

COTM: Silver Lakes Golf Estate

COMPLEAT GOLFER

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The development of Silver Lakes was the brainchild of the property arm of the giant corporation Anglo American. Selborne Park, south of Durban, was South Africa's first golf estate, a business model which was replicated (but with a much higher density of homes) at Dainfern in the late 1980s. It seemed natural that with Pretoria's burgeoning suburbia heading eastwards of the capital city, the time was right to launch a similar development in that area.

I recall visiting this property – which covers some 334 hectares – just as work on the golf course began, and to be truthful, the terrain was decidedly uninspiring. What didn't help was the time of year – the middle of winter, when what sparse veld grass grew was dormant, and driving the dusty construction sand roads it was hard to imagine that a verdant golf course surrounded by upmarket homes would one day occupy the property.

At the time, the sea of urban development had not yet reached this region – in fact, the only landmark nearby was the Farm Inn, a well-known country hotel complete with a game sanctuary. Today it is surrounded by housing estates and office parks, all with the obligatory electric fencing. On top of being devoid of any redeeming features, this stretch of land had decidedly poor soil – mainly made up of a stony conglomerate and most of the areas were high in clay content.

The course architect commissioned to design and construct the course was Peter Matkovich, and given this unattractive canvas, I had my doubts whether he could produce anything special. How wrong I was.

“I wasn’t given a specific brief at Silver Lakes,” Matkovich tells us today. “The developers didn’t want the course to be too tough, and as we always do, we tried to find a fair balance between playability while adding some spice.” He certainly remembers dealing with the awkward clay, a material extremely difficult to shape.

Word was that the original owner of the farm had been given a very generous offer for this property – rumoured to be in the region of R10 million. Perhaps a sizeable windfall about 25 years ago, but to come close to the real value of this developed estate today one would have to add a good few noughts to this figure.



The 13th is a strong par three that can be stretched to 179 metres and requires the tee shot to carry water all the way to a green protected by three bunkers.

It was not exactly plain sailing in the earliest days of Silver Lakes – after the initial flurry of speculators hoping to make a quick profit, the property market seemed to adopt a ‘wait-and-see’ attitude, and although Matkovich worked his magic and indeed produced an excellent layout, the sales of properties seemed to stall. What didn’t help was the difficulty involved in building homes – requiring ‘floating’ foundations or the construction of reinforced pylons, which increased building costs considerably. From the golfer’s point of view, the routing and interesting mix of holes couldn’t be faulted, but it soon became clear that in a few areas there was little margin for error between hitting the fairway or someone’s house.

Anglo's property division, after selling a major portion of the stands, decided to offload the golf course and clubhouse, and at an auction in 1999, a prominent Pretoria businessman, Piet Geysler, bought the golf club for what seemed like a 'bargain basement' price of R3 million. This was, of course, a fraction of what the replacement value of the golf course would have been at the time, not to mention what it would have cost to build the clubhouse.

Mr Geysler soon realised that this was no money-spinner, though, and his investment, at least initially, seemed more like a bottomless pit rather than a cash cow.

Importantly, as time went by and the many indigenous trees that had been planted grew, the course improved in leaps and bounds. Like so many other estate courses, the layout had been opened too soon, but with time (and liberal doses of expensive TLC), the kikuyu fairways knitted and Matkovich's vision came into its own.

The original property had a single dam fed by rainfall runoff from surrounding areas, and this was re-shaped to fit within the course's layout (now a major feature of the par-five 14th), but considerable work was done constructing other water features so the name 'Silver Lakes' certainly became appropriate.

In an era where so many golf clubs are struggling to keep the wolf from the door, Silver Lakes has convincingly bucked this trend – and is a glowing example of how a golf operation can be self-sustaining.

After 11 years of ownership, Piet Geysler sold the club to the estate's homeowners, and soon after, Andrew McKenna joined the club as head professional and director of golf. A former European Tour player, McKenna has certainly been an asset to the club, and his passion and hard work have paid dividends.

In 2010, the club had only 470 members, but this number has since doubled. The number of rounds played here has also increased dramatically – to more than 43 000 per annum (about 40 percent of these are visitor rounds).



This view of the 10th and 17th greens illustrates why Silver Lakes is an appropriate name for this club.

This is a vibrant club with enthusiastic members, and a considerable investment is now being made to further upgrade the facilities – the clubhouse is being revamped, and the flow of traffic, the restaurant and the outside areas are being improved, all at a cost of some R10 million.

The first-time golfer is going to discover that although the layout is comparatively short (6 214 metres from the club tees), scoring is not that easy. There are some rather tight holes, and besides the out of bounds and the more obvious water hazards, the trees can also present a problem for slightly errant shots. What is particularly pleasing is the mix of challenges, and the course has a high memorability factor.

After a gentle introduction to the course (the opening hole is a relatively straightforward par four that doglegs to the right), a rather quirky, three-shot par five follows, a hole that features trees in the fairway that can bedevil the tee shot or the lay-up. After a rather ordinary par three, an excellent par four follows, where a dual fairway encourages the longer hitter to take a line over a wetland, but the more conservative route is to go left and face an intimidating approach to a green surrounded by water and bunkers.

Another good par four is followed by what is rated as the easiest hole on the course – a par five that is well within range with two solid shots, but again water comes into play. The 8th hole is one of the more contentious creations – again a split fairway, more water, and well worthy of its stroke two rating. A simple little par three completes the outward nine, a pleasant enough hole which is spoilt by the towering palm trees that would be better suited to a desert oasis than Pretoria.



The large clubhouse is currently undergoing a facelift, and a golfers' patio overlooking the 9th and 18th greens will be the perfect place for a post-round cocktail.

The back nine has a completely different feel – again a gentle start that requires an average-length tee shot followed by a short- or medium- iron, but after this, a series of excellent holes follow. The 11th requires an accurate tee shot and a solid approach to the green that can accommodate some fiendish pin positions, and the hole that follows is as good a par four as any – certainly the toughest two-shotter on the course.

Next is a brilliant par three – 180 metres with water guarding the front- right of the green. The par-five 14th features another dual fairway – the stronger player can play to the ‘island’ fairway, most would be advised to keep left of the lake; certainly one of many interesting holes here that is not easily forgotten.

A short, driveable par four, another excellent par three, and a beautiful par four with water left of the green (stroke three) sets up the home stretch, a very good par five with a peninsula green.

Like at every good golf course, golfers of all abilities will always walk off after their initiation here and be itching to have another attempt. A fierce championship test this is not, but it is certainly fun to play.

FACT SHEET

GETTING THERE: From Johannesburg, proceed north on the N1 and take the Lynnwood Road (M6) turnoff. Turn right at the traffic lights (east). After crossing Solomon Mahlangu Drive, turn left into Silverlakes Drive.

COURSE: Parkland, 18 holes, par 72. Kikuyu tees and fairways, bent-grass greens. Total length (championship tees) 6 640 metres.

DESIGNED: Peter Matkovich (1993).

GOLF DIRECTOR: Andrew McKenna

COURSE SUPERINTENDENT: Johan Smit

CLUB CAPTAIN: Dean Armitage

GREENFEES: Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays – R425 (affiliated), R570 (non-affiliated) Weekdays – rates range from R190 to R310 (for affiliated golfers).

CONTACT: 012 809 0430

WEBSITE: www.silverlakes.co.za

LIKES

- This is a course where accuracy is rewarded, and the receptive, consistent putting surfaces allow for some great pin positions.
- The clubhouse is perfectly positioned, and faces both the 9th and 18th greens.
- The locals – for some reason the folk in Pretoria are a lot friendlier than those south of the Hennops River.

DISLIKES

- The proximity of homes on certain holes.
- The palm trees would be better suited to a set for Arabian Nights.
- One normally has to spend some time in the queue at the security gate.