

Opinion by Greg Hansen : Match Play puttin' on the Ritz — in 2009

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Jack Nicklaus and the Ritz-Carlton people have made so much progress on the next home of the WGC-Accenture Match Play Championship that they have settled on names.

And, no, it won't be Bear Gulch or Bear Down or bear-anything.

In 13 months, the world's leading match-play golf event will be staged on the Tortolita Course at the Ritz-Carlton's \$60 million Dove Mountain project. Another course, the Wild Burro, will be completed by 2010, although it will not be used for the WGC event.

Two small armies of workers travel once-secluded but now-congested Dove Mountain Boulevard each day. The first group stops at the Gallery Golf Club's South Course, where preparations for next month's Match Play Championship — Year 2 in Tucson — are such that operations director Stephen Nutt refers to it as "crazy busy."

A second brigade of workers proceeds north and west to Nicklaus' design, which, at first glance, almost appears ready for play. The manicured grass is a deep green, although it is unlikely to be ready for play until November.

Nicklaus plans to play a grand-opening round at Tortolita as soon as the finishing touches have been applied.

But that's a story for another day.

Three things you must know if you plan to attend the Feb. 20-24 Match Play event:

1. Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson have committed to play. Last year, 63 of the world's 64 top-ranked golfers participated.
2. Ernie Els, the world's No. 5-ranked golfer, is likely to be the only Top 50 player not here. Els' Web site suggests that he won't play in any event on the PGA Tour's West Coast swing.
3. Patron amenities from Tucson's 2007 Match Play debut, from parking to concessions to restroom facilities, have been reviewed and reworked.

To its credit, the PGA Tour has recognized the unique challenge of staging the Match Play event on a limited-access plot of foothills turf and has put one of its key operations people, Nutt, on the case.

Nutt has moved to Tucson full-time and has been hands-on busy since Dec. 1. At the inaugural event last year, day-to-day operations — from scaffolding to tent-building — didn't begin until Jan. 2.

Some of those things weren't completed until a day or two before Woods and Mickelson stuck a tee in the ground.

Crazy busy, right?

Recognized for his efficiency at event operations, Nutt not only worked the 2007 President's Cup, but for eight weeks was "loaned" to the Tiger Woods Foundation so that he could organize and execute Tiger's first-ever AT&T National invitational in Washington D.C.

Tiger wanted the tour's best man on the job, and Nutt was the man appointed. Now he is Tucson's Match Play Man.

At the Gallery, Nutt reacted on an impromptu basis at the 2007 event. In the first 24 hours, he discovered that transportation demands and spectator comfort needed immediate attention and change.

"We want people to give us a second chance," he said Monday. "We've reorganized the way we get people up and down the mountain. The Police Department will be more involved with out-bound traffic on Tangerine Road. We've added concessions stands. We've added more (port-a-johns). It is going to be a better experience for spectators."

In addition, 250 parking spaces have been created at nearby Heritage Highlands. The volunteer workers' parking lot has been moved away from public parking. Will-call ticket transactions will now be conducted at the less-congested Bashas' shopping center.

"Much more emphasis will be given to the ebb and flow of general-public traffic," said Michael Garten, executive director of the Match Play event. "We learned a lot last year. At the course, we now will have five drop-off bus locations; last year we had three. We've paved some public walkways, cleaned things up. This isn't the sexiest information, but it's important for spectator comfort."

The Ritz-Carlton's Tortolita Course is contracted to stage the WGC-Match Play Championships in 2009 and 2010. Most PGA Tour venue contracts expire at the conclusion of the 2010 season. Some international golfers, none more notable than Els, have lobbied to have the Match Play event moved periodically. It was played in Australia in 2001 but thereafter returned to La Costa near San Diego and, last year, to Tucson.

Construction of the Nicklaus facility, designed specifically for tour players and for spectator traffic, has made the Ritz-Carlton course more suitable for world-class golf.

"I have every reason to believe we'll be here through the next contract period, from 2011 to 2014," said Garten. "We like it here. Tucson has been good to us; we plan to be good to Tucson."