

Nathan Crace, ASGCA, to Fully Renovate The Refuge with Returning 9's, Longleaf Tee System, and More

THE REFUGE BEGINS FULL COURSE RENOVATION BY NATHAN CRACE, ASGCA, FEATURING RETURNING NINES, LONGLEAF TEE SYSTEM, AND UPSCALE DESTINATION HOTEL/CONFERENCE CENTER

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- Since 1998, The [Refuge](#) has been known as the “Best Purely Public Course in Mississippi” and ranked annually among the top public courses in the state in various polls. However, the course known for immaculate conditioning was also known for three other things: it was too tight, too short, and featured a “nine out, nine back” routing. The City of Flowood is about to change all of that with the help of [Watermark](#) Golf and golf course architect Nathan Crace, [ASGCA](#).



“When the course opened in 1998, the game was played differently,” explains Crace. “In the two decades since, the ball travels further, the trees have grown bigger, and players’ time is more constrained--all factors contributing to the renovation.”

According to press reports, another factor is a developer’s \$50 million investment in a new 200-room hotel and conference center adjacent to the course, Crace does not deny plays a part in moving the improvements forward.

“We have spent the last 15 years studying the course and making in-house improvements where possible,” he says. “But when the developer offered to partner with the City to make this investment in the community, the City [which owns the course and has a long-term agreement with Crace’s management company to operate it since 2002] made the prudent decision to invest in improvements that are best made when the course is closed for a sustained period.”

What are the improvements that are planned? All new greens with TifEagle hybrid Bermuda to replace the existing TifDwarf, all new and renovated bunkers, irrigation upgrades, the removal of invasive species of trees to drastically open up playing corridors and improve and expand turf along the periphery of the course, removal of some water hazards that slow play, new concrete cart paths, the installation of the Longleaf Tee System, and—perhaps most importantly—the creation of two new holes and the re-alignment of several others to create returning nines back at the new clubhouse.

“That’s going to be a big shot in the arm to the operation of the course,” Crace explains. “Our golf professional [Randy Tupper, PGA] can tell you that it’s a daily occurrence for golfers to walk in asking to play nine and it’s currently not a popular option because the 10th tee is on the opposite end of the property. They can play nine, but then they have to walk or ride all the way back. The discussion of having returning nines after the renovation has already stirred up a lot of excitement.”

Crace claims the final four holes of the new routing will be among the best finishing holes in the area with a 191-yard par-3, a drivable par-4 with water guarding the green, a 601-yard sweeping par-5, and a “strikingly beautiful” new mid-length par-4 18th hole that framed by a new 12-acre lake with the new hotel tower as a backdrop in the distance. He has already had conversations with the Mississippi Golf Association about hosting top amateur events soon, including the State Am or Mid-Am.

Crace says that he is also going to utilize the Longleaf Tee System as part of the re-design and that the course will have playing options for all skill levels ranging from 4,000 to 7,000+ yards when it re-opens. “As a member of the ASGCA [American Society of Golf Course Architects], we recently adopted the Longleaf Tee System to help grow the game and offer options for more players of all skill levels. It’s more than just adding more tees—there’s a lot of hard data involved. Rees Jones is currently putting it into place at Medinah Number 2 and we are thrilled that The Refuge will be among the first to adopt it!”

Crace explains that the Longleaf System also helps him resolve another issue inherent in the infrastructure of the current design of the course. “It’s a strange situation where the course has simultaneously become too tight for higher handicappers and too short for lower handicappers—leaving us in a golfing ‘no man’s land.’ The conditioning of the course and the setting [a golf-only core course with no development around it] has been what attracts golfers, but when we re-open there will be no negatives. Every golfer within 100 miles will answer ‘The Refuge’ when they’re asked where they want to go play.”

Crace will have an on-site project office and expects to be on-site “pretty much daily” for the duration of the project. “Since our management company operates the course and I live close by, I will be able to be here with [superintendent and Watermark agronomist] Bill [Whatley, GCSAA] and Randy and work even closer with the contractor than we normally would be able to on a renovation project. That adds immense value to the finished product.”

When asked about the upcoming renovations, Gary Rhoads, longtime Mayor of Flowood, was quick to note that “this is not just a facelift or an update. This is a full renovation that will re-position The Refuge as the premier golf destination throughout Central Mississippi. With a world-class hotel and conference center adjacent to it and the Jackson International Airport across the highway, there will be nothing else like it in the Magnolia State for golfers, families, and anyone wanting to just play golf or get away for recreation, a vacation, or even a business trip. You can literally walk from the hotel lobby into the golf shop and get in your cart and drive to the first tee. It’s going to be great!”

“When we re-open for play,” Crace began. “Golfers won’t recognize the course. It will feel like a destination course with the hotel and the amenities available there. Players can expect the same great course conditioning plus TifEagle greens, but every hole will be drastically better with wider corridors and a different look. When golfers walk off the 18th green, I want them to immediately call their friends and say ‘You’ve got to come play this course!’ For us, that’s the ultimate goal.”

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