

The total package

By **Heather Wood**

3/31/2008

URL: <http://www.golfcoursenews.com/news/news.asp?ID=4051>

With talk of recession, a slumping housing market and golf courses closing at a faster pace than they open, it's not unusual operators of golf course communities to be concerned about business. As one of those operators, Lawren Just has seen difficult times but isn't worried.

Just, owner and operator of Persimmon Ridge Golf Club in Louisville, Ky., started out in the insurance business but entered into the golf industry in the mid-80s. Her husband, Elmore, ran the Louisville Golf Co., maker of persimmon wood golf clubs, and dreamed of building a course.

"In 1986, a realtor introduced us to a piece of property," Lawren Just says. "It was 765 acres – almost four times the size of what we looking for."

The Justs ended up buying it and hired Arthur Hills, partner in a Toledo, Ohio-based golf course architecture firm, to design a course for the site. He designed a 36-hole master plan, but only 18 holes were built at the time. Bluegrass Golf out of Edmonton, Ky., constructed the course. It opened in 1989, coming in at sixth place in 1990 for a best new course honor.

While Elmore ran the course, Lawren began to develop the land around the course for a residential community. But soon after, the Justs found they were affected by the Savings & Loan failures of the '80s. Their lender was sold to a national company, and they were forced to sell their course or the land around it.

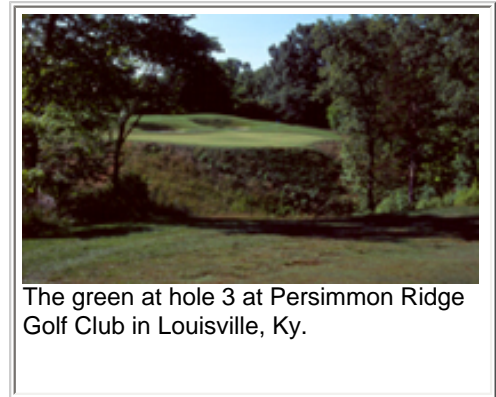
The Justs didn't want to lose the ability to develop the land around the course the way they wanted it, so they sold the course instead. Golf Trust of America took over the ownership and operations. The company wouldn't spend any money to update the course, only to maintain what was already there, says superintendent Kevin Daly, who has been at the course since 1999.

"A lot of things were neglected – in particular, the bunkers," Daly says.

When the Justs bought back the course, these projects were tackled, starting with the bunkers and continuing with a renovation of the driving range, several tees and holes, the cart path and the planting of more than 200 trees.

Lawren Just's husband never got to see these changes, however. Two months after the purchase, Elmore walked off the 18th hole, had a heart attack and died at age 53.

After Lawren Just pulled herself together, she did what she knew Elmore wanted – she made arrangements to bury him on the golf course. The coroner told her there would be hurdles and delays, but she got to work contacting her business contacts from the county planning and zoning board. They helped her get approval and a cemetery was built off the seventh hole. Lawren Just buried her husband under a persimmon tree. It has become a custom for golfers to place their balls on the grave when they score a





Persimmon Ridge owner Lawren Just's husband, Elmore, is buried in a small cemetery off the seventh hole.

birdie. There are more than 500 balls there now, Just says.

The passing of Elmore Just left Lawren Just with additional responsibilities.

"After his death, all of sudden I had not only a residential development, but golf course operations and Louisville Golf Co. operations," she says.

While Lawren Just remains chairman of the board at LGC, Elmore's brother is president and oversees the day-to-day business.

The absence of Elmore Just still affects his widow.

"If I have rough day, I get kind of angry and say, 'why aren't you here to help?'" Lawren Just says, adding, "I'm sure everyone who's lost their soul mate, friend and business partner goes through the same emotions I go through."

Lawren Just believes her husband would be pleased with the way the course is being run, and the patrons agree. She compares the design and upkeep to nearby elite courses, specifically mentioning Jack Nicklaus-designed Valhalla Golf Club in Louisville.

"Most golfers in area will tell you the challenge is greater at Persimmon Ridge," she says. "I wish I had the dollars Valhalla has for the maintenance budget."

Outside the course, Lawren Just upholds the notion houses in golf course communities shouldn't be as close to the course as many developments create them.

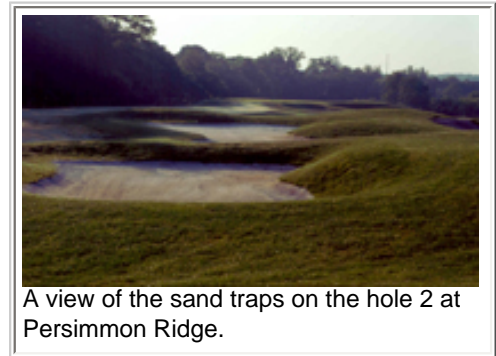
"Golf course properties have gotten to have a bad name," she says. "Real estate developers are getting so greedy and want to maximize land along golf courses. That's what used to sell. Even though this is a golf course community, so many time people play the course and don't realize there's a housing community. We've had homes for 18 years and fewer than 12 broken windows in those 18 years. In some developments, you might have that in one week."

Lawren Just also subscribes to the idea that it's a buyer's market.

"The word through newspapers and TV was in the housing market it's a terrible time to buy, and that just wasn't true," she says. "There are so many houses on the market now. The supply is abundant, which makes it a buyer's market. You can pretty much name your price in a lot of areas."

Lawren Just believes she'll be able to continue selling lots around the course because of their unique placement and because of the fact the course is far enough removed from the city of Louisville to be a peaceful place.

Lawren Just also is confident about the success of upcoming projects on the course, including the upcoming completion of the third set of nine holes, which is being completed by Kentucky Golf. Eventually, she hopes to build another nine and complete the original master plan.



A view of the sand traps on the hole 2 at Persimmon Ridge.