

## OLD UNION

### Blairsville

**D**enis Griffiths has designed and built over 100 golf courses. His work can be found in Spain, South Africa, Japan and England. He's even built a course at the home of golf, St. Andrews, Scotland. But he's never built a course like Old Union before.

Griffiths, who works out of his office in Braselton, has been one of the most prolific designers in Georgia over the last 25 years. It's unlikely that anyone who plays much golf in this state is unfamiliar with his work. If you've come to know him through the **Chateau Elan** courses, **Chestatee**, **The Georgia Club**, or anywhere else, you probably won't recognize Old Union, which opened last July just outside of Blairsville in the North Georgia mountains.

Intended to be part of a development called Owen Glen, Old Union scrambles tightly through the floodplain and marshes along Ivy Log Creek, an area where it would have been prohibitive to build home sites (so far, there are few, if any, homes in the development). Like his course at nearby **Brasstown Valley**, Griffiths calls this "valley golf in the mountains." It's a pleasing, rural property with very little elevation change, though the land rises gently around the flanks of the course with views beyond that to the rounded Blue Ridge foothills on the horizon.

In such a setting, as is the case at Brasstown, you might expect holes with supple shaping that flows smoothly from feature to feature. Immediately it's a surprise to see Old Union's fairways drop off at sharp angles and the strong upswept formations bracing the edges of greens and bunkers. The greens themselves are typically propped atop squared plateaus, their flattish putting surfaces full of mysterious breaks you struggle to see. Griffiths built these percolating ramparts — elevated banks with a crisp upper edge and sheer

faces that look wind-eroded — throughout the hole corridors and even in between the holes as well. There's a lot to look at in every direction as they create a muscular motif that unifies the design. They also leave awkward lies when your ball nestles up or near the faces.

What inspired such a sudden break of format for Griffiths?

At first he cites the desire to do something that would separate Old Union from Brasstown Valley, but also he says experience. "As you mature as a designer some of that happens naturally — we do things differently than we did 15, 12 years ago," Griffiths says.

He elaborates: "The setting, it's so soft. And the serenity...that the thought was to get some visual contrast in that valley, something that was striking. That's where the hard lines come from, to get that shade and shadow, and not do it with sand like we did at Brasstown."

The Owen Glen project began in 2006, but midway through construction the original developer ran out of money and asked Griffiths if he'd be willing to invest personally in the course. Given how the economy had halted virtually all golf course development, "If it stopped, we stopped," Griffiths says. So in March 2008 Griffiths purchased the course outright and completed construction, a task he and his hands-on staff performed in-house. The style and shaping of the course had been predetermined and supported by the original developer, he insists, but taking over ownership couldn't have hindered his artistic freedom.

Seventeen acres of wetlands and riparian areas were created along the creek

to enhance the diversity and flora of the golf course, and the holes use these areas both to scenic and strategic effect. Not that you can take your eyes off the land formations.

The par-3 second, moguls and ramparts surrounding the long and wide green, would look at home in the Scottish Highlands. The fifth is a tasty, short par-4 with a line of bunkers and ramparts set on a diagonal running the length of the fairway. One of the most intriguing par-5s in Georgia public golf is the 518-yard eighth. It offers an enormous fairway, a hidden second landing zone surrounded by grassy ramparts, and, over the top of two marshes, a direct line to a well-guarded green perched some 10 feet above the surrounding bunkers.

What's interesting about the shaping is that there are no obvious historical precedents for it, at least as its used uniformly throughout the Old Union design. Griffiths says he was trying to get a little of the **Seth Raynor** look with the hard edges, but even that parallel only goes so far. It really looks entirely unique.

"The mindset when we're talking about it and shaping it is how dunes are formed. When the wind blows, when the dune is rolling, you get the soft edge and away from wind as the sand is rolling over you, you get the hard edge," he says.

When you see it in the early evening or early morning, the shade and shadow these formations create are dramatic, somewhat haunting, and most importantly, memorable. **GG**

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