

A THROWBACK TO THE Golden Age

The Cardinal merges scenic beauty and shot making into championship course

By Brad Emons

Known around the world as one of the leaders in golf architecture, designer Ray Hearn has crafted another gem with his latest jewel.

Hearn, whose office was previously based in downtown Plymouth before moving his company to Holland, Michigan, will be unveiling a new championship 18-hole golf course as part of the Saint John's Resort in the spring of 2024.

The Plymouth project is the region's first high-end public golf development of its kind in more than 20 years and is part of a \$50-million resort transformation that began in 2021 under the property's new ownership group, the non-profit Pulte Family Charitable Foundation.

In Hearn's latest gem, he has transformed 200 acres of rolling land and its original 27 holes where the nines were called Mark, Luke and Matthew, to build the new course, named The Cardinal. It will also feature a

7-hole, par-3 course along with a 1.6-acre putting course.

"Everything is finished up, it's growing in now," said Hearn, who has designed courses as far away as Egypt, Vietnam and Croatia. "The contractor and the maintenance crew are touching up some spots here and there, but really the last several months have just been a grown-in phase. And I think the whole darn place is going to look almost perfect (by fall). But the Pulte family doesn't want to open it until the grand opening, spring of next year (2024). They want it perfect, perfect."

No two holes will look the same, or play similar, while being routed in all different directions factoring in the elevation, wind, terrain and scenic beauty to optimize shot making.

Hearn was able to take full advantage of the flow of the land. Many beautiful 100-year-old trees that were saved during the project now frame many of the



Golf course designer Ray Hearn (left) with Kevin Peck during construction on Hole 8 at the St. John's Resort.

holes, which will feature classic Golden Age architecture when it comes to green contours and bunkering.

"We took down a ton of trees, too, to make the angles and options on the holes more viable for risk-reward," Hearn said. "You've got new holes – basically Nos. 4, 5, 6 – part of 17th is a new hole. Everything was basically blown up, start from scratch. We used some old

corridors, but we didn't use any of the greens, any of the bunkers, any of the tees – everything is brand-spanking new, brand-new irrigation, drainage system."

Two years ago, when the project was launched, Hearn partnered with LaBar Golf Renovations, one of the industry leaders in golf course construction, to transform the Saint John's property to the highest standards.

“EVERY HOLE HAS GOT SOMETHING SPECIAL, IT’S PRETTY COOL. THIS IS WHAT I CALL IN GOLF ARCHITECTURE LAY OF THE LAND. THE TERRAIN-YOU’VE GOT AREAS THAT ARE FLAT, AREAS THAT DROP OFF IN A VALLEY, AREAS THAT ARE STEEP, SO THE TERRAIN DOES A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING. I LET THE LAND TALK TO ME AND IT REALLY DICTATED THE FEATURES THAT I WANTED ON THE HOLES. I WOULD SAY IT’S MORE OF A LAY OF THE LAND DESIGN.”

Ray Hearn, designer of The Cardinal golf course



“The Pultes made such a commitment to this that all of the specifications for the golf course, all the materials used like for the irrigation, the bunkers, sand, the greens mix, the tee mix... those were all the same high-high specifications that Oakland Hills South (Course) used,” Hearn said. “Now, we did not put in those sub-air systems for each green. Those are real expensive, but all the other stuff...was done to the highest standards and specifications that money could buy.”

The 18-hole championship course will feature a 5-tee system to accommodate all skill levels from professional, to core golfers, to beginners.

“This is a resort course, and in golf course architecture, in this five-tee system, this is going to have something for everybody from the forward tees,” Hearn said. “Alister MacKenzie was a golf course architect in the early 1920s that did Crystal Downs (in Frankfort), co-designed Augusta National (Ga.) with Bobby Jones, did Cypress Point (Calif.). For the forward tees this is going to be fun for the beginners, super seniors, men and women, the middle tees – the bread and butter for the everyday players – and then from the back tees we’re over 7,000 (yards).”

Hearn also believes The Cardinal could also be a tournament destination stop as well.

“The way this is set up – the tree lined corridors on certain holes, the bunkers, the risk-reward...this could host a Michigan Open someday,” the golf course designer said.

Hearn said Hole No. 18 will be the signature hole, a 421-yard, par-4, which features a valley cut fairway.

“You’re hitting through a chute,” Hearn said. “You’re hitting up to this valley that

around the southern edge are right on the edge of the rock line water feature. And then I’ve got this strategic bunker that is short, right of the green, and that kind of defines your pathway in.

“I redo a lot of what I call Golden Age clubs that are 1930s-earlier, and done a lot of Willie Park, Jr. designs. I’m doing Moonbrook Country Club in Jamestown, N.Y. now. Willie was a genius at what I call the

water feature. And that’s all the way down your vista, down the entire hole is one of the towers on the hotel.”

Meanwhile, hole No. 9 is a Hearn designed a tribute to the Church Pew bunkers at Oakmont Country Club (Pa.).

“Every hole has got something special, it’s pretty cool,” he said. “This is what I call in golf architecture lay of the land. The terrain – you’ve got areas that are flat, areas that drop off in a valley, areas that are steep... so the terrain does a little bit of everything. I let the land talk to me and it really dictated the features that I wanted on the holes. I would say it’s more of a lay of the land design.”

Hearn draws his inspiration from the old course designers such as Ross, Park and Tom Bendelow.

“Each hole has its own personality,” he said. “Most architects ask, ‘What’s your signature hole?’ I say, ‘One through 18,’ so that may mean you’re always a little full of yourself. But each of these holes are pretty darn strong, but 18 stands out as the exclamation point.”

Meanwhile, the 7-hole, par-3 will have British Isles feel. The state-of-the-art short game area will also feature the putting course with memorable green



Hole 9 of The Cardinal features a series of challenging bunkers.

kicks your ball – you hit it right or left, it kind of kicks it back to the center of the fairway. Pending on where they put the pin, there’s some strategically placed bunkers. And four of them

short bunkers that Flint Golf Club has,” Hearn continued. “From a second shot you’re going to look at and think that bunker is closer to the green than what it is. And then you have this beautiful

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contours. And adjacent to the Saint John's golf complex remains Carl's Golfland retail store in Plymouth, which has its own heated and lighted driving range.

"They allowed me to do a 7-hole, really cool par-3 course

for youth and families, before converting to a conference center and hotel.

In addition to the golf course development, the resort will feature 118 updated luxurious hotel rooms, two bars and a restaurant – the upscale FIVE Steakhouse and the brand-new



The Cardinal, a new 18-hole championship course, will open in the spring of 2024 as part of the Saint John's Resort.

that I was able to emulate some great holes, the great greens around the world," said Hearn, who has worked in concert with Mark Pulte and Kevin Doyle for the Pulte Trust on the project. "The putting course is close to two acres. It's a little like Pinehurst (N.C.), their putting course, and it's a little like the Himalaya's Putting Course at St. Andrew's (Scotland). It's somewhere in between. They're going to have food, drink, trailers out there, music and heated patio. It's just going to be a cool, festive area."

In 2021, the William J. Pulte estate purchased the former Inn at St. John's from the Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit and donated it to the Pulte Family Charitable Foundation, which has since rebranded the property into Saint John's Resort.

With a rich history that dates back to the early 1940s, Saint John's Resort originally opened its doors as a seminary. After more than 40 years the seminary closed, and it was re-opened in the late 1990s as a retreat center

Wine Grotto. There's also 50,000 square feet of event meeting and wedding space.

The resort is part of the Pulte Family Charitable Foundation's "Humanitarian Hotels" strategy, which will undertake initiatives for employees, guests, and their communities that represent the Foundation's mission of serving those in need. Additionally, 100% of the net profits from the resort are donated to educational and humanitarian initiatives from Metro Detroit and around the globe.

Meanwhile, Hearn believes The Cardinal will become more than a curiosity once it opens for play in 2024.

"This is the first new (public) golf course – this is new, it's not a remodel – in the last 20 years since Shepherd's Hollow was built in Clarkston," Hearn said. "That is absolutely amazing."

The Cardinal, which will open in the spring of 2024, is part of the St. John's Resort located at 44045 Five Mile Road in Plymouth Township. For more information, visit sjresort.com.



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