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Golfer turned lawyer: Atlanta partner Chuck Palmer reminisces

Golfer keeps his links to the links: Would-be pro who switched to law school finds professional rewards at East Lake

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By John Carroll, Special to the Daily Report

AS A YOUNG MAN, Troutman Sanders attorney Chuck Palmer had a dream of playing golf professionally. He was No. 1 on his high school golf team at Pepperell High in Lindale, near Rome. He became an assistant pro in Louisiana after graduating from the University of Georgia in 1979. He once shot 65 on a golf course in New Orleans.

"I thought that if I really concentrated at golf, that I had a shot of being a player, and if I didn't make it, I would be happy as a club pro," said Palmer, 50.

But after three years of full-time golf from 1979 to 1982, he realized that a career on the PGA Tour was a long shot. "It was a big challenge, and I started to think about other options," said Palmer, "and decided to take the LSAT."

Thus began Palmer's career in law. He graduated from Emory University School of Law in 1986, and soon after joined Troutman Sanders, making partner in 1995. He is currently head of the firm's governmental law group.

Practicing law has given Palmer the opportunity to be involved in golf in ways he never anticipated. He stays connected to the sport through various professional and volunteer channels, such as serving as general counsel of the Georgia State Golf Association. But his most rewarding experience as a lawyer, he said, has been contributing to the resurrection of East Lake Golf Club and the surrounding community in Southeast Atlanta.

Palmer joined East Lake in 1987 because it was affordable, historic and had a good group of skilled golfers as members. But he soon discovered that the future of the club looked bleak because the golf course was neglected and crime was rampant across the street at East Lake Meadows, a public housing project built in 1970. "Clearly, East Lake was on a downward spiral," said Palmer.

Founded by the downtown Atlanta Athletic Club in 1904, East Lake was the site of many important golf championships, including the 1963 Ryder Cup. In its heyday of the early- to mid-20th century, East Lake was an internationally revered golf facility with 36 championship holes designed by renowned golf course

architect Donald Ross. The golf course was home to legendary golfer Bobby Jones, whose family lived in a house on the third hole.

But in the mid-1960s many wealthy members of East Lake migrated to the suburbs. In 1966, part of the club's property, including its No. 2 golf course, was sold to developers who built low-income public housing on the land. The neighborhood rapidly deteriorated. Crime, drug trade and squalor escalated.

As a young law student, Palmer observed the despair of the community when he took a class that required him to spend the evening with the Atlanta police who patrolled East Lake Meadows, or as they called it, "Little Vietnam."

"It was unimaginable how bad the conditions were," said Palmer. "How hopeless it was for people living there. Folks were sitting around in their underwear. I was told there was a tremendous amount of substance abuse. Kids growing up there had no future."

A few years later, as Palmer played the golf course as a member, he said it was not uncommon to hear police sirens and gunshots in the area. "One day we were on the fifth tee box and we heard gunshots, automatic weapons," recalled Palmer. "We heard later that someone was killed."

The situation came to a boil in 1992 when a group of disenchanted East Lake members filed a lawsuit in Fulton County Superior Court to dissolve the club's limited partnership, liquidate the assets, and sell out to the highest bidder. Rumors swirled that a cemetery would be built on the famed golf course.

But Palmer and other members were intent on saving the golf course and preserving the club. The lawyer appeared in court on behalf of the membership and participated in a series of hearings on the future of East Lake. "We ended up with the court approving a purchase contract for the members to buy East Lake for \$4.5 million," said Palmer.

In an effort to secure financing for the acquisition, Palmer met with Atlanta real estate magnate Tom Cousins, a skilled golfer himself and a Bobby Jones admirer. Palmer was thrilled to learn that Cousins was interested in purchasing East Lake himself.

"We had a membership meeting to discuss and authorize proceeding down that path," said Palmer. "We took a vote, and the result was 120-12 in favor of Cousins purchasing East Lake. It was a very exciting evening."

What happened after that is a well-documented revitalization story of Cousins pumping \$25 million into the golf course and clubhouse, and restoring the property to its former glory. The PGA Tour took notice, and in 1998 conducted its season-ending Tour Championship at East Lake, which is now the permanent home of the tournament.

Palmer has served in various volunteer roles at the Tour Championship, including co-chairing the scoring committee in 1998. Most recently, he has been involved in selling hospitality packages to corporations and law firms.

This year, the Tour Championship presented by Coca-Cola will be played Sept. 13-16, and officials are expecting

100,000 golf fans to roll in to watch elite players, including Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson and Vijay Singh, battle for the inaugural FedEx Cup.

Proceeds from the tournament benefit the East Lake Community Foundation, a nonprofit entity created by Cousins in order to transform the dilapidated public housing project. As it turns out, Cousins had a much bigger vision for the community other than just fixing up a golf course. In 1995 East Lake Meadows was torn down and replaced with The Villages of East Lake, a mixed-income complex with 542 townhouses, duplexes and garden apartments. Today, crime is minimal in the East Lake community, and youth growing up in the area have opportunities that didn't exist years ago.

One stipulation that Cousins insisted on during his purchase of East Lake in 1993 was that all future profits from the club go to the East Lake Foundation. So far that figure is roughly \$20 million and growing. Palmer said Cousins has successfully orchestrated an urban renewal project around a golf club that is breaking the cycle of poverty by creating and funding educational, recreational and self-sufficiency programs for community residents, and providing amenities that attract mixed-income residents and private investment.

"Cousins had the vision, and the political and financial wherewithal to pull it off," said Palmer, who has done legal work for the East Lake Foundation. "What he did out there exceeded our wildest dreams and imagination. It's been an extraordinary metamorphosis for both the golf course and the surrounding community. To have played a small role in everything that has happened is the most fulfilling experience I've ever had as a lawyer."

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