When Hawks Ridge Golf Club opened in 1999, owners Mike Nixon and Joe Jillson envisioned a Gatsby-like atmosphere with all the grandeur and cosily decadent service one would expect from a club founded in the 1920s on Long Island. Yet, this is Ball Ground, Ga., not The Hamptons, where six years ago, you were more apt to hear the shrill sounds of a crowing rooster than pleasant country club chatter.

Despite the geographical challenge of its off-the-beaten path location off Hwy. 372 north of Hwy. 20, avid golfers like John Smoltz, Michael Jordan, Greg Maddux, Tom Glavine and Chipper Jones are drawn to the club as if it possessed a magnetic field. PGA Tour professionals Tiger Woods, Chi Chi Rodriguez and Billy Andrade have enjoyed its many charms on occasion, too.

The purpose of this celebrity name-dropping is nothing more than to point out that these guys can play anywhere, and they pick a course a solid 50 minutes from the Atlanta airport designed not by Nicklaus, Jones or Fazio, but by Bob Cupp. Those of us who know and enjoy Cupp’s work recognize his masterful design
talents, as do Golf Digest and Golf Week, which rank this gem of North Atlanta among the top courses in the country.

A COURSE FIT FOR GRAND CHAMPIONS
Later this month (Sept. 19 to 23), the elder statesmen of the Champions Tour will be at Hawks Ridge for the Georgia-Pacific Grand Champions Championship, the season-ending event that will feature the leading-money winners from the five Grand Champions events that precede the finale.

Hale Irvin, Raymond Floyd, Dave Stockton, J.C. Snead, Jay Sigel and reigning champion Mike Hill are among the 18 golfers (60 years of age and older) expected to compete for the $85,000 first-place prize. The total purse for the event is $400,000, and approximately $150,000 will be donated to Children’s Health Care of Atlanta and Rebuilding Together, a national organization that preserves and revitalizes homes and communities, assuring that low-income homeowners live in warmth, safety and independence.

Alan Thielmann, vice president of marketing for Georgia-Pacific’s building products division, said Hawks Ridge is the perfect venue for the tournament, which for the first time will be held at a separate venue from the Champions Tour.

“This event used to be a part of the regular Champions Tour and just got lost in it,” Thielmann related. “It just wasn’t fair to these

Hawks Ridge has an aura about it. It is a fabulous golf course, is impeccably maintained, and it is a hard golf course for many golfers to get on.

— ALAN THIELEMANN, GEORGIA-PACIFIC

guys because they are such terrific players. I suggested we set it up as a separate venture. When we decided we wanted to do it in the Atlanta area, we wanted the host course to represent class, distinction and quality. Hawks Ridge has an aura about it. It is a fabulous golf course, is impeccably maintained, and it is a hard golf course for many golfers to get on.”

Hawks Ridge possesses a certain “wow” factor, according to Thielmann. “We could have gone to a lot of other name courses, but felt that Hawks Ridge offered something the others didn’t.”

Although each of the golfers who will participate in the event is closer to sunset rather than dawn, the quality of the golf during the event will be second-to-none. Last year’s Grand Champion winner Mike Hill’s final score through 54 holes would have been leading the Champions Tour event held that same weekend on the same course, and he played from the same set of tees.

“You can’t tell me that these guys are old, are playing from the front tees and life is easy for them,” Thielmann stated.

In fact, the course likely will be set up at 6,600 to 6,700 yards for the event, according to Hawks Ridge’s head golf professional Chuck Knebel. He expects the winning score to be somewhere between 6- and 10-under par for 36 holes.
“The greens are so perfect right now that the Tour officials asked that the greens be slower than what our members normally play,” Knebels said. “The golf course should be fabulous in September. The rough will be penal, but not impossible. The challenges here come from many different things. You don’t have to trick up Hawks Ridge to make it a great test of golf. It will stand up on its own.”

VALIDATION OF THE VISION

Earlier this year when Golf Digest released its 2005 Top-100 Courses in the United States in its first year of eligibility, Hawks Ridge was ranked at No. 81. That is ahead of revered courses such as Congressional C.C., Pete Dye G.C., TPC at Sawgrass (Stadium Course) and Harbour Town Golf Links.

Knebels said everyone at Hawks Ridge was thrilled at its inclusion on the prestigious list. “Of course, we did receive a lot of local recognition after the club opened, but the Golf Digest Top-100 Courses is the oldest, most respected, recognizable rating system of a golf course there is,” Knebels stated.

Golf Digest’s formula for determining which courses rank in the Top-100 combines subjectivity and objectivity. Variety of the golf
course's design, shot values, conditioning, walkability, resistance to scoring and memorability contribute to a course's ranking. Knebel said Hawks Ridge received high marks for conditioning and memorability. Because previously used grades for nostalgia are no longer considered, newer clubs like Hawks Ridge are now a part of the list.

"We always knew it was really good, because we get great response from our guests comparing it to other great courses they have played," Knebel said. "It's almost like you can script it. We hear I've never been to a place like this quite often."

"When we started the club, we wanted to build the best in the area. Our first step was to be considered for the Best New Private Course of the Year in 2000. We finished second in that competition, and we knew Golf Digest looked at us last," Knebel said. "We didn't feel we were taken seriously until they were well into their decision-making process... We were honored to be second in the country, but disappointed we didn't finish first."

**MEMBERS FIRST PHILOSOPHY**

Being included on the Golf Digest list has spurred membership interest (unbeknownst to many, Hawks Ridge does encourage membership inquiries), and Knebel believes the club's current ranking will climb higher as the years pass. Holding limited field events like the Grand Champions, which will air on The Golf Channel, can do nothing but enhance the club's reputation and its membership roster.

"If we were located a bit closer to Atlanta, I can assure you we would have a waiting list of 100 players," Knebel said. "These days, there are few clubs where you can play 18 holes on a great course in three hours and 45 minutes."

"Georgia-Pacific inquired if we would be interested in hosting the event, and we are looking for certain limited field events," Knebel continued. "We're not looking for events that require us to host 140 players and tie the place up for an entire week. The owners said they'd love to host the Grand Champions, but were more concerned about how it would affect our members. In fact, after the event is over each day, members are encouraged to come out and play."

Each day, the championship will provide approximately 2,000 local golf fans the opportunity to see Golf Digest and others rank Hawks Ridge so highly, as well as give golf fans a close-up view of great golf by some of the players they grew up watching.

"We're not even roping most of the areas. The only ropes will be around the tees and the greens," Theileman said. "The whole objective is for the fans to get very close to the players, and these guys are not high and mighty. These guys have been around for a long time and appreciate the fans and appreciate where they are [in life]. They are much more approachable, conversational and still can play some darn good golf."

And with Hawks Ridge playing host, you are guaranteed a congenial atmosphere.

"We think it is a draw because it's Hawks Ridge and we're not charging a lot for the tickets," Theileman said. "It's one of these great events where you can watch the legends of the game for $10, and there is no parking fee. How much cheaper entertainment can you get?"

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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