

Disney's Magnolia Course: Long on History . . . and Yardage

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Long. Very long!

When a golfer is asked to describe the Magnolia course at Walt Disney World Resort, this is normally the answer for this layout that is 7,516 yards from the tips (pro tees).

Like "sister courses" Palm and Lake Buena Vista, Magnolia was designed by Floridian Joe Lee. Opened on the same morning as Magic Kingdom in 1971, Magnolia sports a second description: a classic Florida golf course.

Every year since 1971, Magnolia has been host to the final round of a PGA TOUR fall event, now the Children's Miracle Network Classic. The course has entertained many of the world's finest golfers, including Jack Nicklaus, who earned victories in the first three Disney tournaments. Tiger Woods capped his rookie season with victory here in 1996 and won again in 1999.

The course, aptly named for its more than 1,500 magnolia trees, winds through 175 acres of thick Florida wetlands. It features 97 bunkers including the world-famous "Mouse Trap" fronting the par 3 No. 6. Water comes into play on 11 holes. Six stately bridges carry players across the many creeks that cross the course.

In Robert McCord's *The 479 Best Courses to Play in the U.S., Canada and the Caribbean*, it is concluded, "The combination of water hazards, sand traps, length, challenging greens and well-designed golf holes make the Magnolia course a beautiful and memorable test of golf."

The course has undergone two major facelifts over the years. In 1993, 23 years after opening, course architect Lee returned to redesign all 18 greens and the main putting green.

The putting surfaces, which had lost their shape through years of routine maintenance, were restored to their original condition.

"The main thing we changed on the golf course was the elevation of the back of the greens," Lee said. "We have created 'spectator mounds' on most holes for better viewing during golf tournaments."

The original Tifgreen/328 grass was replaced with Tifdwarf, a grass that Lee described as "superior and faster."

Aside from the greens, Lee had teeing areas realigned to their original form. He also changed many of the tees used by women. With women making up such a large portion of the world's golfers, he said he is "trying to do a much better job with ladies' tees."

"I think the guy who said this is one of the greatest golf complexes in the world would have to be right," Lee said. "I think what we have done here with reconstruction may be better than when it was originally done."

Lee was no longer alive to oversee a second "extreme makeover" during 2005. But head golf professional Kevin Weickel believes the designer would be pleased with the makeover because the changes have restored Lee's "design philosophy" for the course. Specifically, the course has been lengthened by more than 300 yards through the installation of new tee boxes. The result: Today's typically longer hitter will be playing into the landing areas that Lee had in mind when he originally conceived the course.

The most dramatic yardage increases involve several of the par 4s – four of which can now play at more than 480

yards – and the iconic par 3 No. 6 – fronted by the famous “mouse trap” – which will play at more than 230 yards.

The changes have made the Magnolia one of the five longest courses in Florida . . . and one of the five longest courses that the PGA TOUR plays.

But the changes aren't intended to scare off resort golfers. “Fifty weeks of the year, our courses are played by amateur golfers,” Weickel said. “They were originally designed with that in mind – to be great courses for all levels of golfers. And they are still that. For the average golfer, the changes are like going to a steakhouse, saying ‘Wow!’ when you look at the six-pound challenge . . . and then ordering something more to your taste – a strip, a Delmonico, a petit filet.”

The makeover also included another resurfacing of all the greens with yet a newer bermudagrass – TifEagle.

Facts and Figures about the Magnolia Course:

- Course opened in 1971
- Par is 72
- Course record: 61 (Payne Stewart)
- Length ranges from 7,190 (pro yardage) to 5,232 (forward tees); men's yardage: 6,642
- Course rating from the men's tees is 72.3
- Slope index from the men's tees is 130
- Water figures in the design of 11 holes
- Greens are TifEagle
- Fairways are Tifway 419
- Magnolia is one of three Walt Disney World courses designed by Joe Lee; others: Lake Buena Vista and Palm
- The Magnolia course shares clubhouse facilities — including a pro shop and locker rooms — with the Palm course
- Among the prestigious events that have called the course "home": the PGA TOUR fall Classic (1971-) — currently the Children's Miracle Network Classic; the Bryant Gumbel/Walt Disney World Celebrity Tournament benefiting the United Negro College Fund (1989-91); and the AJGA/Polo Golf Junior Classic (1995-2003)
- Magnolia is part of the Walt Disney World golf resort complex honored as one of America's Gold Medal Resorts by *Golf Magazine* (2004 biennial survey)