

# DFW LINKS

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## 'We Rebuilt This'

**At Rockwall Golf & Athletic Club, homeowners, members and private investors have teamed up to breathe life back into their local club and neighborhood**



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## Rockwall Golf &amp; Athletic Club

## PRIVATE CLUBS



The 12th hole at Rockwall Golf & Athletic Club begins a stretch of five holes that play along the shore of Lake Ray Hubbard.

# We Rebuilt This

*At Rockwall Golf & Athletic Club, homeowners, members and private investors have teamed up to breathe life back into their local club and neighborhood*

By Kevin Newberry

**R**OCKWALL—The Shores Country Club died July 13, 2010. It was resurrected July 13, 2012, as Rockwall Golf & Athletic Club.

In the midst of a never-ending recession and a world that seems to be turning upside down, we wanted to share some good news.

This is a *we built that* story.

This is a win-win-win story.

This is a feel-good story.

In 1970, three years after Lake Ray Hubbard opened, legendary Texas architect Ralph Plummer was hired to build a golf course on 200 acres along the preferred north shore of the lake in what was then a sleepy little berg about 25 miles northeast of downtown Dallas.

Plummer's employer was using a new formula that was sweeping the nation at the time--building neighborhoods around golf courses to increase the value of the surrounding real estate. It worked. Over time, nearly 1,300 homes were built on or around the golf course.

Fast forward four decades. By now, this sleepy bedroom community has become a boomtown. A great lake for fishing and water sports, a bustling harbor, a yacht club, a major tollway, great schools and a popular mega church bring all types of traffic to Rockwall from all parts of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex.

Yet, amid all this growth and prosperity, that golf club went down the tubes. New owners ran it into the ground. Members left in droves to newer public

courses in the area. Course conditions deteriorated. Over two years, the death spiral continued its agonizing process until the owners turned the keys back to the bank.

Turn out the lights. Screen goes dark.

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**Y**ou can't have a "rises from the ashes" story without first setting the stage with a spectacular crash and burn story. You can't have heroes without a crisis.

This is where our story *really* begins.

When the club closed, nobody came to the funeral. There were no flowers or cards. Only a three-man mowing crew was hired to keep the gravesite from becoming an eyesore.

And a golf course that was created to inflate home prices had the opposite effect upon its closure. A pall of uncertainty was cast upon the entire neighborhood.

Home prices dropped.

Home sales dropped.

Tax rolls dropped.

It was a nightmare for club members, homeowners and city officials.

Enter stage left: Mike Jenkins, CEO of Landscapes Unlimited. Jenkins' company manages about 30 courses around the country as well as doing golf course construction and park maintenance. His company had built several parks for the city and was hired to maintain the defunct



**2600 Champions Drive  
Rockwall, TX 75087  
972-771-0301**

**www.rgactx.com**

**Designers:** Ralph Plummer (1970)

Jeff Blume (2012)

**Par/Yards:** 72/7,200

**Greens:** MiniVerde Bermuda

**Public Rates:** \$60/weekday, \$75/weekend

**Family Memberships:** \$750 initiation fee and \$200/month



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Lake Ray Hubbard wraps around the 13th green at Rockwall Golf & Athletic Club.

course at parkland levels.

Jenkins saw an opportunity to revive the club, but didn't feel his company was in position to bear all the risk. So he called his good friend, Oklahoma City investor John Dunn, and presented a deal to him. Landscapes would provide the earth moving equipment and expertise if Dunn could bring an investor group together. Dunn made multiple trips in his private plane to meet with bank officials, the FDIC, city officials and homeowners to see if a deal could be made.

From the time the original club was built in 1970, a covenant was created that requires a portion of the homeowners association dues from 1,238 homes would forever be allocated to social membership privileges at the club. It was a built-in way for them to protect their home values. With that type of built-in support, Dunn was all in.

Dunn was then introduced to Houston investor James Havens, who owns 20 percent of the famed Champions Golf Club, and long-time Texas golf pro W. Kit Thomson. They liked the opportunity and joined in the deal. Add local chiropractor Dan Traxler and the owners of a popular local restaurant, Zanata, and the team of superheroes was complete. Not to mention well-equipped with money, golf and food and beverage expertise...and a vested interest in success.

By the time the group brought in architect Jeff Blume, who had a healing hand in similar resurrections of Quail Valley Golf Club and Del Lago Resort, the consensus was, *we can do this*.

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In an industry devoid of new course construction, this type of partnership between public entities, homeowners and private investment capital is a glimmer of hope. What you see going on

at Rockwall Golf & Athletic Club is a formula that likely will be used at other struggling golf courses around the nation that are trying to reinvent themselves to survive in the new golf economy.

"The homeowners being married to the club via covenants was something very unique to this deal and played a big part in my desire to put the deal together," Dunn said. "This is a market opportunity where there were a lot of forces at work that really made it attractive. When you fly over Rockwall and our golf course...that piece of real estate really stands out.

"The Rockwall market really appealed to me as much as anything. When you see 5,000-6,000 houses on the lake to the north of I-30, it didn't take much to figure out if you put together a nice family-oriented club, there should be plenty of prospective members."

All of the owners also shared the vision of what a successful 21st century golf club should look like.

"Clubs that aren't built for the whole family offer nothing to younger generations," said Dunn, who has developed and owns golf courses in Amarillo and San Angelo. "I don't know if the next generation is going to recreate the same way the previous ones have. They'll join a club more for the value than for prestige.

"We strongly believe we have to give value to every member of a family—a fun place for mom and kids to swim during summer time, fitness, tennis, dining out, without pretense. We want to be a family-friendly club that offers good value. If you offer good value, the economy is always good."

Here's the value proposition at Rockwall Golf & Athletic Club. For \$750 to join and just \$200 a month for a family membership, an entire family gets full privileges on a newly renovated course as well as tennis, swimming, fitness center and full clubhouse facilities.

Rockwall Golf & Athletic Club

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- 1—Par 4—490
- 2—Par 4—400
- 3—Par 3—177
- 4—Par 3—425
- 5—Par 3—162
- 6—Par 4—423
- 7—Par 5—563
- 8—Par 4—397
- 9—Par 5—532
- 10—Par 4—397
- 11—Par 4—440
- 12—Par 5—537
- 13—Par 4—462
- 14—Par 3—198
- 15—Par 5—598
- 16—Par 4—452
- 17—Par 3—183
- 18—Par 4—445



It's a value proposition not found at any private club in eastern Dallas County.

By lease agreement with the city of Dallas, the club has to provide public access to the course on a space-available basis. Initially, green fees are set at \$60 weekdays or \$75 weekends for golfers who want to come check out the new and improved club. At that rate, for the cost of three rounds per month an entire family can join the club.

"Customers are looking for a better bargain," said Havens, who made weekly trips from Houston to Rockwall over a 15-month period until he finally bought a house near the club. "We're giving them the best value proposition we can."

"By pricing our membership at \$200 a month for a family golf membership," Thomson said, "we feel we have marketed our golf at a very affordable rate that everyone in the family can enjoy. Couple the golf with our fitness center, tennis facilities, and dining experience at Nineteen and we have the best thing going in our marketplace for the money."

Of course, it's easier for owners to pass along great value when they themselves get a great value. The old saying in golf is that the second or third (and sometimes fourth) owners of a golf course are the ones who have a chance to make money. Jenkins has participated in many deals where golf courses were bought back from the bank at rock bottom prices.

"That allows the new owners to sink extra dollars into the project, create some eye-popping improvements in the course and clubhouse and reposition a tired old golf club into something new and exciting," said Jenkins, whose company earned its equity interest in the club through its work. "This was truly a great team effort."

And the members ultimately benefit with a better product at a

lower cost.

"I'm hopeful now when the economy improves, that there are many baby boomers still out there with an unprecedented amount of wealth and leisure time to play golf," Jenkins said. "And positioning our club to appeal to the entire family is a great way to grow the club in the future."

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The new owners of Rockwall Golf and Athletic Club will attest this certainly was no overnight success story. While they saw lots of upside potential, this was one of those deals the investment community would say "has a lot of hair on it."

Before they could do the hard work of reviving the club, Dunn had to bob and weave through an obstacle course of red tape. You see, about 11 holes are on land owned by the City of Dallas, which entered into various agreements with the City of Rockwall and the previous owner to make the land available for use as a golf course in 1970. Dunn personally steered the deal through the negotiations before they could finally start work on the course and clubhouse.

This was no small task in itself. If you've never seen one, it doesn't take long for a defunct golf course to go to seed. Without constant care, an unkept golf course can quickly turn into a great dove hunting lease with waist high sunflowers and weeds. While the greens and bunkers were unsalvageable, the 2011 drought and effort to keep the land mowed at park levels prevented much weed intrusion and kept the fairway turf in manageable condition.

They started with the skeletal remains of the old club and began putting the muscle structure (irrigation and drainage) back on it.



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Before they could drape it with new flesh (new tees, new trees, new mini-verde greens, new bunkers and a totally remodeled clubhouse) the first order of business was to get water on the course to keep playing conditions at a high level and get water off the course during heavy rains to keep the course playable.

They created a new, silt-free irrigation lake with a state of the art pumping station that doubles the club's irrigation capacity and provides more control over when and where and how long to water. New irrigation lines had to be placed around all new greens, tees

and bunkers and 20 percent of the original irrigation lines had to be replaced. Every sprinkler head was either replaced or repaired.

Then came drainage. The surrounding neighborhood was built in the 1970s with no storm drains, so all water from the neighborhood flowed under or across the golf course to get to Lake Ray Hubbard. So they reclaimed a pond on the third hole to serve as storm water retention and provide an enticing signature hole as you drive into the neighborhood.

"We spent a lot of money moving water out of a relatively flat area," Dunn said.

**'The golf course is remarkable. I'm overwhelmed with what they've done. Every green out here is majestic. I look out at one through my back window every day. It's just beautiful.'**

—Bob Edwards, member

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Havens is quite familiar with Ralph Plummer layouts. He is a member and part owner at Champions, where Plummer's Cypress Creek course has hosted the 1967 Ryder Cup, the 1969 U.S. Open as well as the 1993 U.S. Amateur, the Houston Open and a couple PGA Tour Championships.

Yet, the owners didn't charge Blume with a restoration of Plummer's original design. Blume's job was to take what Plummer did and make it better in every way.

In six large open areas on the course, which encompass more than 50 acres, they are allowing native grasses and wildflowers to grow and are adding birdhouses for purple martins. They hope to

eventually achieve certification from the Audubon Society.

Owners also made a huge financial commitment to a new driving range and par-3 short course for lesson programs for juniors, ladies, seniors and low handicap players. With the addition of six new tee complexes on the practice range, the club has a large hitting area and the ability to segregate group lessons from walk up members. Work is still underway on a new 2,800 square foot covered deck and pavilion area, which will become a focal point of the club to host golf tournaments, weddings, birthdays, or provide a cool place to

watch your children take a swimming lesson or just hang out and enjoy the sunset after a hard day at work.

"The commitment of John and James to this project has been second to none," said Thomson, who helped open Raven's Nest Golf Club in Huntsville and The Wilderness at Lake Jackson. "With the help of Mike Jenkins and his great staff, we have been able to put the accounting and business practices into place to help drive the club to its much-needed financial success."

Blume made only two significant routing changes to the layout. The front nine still features nice elevation changes as it winds through the neighborhood, while the back nine plays back down toward the lake.

One part of the course used to flood so frequently that previous owners had created a hole 7A and 7B depending on flood conditions. The two holes were mediocre at best and created an awkward rotation on the front nine, so Blume turned those into one great 583-yard par 5 that plays into the wind with 38 catch basins in the right rough to keep storm waters off the fairway.

He also changed the first hole from a short par 5 to a long par 4 to speed up circulation onto the par-72 layout, which can play over 7,200 yards from the back tees. Only one of the par 5s is even remotely reachable in two from the tips.

The rest of the work designed by Blume and performed by Landscapes focused on making the course more playable, more pleasing to the eye and more memorable.

"The aesthetics of the course have been improved dramatically, and the natural setting around Lake Ray Hubbard has been enhanced," Blume said. "The golf course is long if a player decides to play it from the back tees, but it is very playable for the average golfer. The difference before and after is night and day.

"Most of the greens are open in front to allow for low trajectory approaches, and the putting surfaces are softly contoured to allow putts to be made once a player reaches the green. I think the back nine will be the most challenging, because it is most impacted by the wind conditions along the lake shoreline. Consequently, a player better score early and then try and maintain the round on the back nine."

The original greens and bunkers were either round and oblong and devoid of character. Since these all had to be redone, Blume started with a fresh palette of design tools. He created more interesting green and bunker shapes. By elevating each green a few feet, he was able to improve drainage and add depth to greenside bunkers and more contours around the greens so that missed shots run off into tightly mowed swales.

All of that work enhanced both the visuals and the challenge on approach shots and off the tee.

"The greens and bunkers needed some variety. They all looked the same. When they are all too similar, they all run together and a golfer can't remember the hole. They need to fit together in one big collage," Blume said.

Blume also strategically used false-front bunkers 30-40 yards from the green on Nos. 1, 11, 12 and 16. This is an old-school design trait that guides a player how to play the hole, but also makes the

**'There's not a guy I play with, nobody I talk to, that's not thrilled with what is happening here. The staff on and off the golf course has been great, and they've turned the clubhouse into a showplace. I can't tell you how proud I am to be a member.'**

—Danny Seed, member

green complex look closer on the approach. It gives the golfer one more thing to think about before he pulls a club out of his bag.

"We took the bunkering to a whole new level," he said. "When you're doing a project where you are primarily focusing on the green complexes, by pulling some of the bunkers off the green back into the fairway, they can also serve as fairway bunkers and it makes it look like you've made a bigger impact on the golf course. Players can't reach them from the tee, but they give you a visual on how to play the hole. You have to pay attention, because a 40-yard bunker shot is tough.

"They also help make the golf course look harder than it actually is. You want golfers shooting good scores and feeling like they tamed the beast."

As Blume said, the front nine presents the best scoring opportunity. After the turn, the course begins to bare its teeth as it heads down toward the windswept lakeshore.

The back nine challenge begins at No. 11. It's a 440-yard par 4 that plays into the wind and is undoubtedly one of the toughest holes on the course. Blume placed a fairway bunker down the left side and a false-front bunker on the right, as well as a small but dangerous pot bunker on the right side that

you don't want to be in.

"No. 11 begins a pretty unique stretch of holes," Blume said. "The ground doesn't have a lot of movement, but you've got the lake to your left from No. 12 through No. 16. They play downwind, but they are pretty good-sized golf holes."

No. 12 is a 563-yard, par-5 that plays into a crosswind as golfers begin a stretch of five holes along the lake. It was always one of the best holes at the club as it plays onto a peninsula and features one of the layout's best green sites. Blume created a series of fairway bunkers that stagger down the left side with only one on the right.

The par-4 13th is downwind, but still measures 462 from the



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back tees and plays to a green tightly tucked along the shore of the lake. Blume added a false-front bunker 30 yards short of the green.

Even at the par-3 14th, golfers can't reach for a short iron. It stretches 198 and requires a carry over a lake inlet.

No. 15 is a 593-yard par 5 that doglegs left along the shore. A creek crossing the fairway about 70 yards from the green makes this a three-shot hole for most golfers.

The lake stretch concludes at the 452-yard, par-4 16th. Once they navigate the fairway, players still have to accurately gauge the wind as they hit downwind into a green guarded by the lake on the left and behind.

When golfers finally reach the 18th, they are greeted by a 440-yard par 4 that plays uphill and into the wind and over a creek about 125 yards from the green.

"Jeff did an awesome job with the green complexes and bunkering," Havens said. "It's just a tremendously better course and club than was ever there before. The course has a USGA rating of 75.6 and 133 from the back. Our members' handicaps will travel very well when they play elsewhere."

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While Blume and Landscapes were working on the golf course, Havens, Dunn and Thomson spent time working on renovating a clubhouse that looked straight out of the 70s. The best thing the clubhouse facilities had going was that the homeowners had continued to maintain the two swimming pools and tennis courts for community use, so they needed no attention.

But with an entrance that leads straight to the second floor and its beautiful vistas of the golf course and the lake, it had lots of

potential. Tom Hoch, a highly-regarded interior designer from Oklahoma City who has done work for Augusta National, created all new woodwork throughout the clubhouse and helped Havens choose color patterns for paint and tile areas.

It is a relatively small, intimate clubhouse, with the dining area taking up most of the top floor, so Havens went for more a lodge feel to the clubhouse, which is already booking weddings, bachelor parties and business meetings in addition to golf outings.

"The old clubhouse was very 70s," Havens said. "I'm just smart enough to be dangerous when it comes to interior design, so I left it up to the expert Tom Hoch. We increased our budget by 30 percent over what we planned, but our members have received it well."

Next came getting the food and beverage operations lined up. The owners were in discussions with several vendors when Jason Gorsuch and Mike Lawshe walked into the clubhouse late one afternoon. The owners of Zanata restaurant in Rockwall and Plano had been sitting on Lawshe's patio on the seventh hole when Lawshe said he needed go to the club to talk to them about his old membership, for which he had paid two years in advance. Gorsuch tagged along.

Wearing shorts and Hawaiian shirts, they introduced themselves to Thomson and Havens and were given an overview of their plans for the club. They talked about a number of topics, including the TV-audio system since Lawshe owns a large electronics company that installed all the TVs in Cowboys Stadium, the Toyota Center in Houston and several large hospital systems.

When the subject came to food and beverage service, Gorsuch and Lawshe told them they owned a popular restaurant that has a two-hour wait every Friday and Saturday and they would be interested in providing food service at the club. After a few weeks, the

owners agreed to give them the food and beverage concessions if they joined them as equity partners. The reason? They wanted everyone involved with the club to be on the same team with no competing interests. The agreed the club's restaurant would be called Nineteen.

Known for its wood-fired pizzas, steaks, seafood, fresh ingredients and homemade breads, Nineteen will offer everything from fine dining in the evenings to brunch on Sundays to burgers and wraps.

"I know about 20-30 people who joined the club just because they knew Zanata was going to be here," Gorsuch said. "We've already had more events in 90 days at the club than we did at our restaurant all last year."

Lawshe liked the idea of having the club location because it is right out his back door and there aren't any other restaurants nearby in the densely populated area. And there are no other venues with a great view of the lake and capable of hosting big events and business meetings.

"It was a great decision to not only have us invest in the restaurant, but to also invest in the club so we're all on the same team," Lawshe said. "We want to have a more energetic atmosphere than you would find at a typical club."

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It's one thing to hear about the resurrection of the club from the perspective of the owners, but it's another to hear about the transformation from the members who languished through the death spiral and broken promises under the previous owner.

Many were hopeful but skeptical when the new owners came into

town last year to have a meet and greet at the clubhouse that was filled to standing room only with past members and current homeowners. They listened intently as owners talked about their vision for a value-oriented club and as Blume described in detail the work that would be done on the course.

And it's all good. When the club re-opened, it had 270 members back in the fold. And home prices and home sales in the neighborhood are on their way back up.

Superintendent Shane Hayes has already achieved rock star status at the club for keeping the golf course in perfect condition.

"Shane is doing the work of 10 guys and then some," Havens said. "We're blessed to have him. He's young and interested in continuing to improve the golf course."

Bob Edwards was one of those in the audience at the meet and greet. He left Dallas Athletic Club in 1982 to join the old club and move into the neighborhood. At the

time, the club had a strong men's golf association of 500 members before it began its downturn under different ownership groups.

"Credibility is the point I want to make," said Edwards, a 15 handicap. "We believe they're going to do what they're telling us and they've already done what they said they were going to do...even more than they planned. Yes, there are others that still need to be convinced. But I trust them, and they've earned that trust every time they've told me they were going to do something and they did it."

"The golf course is remarkable. I'm overwhelmed with what they've done. They've taken a base golf course with bulldozers and their skill and knowledge and given us a premier golf course. Every green out here is majestic. I look out at one through my back window every day it's just beautiful."



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Danny Seed also lives on the course and was a member of the previous club for seven years. He has his own golf cart and drives it to the club. When the course closed, the thought of it never being revived was his personal nightmare.

"One of my buddies and I were driving to another golf course and said, 'it may never open again,'" said Seed, a 5 handicap who practices or plays almost every day after work. "That thought sent chills down my spine. It was pretty scary. But in today's economy, you could see something like that happening."

Members and homeowners endured about 10 months of uncertainty before Dunn and the other new owners arrived on the scene. Then, it took another year for them to do their handiwork.

Al Crump is a 12 handicap who also lives in the surrounding neighborhood. He joined the old club in 1983 during its heyday. He moved to Florida in the early 1990s but joined the club again in 2000 when he moved back. He was also in attendance in last year's initial meet and greet, and he bought his membership the next day.

"That meeting was the end of any doubt or trepidation I had," Crump said. "I joined immediately. I followed every step of the renovation and I was at the club quite often. It's truly a 100 times better than what we had before."

Dave Michie is a 15 handicap who lives on the course but had never joined the club. He had played the course a few times in the eight years he lived there, but was never motivated to join the club until he got the chance to meet the new owners and see their vision for the club.

"In the first 60 days the club has been open, I have played the course more than I have in all the eight years I've lived there," Michie said. "My family and I are extremely pleased, and the club provides a sense of pride in our community."

All of the members believe it has been well worth the wait.

"If they had come in and halfway done everything, I think members would have continued to be skeptical that this was another nickel and dime operation," Seed said. "This kind of project takes a huge commitment. I think the skepticism is gone. There's not a guy I play with, nobody I talk to, that's not thrilled with what is happening here. The staff on and off the golf course has been great, and they've turned the clubhouse into a showplace. I can't tell you how proud I am to be a member. It's just going to get better and better."

Golfers owe it themselves to check out the "resurrected" Rockwall Golf & Athletic Club the next time they visit the east side of the Metroplex. **TL**

