

Fairway to Heaven

After a few rounds in the rough, Papago Municipal Golf Course returns to splendor on its 50th birthday.

THE NIGHT AIR IS LUSH with the aroma of blooming citrus as a snaking line of parked cars lies in wait for the approaching dawn. The men inside try to nap, but most are simply too jazzed – soon, the gate will fly open and these links-loving fools will rush in.

Such was a typical springtime scene at Papago Municipal Golf Course through much of the 1970s and '80s. Certainly, the Valley has no shortage of dazzling private golf courses, but for many years the uncontested rock star of the links was this demanding yet affordable public course, set in a Papago Buttes landscape so scenic it was once designated a national monument. Inspiring the kind of spend-the-night fervor typically reserved for *Twilight* sequels and new iPhone releases, Papago became a magnet for the city's top golfers and an incubator of junior talent. Now, 50 years after its debut, Papago is once again a come-one, come-all favorite of pros and hackers alike – a recent detour in the bunkers notwithstanding.

For many years, the only holes at Papago Buttes were of the geological variety. Designated Papago Saguaro National Monument by Congress in 1914 for its spectacular saguaro-studded outcrops, the parcel intrigued local development interests, and the monument status was abolished in 1930. The Desert Botanical Garden, Phoenix Zoo, and athletic fields eventually sprang up in what became known as Papago Park, and in 1959, Phoenix added the Valley's third municipal course, following Encanto and Maryvale.

The city hired William F. "Billy" Bell to design the new course. His father, William Park Bell, had been a famous Southwest golf course architect; when the elder Bell passed away in 1953, Billy completed his father's unfinished plan for the legendary Torrey Pines course in San Diego. Living in Southern California, Bell only occasionally visited Phoenix and hired a local golf course architect, Arthur Jack Snyder, to direct construction.



The 1962 original plan of Papago Golf Course

"Bell told the city, 'Anything you don't like, I'll blame on Snyder,'" Phoenix golf course architect Forrest Richardson recounts. "Snyder responded that anything that came out great, he'd take credit for."

After three years of construction, Papago Municipal Golf Course opened to acclaim on September 7, 1963. Everyone had an opinion about what made the course special. "Papago is challenging and beautiful," local golfer Brian Waggle says. "Challenging in that each hole can be a bruiser, especially 16 through 18. It's beautiful in that the course is a blend of traditional and desert golf and has enough elevation change to offer scenic views."

"The best time to play is in the mid-late afternoon," local golfer Drew Hassler says. "The heat has chased others away and you are alone with the course. You may be playing with some buddies, but in the quiet long shadows of the eucalyptus trees, it is you and Papago. The smell of the late afternoon sprinklers and finishing the last three holes at twilight is truly golf heaven."

The golf course's first head professional in charge of managing the pro shop and golf instruction was Arch Watkins, who held the position until 1981. Watkins cultivated a fertile

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– Drew Hassler

training ground for youngsters, grooming future pro golfers Billy Mayfair, Heather Farr, and Missy Farr. Even touring pros would visit Watkins for help when they were in town for the Phoenix Open, according to William Godfrey's book, *Papago Park: The Golf Course and Its History*.

The most legendary round ever played at Papago occurred within a year of its opening. Johnny Bulla, a former touring pro, shot the current course record of 61 – thanks to 11 birdies. Bulla was highly unusual in that he was ambidextrous. He shot that 61 playing right-handed, but former Papago assistant golf professional Frank Corkhill says, "I heard that Bulla later that year shot a 61 or 62 at Papago playing *left-handed*."

Papago became famous nationally when it was selected to host the 1971 U.S. Golf Association Amateur Public Links Championship, a tournament that drew 4,174 entries. Qualifying rounds across the country narrowed the field to 150 competitors, who played the 72-hole tournament at Papago during scorching July temperatures. Oregonian Fred Haney won the championship, but not without a few gripes. "It was 121 degrees during the third round and nearly as hot the other days. Sometimes golf

was just a matter of survival," he told Godfrey.

The course soon went Hollywood. "In the 1980 movie *Used Cars* starring Kurt Russell, the scene in which a car jumps into a lake was filmed in front of the 11th green," Corkhill says. "And a Top-Flite golf ball commercial in the 1980s that starred an astronaut featured the very extra-terrestrial-appearing Papago Buttes."

However, the greatest testimony to Papago's undeniable allure was the astonishing lengths golfers would go to play the course during its heyday. Like diehard fans seeking concert tickets, determined players camped out in their cars at the entrance the night before, hoping to snag a tee time.

A decade later, Papago almost made the leap to golf stardom. The Phoenix Thunderbirds were looking for a permanent home for the Phoenix Open, which at the time alternated annually between Phoenix and Arizona country clubs. "We loved Papago but knew it needed a better clubhouse, as the PGA professionals wouldn't be too keen on having to change their shoes in the parking lot," attorney Jerry Lewkowitz says with a laugh. "So the Thunderbirds' proposed to the Phoenix City Council that Papago become the tournament course, but the council went ballistic when we wanted to increase the green fees from \$8 to \$12 a day to help pay for the club house, so we passed on the idea."

After Watkins left in 1981, Joe Huber became Papago's head professional for the next 25 years. He upgraded the pro shop, and golfers responded by averaging 110,000 rounds per year in the late 1980s. The lightning speed with which tee times vanished led some to suspect unscrupulous activities.

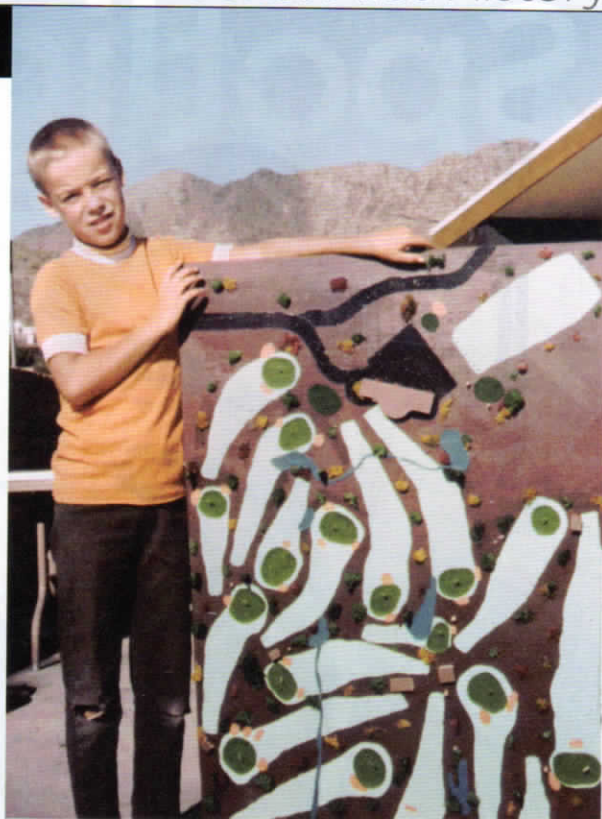
"In 1987, the *Phoenix New Times* caught wind that there might be tee time improprieties at Papago, so they did one of their exposé

Future Phoenix golf course designer Forrest Richardson

articles to reveal the sordid details and culprits," Corkhill says. "They showed up before dawn with flash bulbs popping, taking photographs of geezers sleeping in their campers at the gate in anticipation of getting a ticket from me. The reporter observed the typical process of giving out tee times to people by ticket order alternating with those calling in, which lasted all of a few minutes. The resulting article was decidedly boring."

But all great love affairs go through the occasional rough patch. By the 1990s, Papago was suffering from deteriorating conditions and increased competition from newer courses. "Papago was special, yet the city made the mistake of allotting it the same maintenance budget as the other municipal courses," Richardson laments.

In a controversial decision, the city turned over operation of the course to the Arizona Golf Association (AGA) around 2008. The AGA subsidiary spent \$5.8 million renovating the course and hosted the 2009 Phoenix LPGA International tournament before going bankrupt, leaving many locals upset about the course conditions and the secretive razing of the beautiful Dave Shoulder-designed circular clubhouse that was laid out like spokes to the sun. "Under AGA management, the big trees were killed and the grass turned to concrete," Hassler says. "Thank golf [the AGA managers] are gone!"



Now under new management by Mark Woodward and Associates, the course has improved. "They have Papago in great shape, the old regulars have returned, and word has spread to a new group of golfers," Hassler says.

Reflecting on Papago's golden anniversary, Corkhill is optimistic about its future. "Papago has always been a haven for local golfers who love the beautiful setting, challenging golf course, and general pleasant experience of playing and meeting new people from all over the world." Who knows? Maybe those links-crazed groupies will start camping out again.



Arnold Palmer and Bob Hope

Tour Grind

WHEN PAPAGO GOLF COURSE OPENED IN THE FALL OF 1963, Arnold Palmer was the toast of the Valley golf community, having won three consecutive Phoenix Open championships. Although Arnie's legendary "army" of fans would continue to cheer for their hero every year, Palmer would never again claim victory at the tournament. But that didn't mean Palmer didn't keep trying, looking for every possible edge. In the early 1970s, John Pickrell owned Scotty's Blacksmith and Machine Shop, located on the corner of Brown Avenue and Second Street in Scottsdale. A few days before the start of the Phoenix Open, Pickrell was shocked to see Palmer walk into his grimy industrial space looking to have a little weight taken off his sand wedge. Pickrell confessed that he had never worked on a golf club. The famous golfer told him not to worry, that he wanted to use the grinder himself. After donning goggles and gloves, Palmer ran the clubhead along the grinding wheel a few times, hefted the club for weight, and repeated the process. Finally satisfied with the feel, he thanked Pickrell and handed him a five-dollar bill. Asked where he had learned his machine skills, Palmer responded, "I grew up on a golf course where my father was the greenskeeper. I've always fixed my own clubs."