to maintain the pristine natural environment found atop the Uncompahgre Plateau. To that end, the organization has hired Sue McIntosh to serve as Cornerstone’s Naturalist and Environmental Coordinator.

McIntosh boasts an extensive background in conservation, working first as a lawyer practicing natural resource law in Washington, D.C., before becoming General Counsel and Conservation Director for the Sierra Club in Santa Fe, N.M. In 2003, she opened her own private legal and natural resource consulting practice, with Cornerstone as one of her primary clients.

“I am proud to be coordinating the cutting-edge land stewardship that implements Cornerstone’s exciting environmental vision,” she stated in a press release.

As the community’s Environmental Coordinator, McIntosh has been charged with implementing Cornerstone’s Wildlife Management Plan, and has been assisting with the design of more than 30 miles of hiking, biking, horseback riding, and winter sports trails. She has also been seen walking the holes of the golf course, documenting where the roving herds of elk like to gather.

For more information on Cornerstone Colorado, visit their website at www.cornerstonecolorado.com.