

## Club Course at Sea Pines Country Club is a Quintessential Lowcountry Design

### ***On a layout dubbed ‘Little Harbour Town,’ a Former PGA TOUR Caddie (AKA GM Robbie Ames) Shares His Thoughts on Attacking the Pete Dye, Jack Nicklaus Masterpiece***

By Shane Sharp

Dogwoods and Azaleas may soon be blooming up the road in Augusta. But on Hilton Head Island, the loblolly pines and live oaks await the 52<sup>nd</sup> RBC Heritage at Harbour Town Golf Links held April 13-19.

Last year, 135,000 people made their way through Sea Pines’ gates to attend one of the Tour’s most beloved events. En route to the tournament on Greenwood Drive, a few may have looked up from their smartphones long enough to notice a green ribbon of fairway off to the right.

Most assume its Harbour Town, or one of the other esteemed Sea Pines Resort courses.



*The 18<sup>th</sup> hole on the Club Course at sunset.*

What they’re actually seeing is the par-5 12<sup>th</sup> hole on the Club Course at Sea Pines Country Club, the only private course inside the Sea Pines gates. Originally designed by Arnold Palmer and Frances Duane in 1973, the Club Course opened just four years after Harbour Town.

Home to just over 800 members, Sea Pines Country Club is tucked between Governors Road and an expansive tidal marsh connecting to the Calibogue Sound. In addition to golf, the club has one of the island’s best tennis facilities and (following a multi-

million-dollar expansion) a brand-new fitness center.

### **‘Little Harbour Town’**

While the Club Course is member owned and Harbour Town is owned by the Riverstone Group, the two layouts share inexorable connections, frequent comparisons and even common guests.

“Players used to sneak in a practice round [on the Club Course] or use the practice range because space was limited at Harbour Town,” says Sea Pines Country Club general manager Robbie Ames. “Augusta National is spacious compared to Harbour Town, and players would need to adjust their games in a hurry.”

And Ames should know – he was a caddie on the PGA Tour for his brother Stephen from 2003-2006. He was on the bag for him at the (then) MCI Heritage in 2004 and 2005 where Stephen tied for seventh and sixth, respectively.

According to local lore, Vijay Singh, Jeff Maggert, Brad Faxon and several other players made regular stops at The Club Course to sneak in a round if they weren't playing in the Wednesday Pro-Am.

"The Club Course is a quintessential example of Lowcountry golf course design," says Ames. "It has narrow, tree-lined fairways, a high percentage of doglegs, subtle green complexes and lagoons. There's a sense of intrigue on every tee box as to what comes next."



*The Club Course has been dubbed "Little Harbour Town" by members*

Over the years, a crop of members took to referring to it as "Little Harbour Town" due to its similarities to the Pete Dye, Jack Nicklaus masterpiece just a sand wedge to the south. Local golf course architect Clyde Johnston, who renovated the Club Course in 2001, says the tagline isn't just hyperbole.

"The hole corridors, fairway widths and turning points for doglegs feel similar [to Harbour Town]," says Johnston. "Believe it or not, the fairway widths at the Club

Course are fairly standard for the time, 30 yards or so. They feel tighter because of the tree lines."

At Harbour Town, Fairway widths of 25 yards are common, and tree chutes often constrict openings to 20 yards, like on the par-4 first hole. A quarter of the holes on the Club Course are considered doglegs (holes with turning points in a different direction), a similar number to Harbour Town.

While it doesn't possess Dye's trademark waste bunkers or bulkheads, Johnston says the placement and angles of green complexes, especially on par 3s, is very similar on both courses.

"The par-3 11<sup>th</sup> hole is a nifty one-shotter with two live oaks framing the hole and coming into play," he says. "It's the easiest hole on the course, but it reminds people of Dye and Nicklaus's par 3s at Harbour Town."

### **Taking 'Dead Ames'**

It's been 16 years since Ames carried a bag on the PGA Tour. The caddie life seems a world away for the native of Trinidad and Tobago, with club management stints in Jamaica and Arizona wedged between his Tour days and his current leadership post at Sea Pines Country Club.

But strolling the Club Course with Ames, the caddie in him can't help but resurface. When asked how Tour players and caddies attack a shotmaker's layout like Harbour Town, Ames says it is an exercise in reverse engineering.

First, a player and his caddie will determine what part of the green to land the approach shot on for the easiest putt. From there, they'll calculate the distance for the approach and tee shots and select the clubs for those yardages.

"For example, the ninth hole at Harbour Town is such a strategic hole," Ames says. "It is a short par-4 (332 yards) and it's important to leave yourself a full spinning sand wedge into that green since there are bunkers in front and behind it. If I got the yardage wrong for my brother on that hole, he'd give me a lecture on course management."

Cerebral golfers, whether they're Tour players or amateurs, enjoy the added element of club selection off the tee on par 4s and 5s. While the Club Course is 6,383 yards from the back tees and Harbour Town 7,099, both courses give players myriad tee shot options.



*The 6<sup>th</sup> hole on the Club Course*

For example, many pros will take a long-iron or hybrid club off the tee on the 373 par-4 13<sup>th</sup> hole at Harbour Town. On the Club Course, the 330-yard par-4 sixth hole can play as short as 290 yards from the white tees and 251 yards from the reds.

"We have members, men and women, who will opt for a fairway wood or hybrid on this tee shot to ensure they hit the fairway and have the optimal approach shot suited to their game," Ames says.

And over at Harbour Town, hitting the correct side of the fairway, not just the fairway, is mission critical.

"One of the only courses in the world where you can hit the fairway and be blocked out of your approach shot," says Ames, shaking his head with a smile. "Then the player is forced to manufacture the next shot. Thank goodness the caddies didn't have to hit those shots."

## **The Finishing Touch**

Great golf courses are known for their finishing holes. Eighteenth holes are often brawny par 4s requiring long-iron approach shots to small or medium-sized greens.

Harbour Town fits the mold with perhaps the most famous finishing hole in the U.S., the 472-yard par 4 along the Calibogue Sound. The landing area is the widest on Tour, but approach shots must be precisely gauged and aimed directly at the iconic Harbour Town Lighthouse behind the green for a chance at birdie.

The 413-yard par 4 18<sup>th</sup> hole at the Club Course is also one of the region's most memorable closing holes. The layout's longest par 4, an expansive tidal marsh runs along the left side of the fairway and a serene lagoon flanks the right.

The approach shot is classic risk-reward, says Ames. Golfers can play it safe to the right side of the green or fly their approaches over the marsh and a small bunker guarding the left front of the green. A second, larger bunker fortifies the back left.

“On both finishing holes, players have to be on their game to have a realistic putt for birdie,” says Ames. “I would estimate that 90% of the time, professional golfers are thinking par on the 18<sup>th</sup> at Harbour Town. That’s certainly what Stephen and I were thinking.”

And who are we to argue?

To learn more about The Club Course and Sea Pines Country Club, visit [www.seapinescountryclub.com](http://www.seapinescountryclub.com).

This article originally appeared in the March issue of [Local Life Magazine](#).

*Shane Sharp is a golf writer based in Greenville, S.C. He’s a contributing editor at GOLF Magazine, and a regular contributor to Palmetto Golfer.*