

# Brand of Excellence

## A cattle ranch-turned-golf course is breeding a name for itself in Tennessee.

Betsy Gilliland, *Club and Resort Business*

Spring Creek Ranch in Collierville, Tenn., just east of Memphis, has an agenda, and General Manager Robb Meyer doesn't mind admitting it.

"We want to spoil our members and guests," he says.

Meyer's desire to provide the best possible golfing experience is rivaled only by his respect for, and personal ties to, the property's history and the land on which it was built.

Spring Creek Ranch, which opened in 1999, was formerly a cattle ranch and research facility where Meyer's father, Dr. David Meyer, an ophthalmologist, raised Brahman and Angus beef cows. Once the family members had accomplished their breeding and research goals in the early 1990s, they donated the cattle to a local agri-center. However, the Meyers also wanted to preserve the property in a way that would reflect their passion for the environment.



Hole No. 18 at **Spring Creek Ranch** in Collierville, Tenn.

### Golf Scorecard Spring Creek Ranch



**Spring Creek Ranch** Golf House

Website: [www.springcreekranch.org](http://www.springcreekranch.org)

Golf Holes: 18

Designer: Jack Nicklaus

Property Type: Private

No. of Members: 250

Year Opened: 1999

Golf Season: Year-round; peak season is March to November

Annual Rounds: 15,000

Fairways: Meyer Zoysiagrass

Greens: Champion Bermudagrass

"We didn't want a developer to come in and destroy the property and take every tree down," explains Robb Meyer.

No worries. Its future was decided after his father met Jack Nicklaus on a hunting trip. Intrigued by the elder Meyer's description of the topography that features rolling hills, elevation changes and mature trees, the legendary golfer toured the property. He ultimately designed the 7,150-yard, par-72 golf course after receiving simple instructions from the Meyer family: Build one of the best golf courses in the world.

### High-End Maintenance

Maintenance of the golf course to the highest standards is every bit as important as its design, and Meyer knows that wouldn't be possible without giving Head Golf Course Superintendent Scott Newman the resources he needs. Of course, he adds, "Resources usually means money."

So he counts on Newman to prioritize projects. However, Meyer, a non-golfer who was teaching art in Arizona when he returned home in 1997 to help with the golf course for "a year" that soon turned into a new career, makes it clear he wants to "know what we need to do, and why we're doing it."

The entire property totals about 1,000 acres, and the golf course covers about 320 acres. About 138 of those acres are maintained. "If we were maintaining a thousand acres, it would be a maintenance nightmare," says Newman.

Areas inside the cart paths are seeded with a fescue mix, and most of the property outside the ropes has remained in its natural, pastoral state. The maintenance staff bushhogs the natural areas once a year like a pasture, which saves maintenance costs and gives definition to the golf course.

Newman, who has served as Spring Creek Ranch's Superintendent since October 2004, says the "golf business was booming" when he arrived. However, about two years later, the management team "had to make the decision to get the most out of what we have and be smart."

Newman cut his staff of about 35 by 10 people and decreased the maintenance budget. He also started using resources more judiciously to identify and combat turf problems, such as an ongoing battle with zoysia patch.

"In the old days we sprayed preventively twice a year, wall-to-wall," continues Newman. "But there's a fine line. Is patch a problem to the members, or to the superintendent?"

Now, the maintenance staff limits applications by mapping out areas to spray. Only about five of the 42 acres of fairways are treated. "We will have some zoysia patch, but we won't lose turf from it," says Newman. "And nobody has ever complained about having zoysia patch."

### 'Honey Badger Meetings'

Open lines of communication are also key to the property's success, and a healthy exchange of ideas is vital to the management team. Newman refers to the weekly staff meetings as "honey badger meetings," in which everyone feels free to speak his mind, but he and Meyer also talk daily.

"If I disagree, I tell him, and why," notes Newman.

That's fine with Meyer. "I demand three things of the people I work with—trust, passion, and I like smart people who disagree with me," he says. "I need to work with people who are passionate. It helps to challenge me."

He doesn't want anyone to disagree with him just for the sake of disagreeing, but he wants management team members to feel free to lock horns with him if necessary. "Someone else might have an idea that's better than mine—then tell me," he adds.

Newman and Director of Golf Doug Oubre also share a close working relationship. The superintendent sets up his maintenance schedule early in the year and shares it with Oubre. "He has a great knowledge of agronomy, and I am a golfer, so I know the game and I look at it from a golf professional's standpoint," reports Newman. The other managers depend on Meyer's management skills as well.



Special artistic touches can be found on the golf course and in the Spring Creek Ranch Golf House, which opened in 2007 after 10 years of planning.

### Superintendent Profile: Scott Newman



#### Education and Training:

**B.S. in Agronomy, Mississippi State University**  
Years at Spring Creek Ranch: **8**  
Years in Golf Course Maintenance Business: **17**  
Previous Employment: **New Orleans Country Club**  
Certifications: **Class A Superintendent**  
Honors and Awards: **Course ranked Number 2 in Tennessee by Golf Digest**

"Robb is not a golfer, but he has a lot of experience in managing a golf club," says Oubre. "He relies on our expertise and has faith in our ability to provide a quality product. He gets questions about why we do something on the golf course, but he's confident in our abilities when a member asks a question."

Meyer agrees. "I'm an art teacher who doesn't know how to play golf," he reveals. "But if you surround yourself with people who know what they're doing and let them, you can get out of the way. To have a superintendent who can grow grass, but also can play golf, means everything."

The department heads are in contact with each other six to eight times a day by e-mail, iPhone, text, radio or face-to-face conversations. "We're all readily available to each other whenever we're needed," reports Oubre. "We want to make sure our members' experiences are meeting or surpassing expectations. It's a true team effort here at Spring Creek Ranch."

As part of that approach, the entire staff gets the same communications that go to members. From department heads to the Outdoor Golf Staff (aka cart boys), everyone is trying to accomplish the same goal. "We're trying to create an experience and level of service that's intense," Meyer says.

He also equips the entire staff with the tools they need to serve members and guests. For example, everyone on the Outside Golf Staff wears an earpiece, so they can be ready to indulge golfers' every whim.

"Sometimes they think they're not important, but they are the first and last person our members and guests see," notes Meyer. "They see them more than me."

The management staff turns to outside sources when necessary as well. Earlier this year, Spring Creek Ranch partnered with a golf management company to help boost membership. Newman now also consults with the management firm's regional agronomist about maintenance issues. "I can call on him to make sure my thinking process is correct," he notes. He also can use the consultant's expertise to support discussions with management.

### **An Electric Experience**

Spring Creek Ranch has an array of electric course maintenance equipment, including riding greens mowers and its utility cart fleet. Newman says the property uses electric machinery to improve the entire golfing experience. While the decision to use electric equipment was not based on noise issues or economics, he notes, "We save \$6,000 a year per unit on fuel costs."

He also finds that it's easy to troubleshoot their hybrid mowers. At one point, Newman noticed some of the edges of the Champion Bermuda greens were scalped after a vertical cut. When he started searching for an explanation, he discovered that the greens got scalped if the mowers dropped below 2,200 RPMs.

"It was a simple correction for the operator," explains Newman. "It's another tool for us to use, to fight this [problem] without raising the height."

### **Labor of Love**

Maintaining the property's history is a big part of the Spring Creek Ranch golf experience as well.

The Meyer family's love of nature is reflected throughout the golf course. Each hole is named after a tree species that



"Ranch hands" are led by (left to right) Head Golf Course Superintendent **Scott Newman**, Director of Golf **Doug Oubre** and General Manager **Robb Meyer**.

## Course & Grounds Profile: **Spring Creek Ranch**



**Spring Creek Ranch** in Collierville, Tenn.

Annual C&G Budget: **\$1 million-plus**

Staff: **16 full-time, seven part-time/seasonal**

Other Managers:

**Jordan Carlisle, Assistant Superintendent;**

**Carl Scott, Equipment Manager;**

**Steven Cox, Assistant-In-Training;**

**Mike Williams, Assistant Mechanic**

Irrigation System: **Rainbird Cirrus Central Control with 1,000-plus irrigation heads (900, 950, 700, 750 EAGLE series)**

Water Source: **Five-acre lake fed by a well**

Equipment: **Own and lease Jacobsen equipment, including ECLIPSE walking greens mowers, ECLIPSE 322 riding greens mowers, G-Plex riding greens mowers, LF-3800 and SLF-1880 fairway mowers, AR-522 rough mowers, AR-3 trim mowers and Cushman Turf-Trucksters**

Maintenance Facility: **18,000-sq. ft. turf care facility that includes lockers, conference room, storage facilities, washpad**

Aerating and Overseeding Schedules: **Aerify greens, tees, fairways and rough in mid-summer. Vent twice a year. No overseeding.**

Upcoming Capital Projects: **Regrassing the greens collars with Tifgrand bermudagrass (previously Diamond zoysia)**

Duties and Responsibilities: **Oversee 300-acre golf course and Golf House grounds**

is planted in groupings around the hole. No trees are too close to the greens and when the course was built, Meyer himself approved the removal of every tree that was taken down.

Some of the golf course's features lie beneath the surface. For example, because the clay soil didn't drain well, Nicklaus wanted to sandcap the golf course. As a result, 275,000 tons of sand were brought in during construction, and the entire golf course is built on a 6- to 8-inch layer of sand.

Aesthetics also contribute to the golf experience. Meyer asked himself a simple question when he got involved with the ranch's transformation into a golf course: "What can I do to create the spirit and feel and experience of Spring Creek Ranch?"

"Everything that had nothing to do with tees, greens and fairways, I took on," he recalls. "I didn't play golf, but I understand nature. If you're looking at a hole, you don't see anything unnatural."

Meyer's background in art also contributed to touches such as water coolers that look like old wooden cabins; trash receptacles that resemble Jack Daniel's whiskey barrels; and a lightning shelter that mimics an old barn. The comfort stations (restrooms) on the course resemble old shacks and barns, and include porches, rocking chairs, tin roofs, slate flooring and cypress walls. They also feature heating and air conditioning, as well as refrigerators for drinks and snacks.

The exposed aggregate cart paths were modeled after the driveway of Meyer's parents' house. Tee markers were made from old posts on the ranch that were cut down to 45-degree angles. Instead of men's and ladies' tees, the tees are named after the original ranch's prize bulls - Bravo, Black Duke, Carson, Rocky Joe and Georgie Boy. "Golf is about yardage, not about gender," says Meyer.

Memorable Touches

Of course, the staff is bullish on customer service as well. "It doesn't matter how nice of a facility you have if someone isn't

treated well. They're going to remember that," notes Meyer.

While Spring Creek Ranch was under construction, Meyer visited about 10 other golf courses to learn "how to take care of people." He asked members what they liked about their facilities and what other things they might like to have. "I took little things from different places," he says. "I didn't copy floor plans, but I copied concepts."

It took Meyer about 10 years to think through his plan for a "real, functioning" Golf House, which opened in May of 2007. "I went from being obsessed with building the golf course to being obsessed with hospitality and taking care of our members and their guests," he says. "I wanted to blow people away with our service. I wanted to treat people as if they're at a resort.



The Spring Creek Ranch grounds crew maintains 138 acres of a golf course that covers 320 acres on a property of nearly 1,000 acres.

"I wanted our members to have that experience every day, every time they come to our property," he adds. "I just wanted to create something incredible, the way I would want to be spoiled."

The latest addition to the property is the Rob Akins Golf Academy, which opened in 2011. Led by Director of Instruction Rob Akins, a top-30 Golf Digest instructor, the facility offers year-round opportunities for golfers to sharpen their skills through such features as state-of-the-art swing analysis technology, covered and climate-controlled hitting bays, and overnight accommodations. Akins and his staff now teach golfers of all levels, including PGA Tour pros such as David Toms.

"Everything golfers need is here on property for them," notes Oubre. "It's been well-received by the community."

Spring Creek Ranch now hosts 15 or so corporate or charity outings per year, and the "ranch hands" (as the staff is described on the club's website) have continued to see demand for play increase during the peak golf season.

"We're a no-tee time facility. Our members are welcome to come out any time during the day and any time during the week," Oubre notes.

The fact that greens speeds are faster at Spring Creek Ranch than at other properties in the area and that the golf course is maintained in pristine condition year-round also helps to attract interest. "Our biggest asset is the golf course," says Newman. "That's why we're here. When people show up, they're here to play golf."

"Our motto is 'spoil members and guests,' " he adds. "We know their names, and their kids' names. We know what they drink. We go out of our way to give them a good experience, and we strive every day to make it better."



Spring Creek Ranch's Rob Akins Golf Academy opened in 2011 and now offers year-round instruction.