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## Johnny Miller revamps Napa's Silverado Resort

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Arnie has Bay Hill. Jack has Muirfield Village. And now Johnny has Silverado.

Johnny Miller, part of an investment group that purchased the 36-hole resort in Napa, Calif., last year, unveiled his redesign of the North Course there earlier this year.

"I can't say I dreamed of owning it because the thought never entered my mind," said the two-time major winner, who once lived in a home on the 11th hole. "But I sure thought about redesigning these courses about 4,000 times, probably as far back as the early 1970s. I said we could do one course and show the world and the membership what the potential of these courses are, and breathe a little life into this iconic property."

He's done just that, and magnificently. The revamped North Course received new grasses, new bunkering (complete with blinding, white Idaho sand) and realigned fairways, not to mention significant tree removal.

"It has a clean, open look now where it used to be a little bit shabby," says Miller, who won a PGA Tour event here (the Kaiser International Open Invitational) in 1974 and 1975.

Perhaps the biggest improvement is a higher level of conditioning on the now lightning-fast greens.

"If you had Tour pros play here from the back tees and no rough, with the greens running fast, I'd be surprised if anyone shot 12 or 13 under par for an event, which is strong for no rough," says Miller. "This is a tough golf course. These greens are as tough as Augusta at high speeds. I would probably have five three putts a round."

Miller applied a less-is-more philosophy when it came to bunkers.

"I'm a big believer in not having too many bunkers," he said. "I took out 15-20 bunkers here. My bunkers are there 95 percent of the time for a real good reason. They change the hole and make you think. They are not decorative bunkers. A lot are not even in play for most players, but they are for the Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroys of the world."

Will those two ever tee it up here? Probably not. But Miller is enthusiastic about bringing local, state, USGA and professional events to Silverado.

“We’ve had inquiries from every one of those entities, but we want to wait until we have all our ducks in a row before moving forward with any of them,” he said.

For previous course design projects, Miller estimated he would normally visit the site 10-12 times -- at Silverado that number increased to approximately 40.

“I made every decision on the course for the first time in my life,” he said. “For once I could say if you hate it, it’s my fault. If you like it, it’s my fault. It’s one thing to do a job for an owner who selects you from 10 guys and you want to do a good job for them. It’s a whole different deal if you are one of the owners. That gets your attention. I was determined to do the best dang job I could. I’m not the world’s greatest course designer, but I do know this property, and with the budget we had, I knew I could do a better job than anybody because I knew every inch of this place.”

Future plans call for renovating the South Course, building a world-class driving range, and establishing a golf academy. Dolce Hotels was brought in to handle the unique accommodation situation (435 member-owned cottages that will likely undergo upgrades pending owner approval), while Troon Golf is now handling course operations.

“You can have a Fazio and spend maybe \$10 million, or a Nicklaus come in for \$8 million, but we didn’t spend too much,” said Miller. “If the market was better, and golf wasn’t down, we could have gone with more lakes, waterfalls, or re-circulated streams. That’s what those guys do. What we did was for playability and not a lot of extra frosting. This is a good first step.”

And the first one in what Miller hopes will be a long relationship.

“One thing I learned from Greg Norman, who was way more aggressive than I am, is that I wanted to create something that was a family legacy, create a brand or have an iconic property like this where people in the family could work, or something that just goes on -- that’s what a family business does, goes on for generations,” Miller said. “That’s what we can do with this property. It’s sort of sacred for me. I fell in love with it the first time I saw it. There’s just something about Napa Valley and Silverado. At my stage in life, maybe my announcing doesn’t bring that much joy to the players, but I’m hoping people get a kick out of coming here. That’s our goal.”

(Photo: Joann Dost)