

A National Treasure

Unknown by many, Blaketree National Golf Club brings the Hill Country to Southeast Texas

By Mark Button

Every once in a while, someone you know stumbles on a previously unknown, yet spectacular golf course. It rarely occurs – maybe once every couple of years. But when it does, the finder basks in the praise and pride of knowing he introduced greatness to his playing partners.

Take a drive up Texas Highway 249, just past Magnolia, and you could be that guy. For there, hidden behind a fortress of 50-foot pine trees, lies Blaketree National Golf Club, your newest Absolutely-Must-Play destination.

The 7,196-yard, par-71 beauty stretches out across 325 acres of thick, rolling terrain more commonly seen in the Texas Hill Country than around Houston's prairies and flatlands. Blaketree National's pristine fairways and manicured greens

are sheltered by towering pines and oaks, and separated by seven lakes. Dramatic elevation changes abound, and there are enough doglegs, blind shots and sloping fairways to challenge the most fined-tuned golfers.

Like many of the best hidden courses, Blaketree National is a little out of the way. The hour-long drive to the course isn't too bad, though, and you'll be more than pleased with the time investment once you get there.

Remember those times as a child when you woke up before dawn to go fishing with your dad? They always seemed to begin in the pre-dawn shadows and included commutes to remote locales. Once you arrived, though, you reveled in the peaceful atmosphere.

The par-3 10th hole.





The No. 1 teebox.

A visit to Blaketree National is similar. Not a single house borders the course, which means no screaming kids running around a backyard swimming pool, no dogs barking in your backswing, and no ugly power lines or distracting street traffic.

Once you're there, it's just you, your friends and 18 holes of splendor. The only sounds you hear are the birds ... and the birdies.

"Another advantage of our location is that when Houston gets a lot rain, it doesn't necessarily mean we did," said Al Immekus, Blaketree National's Sales and Marketing Director. "There are plenty of days when Houston courses have been rained out, and we're virtually bone dry."

Thomas W. Blake, a wealthy, eccentric Houstonian, created the tucked-away golf temple. In the 1960s and '70s, Blake grew tired of fighting the country club crowds. So he set out to build a private playground for himself and friends.

It would be the crowning achievement of an extraordinary life.

Born on July 4, 1910, Blake survived the Great Depression to live like a rock star. The attorney-turned-oil-tycoon worked hard, sure, but played even harder.

The post-World War II years marked Blake's rise as a Hollywood playboy. Armed with wingmen such as Gary Cooper, Bing Crosby, Clark Gable and Bob Hope, Blake believed in living fast, taking chances and damn the

consequences. A self-made millionaire, he developed a distinguished palate for the best of everything. His passions included art, music, making money, traveling the world and drinking single-malt scotch.

He loved nothing more, however, than what he deemed as life's two greatest pursuits: women and golf.

Blake, who died peacefully in 2001, achieved prolific success in both endeavors. He was "happily" married five times and engaged in more than a handful of relations with the fairer sex in between nuptials. His daughter, Tessa, created a documentary about her father's romances called "Five Wives, Three Secretaries and Me," which earned Outstanding Documentary honors in 1999 by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and was short-listed as an Oscar nomination.

"He used to throw these big parties out in Squaw Valley, California," said first-born son, Tom Blake. "Bing Crosby and all those guys would always show up. My dad always stocked the place with stewardesses ... he was quite the ladies man."

He also was a pretty decent golfer.

Growing up, Blake often caddied for three-time Masters champion and Houstonian, Jimmy Demaret. Later, he helped Rice University win the 1930 Southwest Conference golf championship. Blake also played with legends such as Jimmy Burke, Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer and Lee Trevino, and even went head-to-head against Ben Hogan a few times (see "Money Game" sidebar).



MONEY GAME

In the late 1940s, Thomas W. Blake spent a couple weeks playing the famed course at Seminole Golf Club near West Palm Beach, Fla.

One day, Blake saw Ben Hogan on the practice green and seized the moment. A 10-handicap at the time, the cocky Blake approached and challenged Hogan to a money game.

"Around here we give amateurs two strokes a side," Hogan said.

Two strokes a side? Against one of the best golfers on the planet?

"But Mr. Hogan," Blake gasped, "you're a professional. There's no way I can compete with just two a side."

"It's two a side," Hogan barked. "Do you want to play or what?"

Blake couldn't pass on the chance to beat a legend like Hogan. And, of course, he couldn't beat a legend like Hogan.

The Hawk massacred Blake to the tune of \$1,000. Not the type to back down, Blake challenged Hogan again. And he lost again. They played a third time, and Hogan dug deeper into Blake's wallet.

After three days and more than \$3,000 lost, Blake decided he'd had enough of Seminole ... and of Hogan.

— MAB

Blake's ultimate golf achievement was the creation of Blaketree National, one of the best – and least known – golf courses in Southeast Texas.

Having purchased 2,200 acres of land in Montgomery County in the late 1930s, Blake envisioned an Old World-influenced golf course. In 1985, he hired Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore to route the course, but a few months later the project was shelved as the oil economy bottomed out.

The hiatus ended in 1997. Along with Blake, Crenshaw and Coore routed the first 11 holes before the project stalled. Always a man with his own vision, Blake took over with his specific ideas on how the course should look, play and feel. The result was the conception of seven dramatic finishing holes, complete with inspired elevation changes, intricately placed hazards and classic risk-reward opportunities.

"Mr. Blake had two main philosophies with his design," said Sam Chapman, Blaketree National's head golf professional. "He wanted to make his visitors leave always wanting more, and he didn't want to let anyone figure out the course on the first trip."

The 17th hole embodies both philosophies.

Standing on the tee box of the 392-yard, dogleg-right par-4, you're moved to pause and think, "OK, now how I am supposed to play this one?"

The safe move is to throw a long iron or fairway wood out to the corner of the dogleg. Favor the left-center, as the sloped fairway funnels everything down to the right. From there, you'll avoid the lakes to your right and left – both of which are hidden from the tee box view – and left with a short iron shot to the elevated green.

If you're one of those "I didn't come here to lay up" players, then go for the more aggressive approach. Long hitters can aim just over the treetops to the right of the dogleg with a power fade. It's a risk, but with the correct ball flight, you can leave yourself with a short chip or pitch for eagle.

"My advice," Chapman offered, "is to play it safe on your first few visits."

Along with Blaketree National's gorgeous surroundings, golfers will fall in love with the fact that they can bang the driver early – and often. Five of the first six holes are par 4s, and they all set up for the big dog. For example, the stunning, 439-yard fourth hole demands a robust drive. One of the seven lakes on the course skirts the right edge of the dogleg-left fairway. Any poke short of the 150-yard marker brings more water (and fear) into play on the delicate approach to the smallish green.

Much of the course was designed in the same vein. There isn't a par-4 or par-5 that takes the driver out of your hands – that is, as long you can produce a straight tee shot. Blake wanted you to feel manly off the tee boxes, but he can turn you into a scared little boy just as quickly around the sloped, undulating greens.

"Even a two-foot putt that looks straight will have some movement in it," Chapman explained.

Another way Blaketree National separates itself from typical Houston courses is the dearth of one, true "signature" hole.

Rather, the course has signature *holes*.

Among them are the ninth, 10th and 12th. The second shot on the 466-yard, par-4 ninth epitomizes risk-reward (see sidebar on page 62). Even with a solid drive, you're faced with a 140-yard, downhill approach over water to a lightning-fast, slanted green.

The No. 12 green.



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Designer: Thomas W. Blake

Opened: October 2000

Par/Yardage: 71/7,196 (Professional Tees); 7,006 (Gold Tees); 6,505 (Green Tees); 5,946 (White Tees); 5,040 (Red Tees)

Fairways: Bermuda 419

Greens: TifEagle

Normal rates: \$60 weekdays and weekends; \$48 seniors rate, Tuesday-Thursday. Rates include cart fees.

Toughest hole: No. 9 – Unassuming from the tee box, the ninth at Blaketre National will reveal the quality of your game from 150 yards to the green. It starts with a blind tee shot – uphill – to a generously wide fairway. From there, you begin to understand the depths of this dubious mission. Before reaching the sloped green 50 feet below, you must carry the lake that wraps around it – most likely from a downhill or side-hill lie. Any approach short or right will splash; shots long or left can find deviously placed bunkers.

Best chance at birdie: No. 16 – Although the back nine is much tighter than the front – the 16th is no exception – scoring opportunities do exist. The 517-yard, par-5 sets up beautifully for a power fade off the tee. The undulating fairway ascends to a dogleg-right turn, where it descends for the next 180 yards before rising again to the elevated green. Big hitters can get home in two, but poorly struck second shots can fall victim to a precarious – and devilishly deep – grass bunker, walled off by railroad ties. If you avoid the nasty collection area, birdie is within reach.

Most scenic holes: No. 4 – Take a moment to stand on the back tee box. Framed by an army of mature pines and oaks, the procession to the green is as impressive a view as you'll see on a daily-fee course in the Houston area.

No. 10 – Remember that magnificent view from the top of the ninth fairway? Here it is again, just one hole later.

No. 12 – The uphill-then-downhill, 453-yard par-4 bears a striking resemblance to the 11th at Augusta National.

Could use some work: From an aesthetic perspective and a playability standpoint, we wouldn't change a thing about the layout and design. However, the club's manila-colored scorecards don't reflect the beauty of the course itself. We'd like to see vibrant, four-color scorecards and yardage books made available.

Local knowledge: Whether in business or golf, Blake always loved a challenge. Thus, he designed five of his greens to *slope away* from the fairways, often penalizing uninitiated players. When you play Nos. 5, 8, 13, 15 and 18, try to land your approach short of the flag to allow the contour of the greens to draw you in tight.

Course record: Former Texas A&M Aggie Stephen Reed shot a 3-under-par 68, which included eight birdies and five bogeys.

Stay the night: Perfect for a corporate outing or a weekend getaway, Blaketre National offers an elegant, five-bedroom cottage – just off the first fairway – for overnight stays. Although the cabin appears rustic from the outside, the inside is completely renovated to match the accommodations of any four-star hotel suite. Nightly, stay-and-play rates start at \$600 with a four-person minimum (\$150 per person).

Pro tip: "You're not going to figure out the course on your first time out, so play from the tees that best compliment your game."

– Sam Chapman, head golf professional.



The ninth green.

“[Mr. Blake] wanted his visitors to leave wanting more, and he didn't want to let anyone figure out the course on the first trip.”

— Sam Chapman, head golf professional

The 10th is a wicked par-3 over water that measures 196 yards from the back tee. The shot is similar to the approach on the ninth: a watery grave short and right, yawning bunkers long and left.

The 453-yard, par-4 12th might remind you of another hole made famous by Bobby Jones, Tiger Woods and television. The roller coaster hole (see sidebar) is an ode to the 11th at Augusta National, the start of Amen Corner. You'd be wise to say a prayer here, too, as your second shot must carry the water short and right to the waif-thin putting surface.

If the plush surroundings and spectacular views of Blaketre National make it feel like a country club course, that's only because it was supposed to be one.

The course opened in 2000 – as a private club. Blake intended to make his masterpiece an exclusive golf community. The club gained just 17 members that first year. When Blake died in 2001, his fifth wife, Muffet, and his four children decided the best way for the club to earn revenue and remain open was to allow daily-fee play.

They made the right decision. Blaketre National is too beautiful to go unseen by the masses.

Tessa Blake said her father took great pleasure in walking the course as it evolved. He felt immense satisfaction in tending to the details, she said. Unfortunately, Blake never got to play all 18 holes of his creation. The good news is that you can. Hurry, and you can claim bragging rights for being the guy in your group who discovered the secluded golf sanctuary.