

Swamp Thing

Sawgrass CC, 'monster' host of the Players from 1977-81, was an equal opportunity destroyer. It messed with the minds--and swings--of all comers



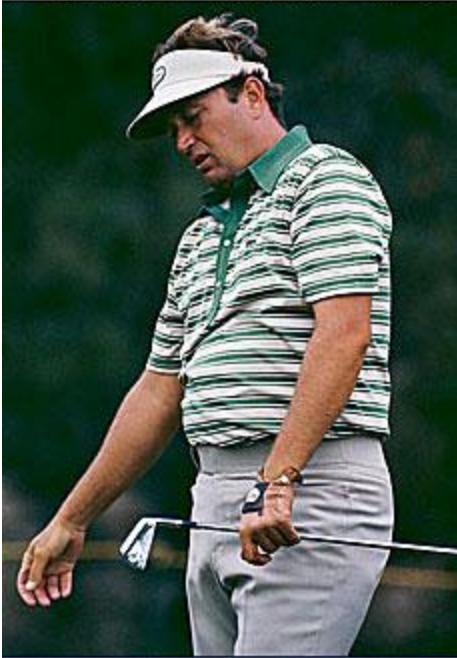
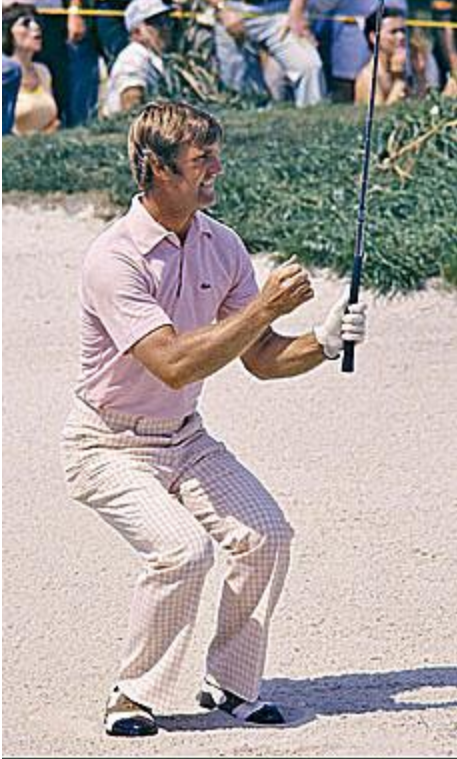
difficult home game: The Tournament Players Championship moved around for three years before commissioner Beman (left inset) relocated it to Sawgrass CC (14th hole shown). In its 1977 debut, the layout was a bear for all, including Nicklaus (right inset).

By [Ron Whitten](#)

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Long before there was TPC Sawgrass, there was the TPC at Sawgrass: the Tournament Players Championship (now the Players) at Sawgrass CC. The original Sawgrass, located across Florida Highway A1A from its successor, was a residential development/resort course pumped from a swamp hard against the Atlantic shoreline south of Jacksonville, designed with myriad humps and bumps by the late Ed Seay (before he became partners with Arnold Palmer) to resemble Troon, if Troon had palms and ponds. Sawgrass hosted the tour's marquee event for five years, from 1977 to 1981.

We forget now just how ferocious Sawgrass was back then, how it set the tone for Pete Dye's subsequent TPC Sawgrass. Sawgrass was the frying pan to TPC's fire. It was Swamp Thing to Dye's Creature from the Black Lagoon. It was the storm before the tsunami.



patience was a must: McCullough (top) started fast with a 66 and held on to finish second in '77. Floyd (middle) called second-round conditions "damn near unplayable." That was an appraisal with which J.C. Snead (bottom) wouldn't disagree--during the windblown day his hat hit his ball, causing a penalty.

Sawgrass had opened in 1974, the same year newly appointed PGA Tour commissioner Deane Beman implemented the idea of his predecessor, Joseph Dey, to conduct a championship for card-carrying tour players only, no club pros, no amateurs, no rabbits. The first three years it was merely a regular tour stop—at Atlanta, Colonial, Inverrary—gussied up with a bigger purse and a 10-year tour exemption to the winner. Jack Nicklaus won two of the first three, Al Geiberger in between. But Beman wanted a permanent site, a place the tour could eventually own and operate, and he wanted it in the Deep South, before the Masters, so it could become, as the event's letterhead proclaimed, "the first major of the year."

He briefly considered Harbour Town on Hilton Head Island, but it was too firmly entrenched as a tour stop. Then he heard about Sawgrass, brand new but already in receivership, just south of the grand old (but far too short for tour purposes) Ponte Vedra Beach Club. Beman played Sawgrass, thought it had potential and brought in Gardner Dickinson, the stern former tour policy board member who had recently proclaimed himself a golf architect. Beman asked him to make it tour-worthy, within a budget of \$275,000.

Dickinson was blunt in his criticisms of Seay's design. "My own philosophy of how to play golf and that of the original architect of Sawgrass are vastly different," he told *Golf World* in 1976. He planned on lengthening the course, reducing greens to fit the length of approach shots, adding bunkers and deepening others. Much money, he said, had to be spent removing "large, unrealistic mounds, many of which are placed directly in the landing areas and which further serve to obscure the player's view of what he has to do or where he is going. The purpose of these large mounds has thus far escaped me."

Dickinson wrote that he would add a seaside atmosphere by creating hazards of "a rather unfamiliar form called 'links' or 'waste' bunkers—in reality sandy mounds decorated by clumps of pampas grass." He installed 21 such humps, covered mostly with coquina shells, at spots along various fairways. Another architect (a friend of Seay) later examined them and pronounced them "embarrassingly amateurish."

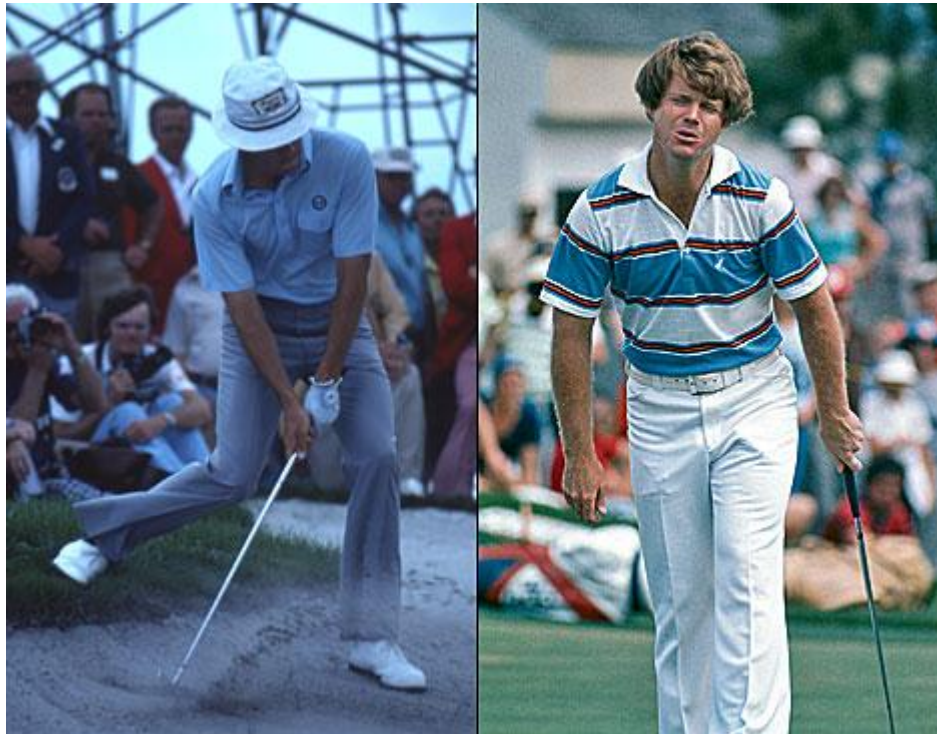
Staff members scrambled to institute Dickinson's changes, tossed a lot of ryegrass over the landscape and prayed cold weather would recede before the following March. A month before the 1977 tournament, 2,000 birds—coots to be exact—invaded the place and started eating the ryegrass. Workers tried spooking them with firecrackers and herding them into chicken-wire cages. Nothing worked, until alligators awoke from hibernation. The coots were soon caput.

Tour players were suspicious of the course when they played their first practice rounds. The 527-yard par-5 fourth was particularly controversial—narrow, pinched by wetlands, with its tiny green perched atop a sand dune like a pirate's hideout. With water in play on 12 holes and dense jungle off most fairways, many predicted even par would win. "On this golf course, a fantastic shot can get you a bogey," Raymond Floyd said.

The first round went OK. Obscure Mike McCullough led with six-under 66, by two over Floyd, Tom Watson and Don Bies. Then came March 18, 1977, the day that sealed the image, reputation and notoriety of Sawgrass forever.

Winds reaching 30 miles an hour and gusting to 40 arose from the west, pushing everything toward the ocean. Shots strayed 50 yards off line. Nicklaus hit a house, not easy to do back then. J.C. Snead's hat hit his ball, costing him a penalty stroke. On the ninth Watson underclubbed his approach by three clubs, while Cesar Sanudo hit two drives into the water, then walked off before his third try landed. "This is the first time I ever withdrew while my ball was still airborne," he told reporters.

It was a tough combination, said David Graham, "a U.S.-style course playing in seaside conditions." In all, 47 players shot 80 or higher. "I shot 80 and never lost the honor," said Bies.



different fates: The unassuming Hayes, who devised a crafty escape from an awkward lie in a greenside bunker en route to a birdie on the par-5 18th hole (left), shot a closing 72 to finish with a winning 289 total. For Watson (right) the final round had a different taste as he piled up bogeys on the incoming nine to shoot a 77 and finish at 293--but 51 finishers didn't even break 300 over 72 arduous holes.

After his round, Floyd was testy. "The conditions were damn near unplayable. That's what you want to hear, isn't it? Damn near unplayable."

"If this was an airport, it would be closed," joked John Schlee.

In the locker room, Bruce Lietzke (who had shot a credible 75) started recording a ringer "worst ball" score. Cheers went up when someone took an 8. "That puts it at 126," Lietzke said gleefully. The final tally was 131, almost a third of a stroke over even 7s.

Someone asked Allen Miller what he thought the average score would be that day. "Withdrew," he replied.

Actually, only 11 withdrew. Another five—including Homero Blancas, who refused to sign for his 91—were disqualified. The average score was 79.

One writer declared it Black Friday. A spectator called it Freaky Friday. It was the toughest day in pro golf since the final round of the 1972 U.S. Open at windblown Pebble Beach, the toughest until, probably, one of two third rounds at recent British Opens: Muirfield '02 or Royal Birkdale '08.

Mark Hayes ended up winning the first Players at Sawgrass, using a 5-iron to play a nifty pitch and run from a greenside bunker on the last hole. He backed into the title when Watson, holding a two-shot lead on the 10th tee, self-destructed on the closing nine with a 41, including a drive on 18 that hit a tree and bounded into a lake. Hayes posted 289, one over par, the highest winning score on tour since that '72 Open at Pebble Beach, the only winning score over par in 1977.

That November, Golf Digest proclaimed Sawgrass "absolutely awesome" and placed it on its list of America's 100 Greatest Courses. (It would remain on the list until 1989).

It was déjà vu the next year: more wind, more 80s, the same winning total, 289. Nicklaus took the title for the third time with his least-sensational closing round in history: no birdies, three bogeys, a 75 and a one-stroke win. He was apologetic. "You probably don't realize it, but we didn't play the back tees all week," he said. "[Spectators] don't need to watch someone shoot 80. They can do that themselves."

Even before that event, Beman had decided the asking price for Sawgrass—\$600,000—was too much and negotiated a much better deal on raw land across the highway, commissioned Pete Dye to create the ultimate spectator layout and announced the TPC would move to the new "Players Club" in 1981.

So Arvida Corporation bought Sawgrass and gave Seay the opportunity to undo much of what Dickinson had done to his design. Seay removed some waste bunkers, chopped down his fourth green and relocated the 18th green to the water's edge atop a bulkhead (same sort of thing Dye was simultaneously doing across the street on the tournament's replacement course).

Winds returned to Sawgrass for three more years, ripping up hospitality tents, overturning portable toilets, shredding scorecards. Players thought they had seen the last of Sawgrass in 1980, but Dye's design was not yet in playing condition, so to the dismay of many, the Players returned to Sawgrass for a second swan song in March 1981. As if to prolong the torture, the final round was delayed until Monday by thunderstorms and tornado warnings. Ultimately, Floyd beat Curtis Strange and Barry Jaeckel in sudden death.

The rest is TPC Sawgrass history. In 1982 players attacked Dye's new design with both clubs and words. A protest petition to Beman insisted upon changes, which Dye, not Dickinson, implemented, accompanied by a "gang of 10" tour advisors.

Today, Sawgrass is a private country club, with 27 holes (Seay added a South Nine in 1984). It has been in sports pages more as a host of tennis tournaments than golf events. But the club is still proud of the reputation of its golf course, its role in the history of the Players Championship—and especially of that Friday in March 1977 when Sawgrass mowed them down.

