



BY CURT SAMPSON

VOICES **bunker**

Augusta West

THE SHELL HOUSTON OPEN EMBRACES ITS PRE-MASTERS SLOT, SHINES AS A TUNE-UP

If golf tournaments were girls, the Masters would be the pretty one. The other tournaments don't like to stand too close.

Since the days of Ben Hogan, many high-profile participants have prepared for the unique challenge of the year's first major with a visit to Augusta the week before the Big Week. Frequent green-jacket wearers Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods (see page 66) have followed this protocol. The tournaments preceding suffered at the gate from the absence of Jack and Tiger.

So when the PGA Tour shuffled its deck in 2006 and informed the Shell Houston Open that henceforth it would have the pre-Masters slot, they didn't exactly celebrate in south Texas. Instead, the host course (the GC of Houston Tournament Course, formerly Redstone GC) and the event's administrator (the Houston Golf Association) rebranded. The Shell Houston Open, they decided, would attract attention and the best players by becoming the ideal preparation for the Masters.

This was audacious. For while the GC of Houston is a very interesting Rees Jones design, it's 933 miles, three states and a time zone from Augusta—and no one has ever asked to see its Amen Corner. The GC of H occupies an attractive piece of ground, dotted with wetlands and sub-tropical Texas flora, but it's flat relative to Augusta National, with overseeded Bermuda grass greens (not Augusta National's bent) and with a paucity of pine trees and pimento cheese.

But they pulled it off.

"It's ideal [preparation for the Masters]. It really is," Phil Mickelson declared in his pre-tournament presser in 2008. "It may not be exact, but all the shots you have to hit next week, you have the same conditions here."

"The greens are fast. The fairways are perfect and tight. They even mowed the grain into you in the fairway just like Augusta does. There's no rough."

HGA president Steve Timms explained the intricate and subtle process of transforming a conventional-looking course into a track that could approximate the thrill ride at Augusta National.

After architect Jones and PGA Tour officials Robby Ware and Mark Russell endorsed the idea, Timms met with the owner of the course, the late David Shindeldecker, CEO of Redstone. "Augusta-fication" was going to be a significant change for the club's members, and it was going to cost real money—mostly for maintenance. Rough that previously



The green complex at the par-5 eighth hole typifies the Augusta influence.

could be left to grow a week or two would now need much more frequent barbering. Greens would need to be double-cut and double-rolled twice a day to get the speed up to Augusta National standards. Greenside grass and the banks of hazards would also have to be shaved. And Timms wanted to send the course superintendent to Augusta National, if they'd have him, to observe the scores of other things they get just right every year at the Cathedral in the Pines.

Shindeldecker said yes. "But I wondered what the world would say, and what Augusta National would say, if we held ourselves out as being a lot like the Masters," recalls Timms. "But then I saw a story on the Masters website that talked about what we were doing in a very approving way."

Jones points out that he'd designed Redstone/GC of Houston with the tour player in mind, with easily discerned targets off the tee and the frequent possibility of heroic shots—just like at Augusta National. The par 5s are reachable, the greens are "compartmentalized"—that is, multi-tiered—and a drive with a hook is often a good thing. Just like you-know-where.

Since redefining its presentation in 2007, the Shell Houston Open has attracted between 23 and 36 Masters invitees each year to its dress rehearsal—until this year when the number swelled to 45. Is the 2014 Masters champion among them? Maybe. The green jacket winners of 2008 (Trevor Immelman), '09 (Angel Cabrera), '10 (Mickelson), and '11 (Charl Schwartzel) all played in Augusta, Texas, the week before. **GW**