

Hoover's new Ross Bridge (below) is designed to host a major tournament event, say course executives. They're talking with officials of the PGA's Champions Tour about moving the highly attended Bruno's Memorial Classic, an annual event in Birmingham, to the new facility.



# Golf Heaven in Alabama

**Alabama's \$145 million Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, the largest golf course construction project in history, has made the state a golfing destination**

BY DONNA CORNELIUS

Atop a hill in Hoover, Ala., John Cannon surveys a golf course with quiet satisfaction. Sunlight sparkles on the

surface of a lake. Wildflowers and tall trees line neatly groomed fairways and lush greens. Even in hot July, there's a cool morning breeze.

Golfers haven't yet teed off at Ross Bridge, a new stop on the state's Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, and Cannon is enjoying the calm before the course's opening next spring.

"I love it like this," says Cannon, president of SunBelt Golf Corporation, which develops golf courses for the Retirement Systems of Alabama.

Still, he's looking forward with confidence to the opening of Ross Bridge and to another Robert Trent Jones facility, The Shoals, near Florence. Who could blame him? Since Dr. David Bronner, RSA chief executive officer, conceived the idea of a collection of top-flight public golf

courses, the trail has won international attention and accolades.

The visionary Bronner had two purposes in mind when he came up with the idea for the trail about 11 years ago. The first was to diversify the assets of RSA, the state's public employees' pension fund.

Another goal was to bolster Alabama's image as a vacation destination. With the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, "I was going to take a chance, and if it didn't work, they could run me off," says Bronner.

These days, no one wants to do that. The \$145 million trail, the largest golf course construction project in history, is fulfilling both of Bronner's goals. The RSA is a top-performing pension fund, and Alabama is now a golfing destination.

A recent Golf Digest survey

ranked the trail among the top eight in the world for quality of golf. The New York Times called the courses "exquisite and exquisitely difficult." And Travel Holiday magazine said, "A couple days on the links usually means teeing off on the same fairways - yawn - all weekend long. No longer: 48 hours in Alabama offers a choice of 21 Robert Trent Jones golf courses - all

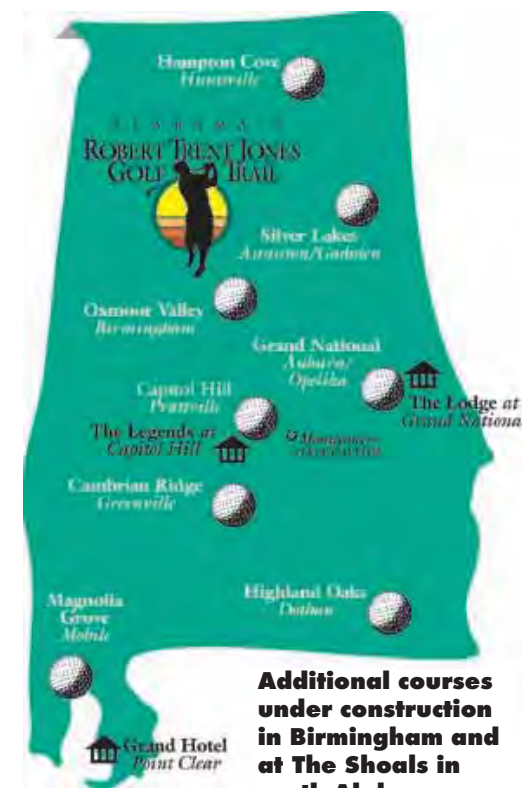


within 20 minutes of Interstate 65, and never more than two hours from one to the next."

RTJ courses are in or near Anniston, Auburn, Birmingham, Dothan, Greenville, Huntsville, Mobile and Prattville. The Shoals development, where the first 18 holes will open in August, includes a resort hotel and conference center, says John Cannon.

"Another 18-hole course and the hotel are set to open in March 2005," he says. "The hotel will take advantage of that area's Tennessee River heritage."

Ross Bridge is a 1,600-acre development in Hoover, a



**Additional courses under construction in Birmingham and at The Shoals in north Alabama.**



**Rolling terrain on the edge of the Talladega National Forest enhances the golfing experience at Silver Lakes, named by Golf Digest's Places to Play as one of the nation's Great Value public courses.**

## Golf Heaven in Alabama

booming Birmingham sister city. In addition to the golf course and hotel, the project includes residential and commercial development. The Daniel Corporation is developing the project with U.S. Steel, the City of Hoover, Jefferson County and Retirement Systems of Alabama.

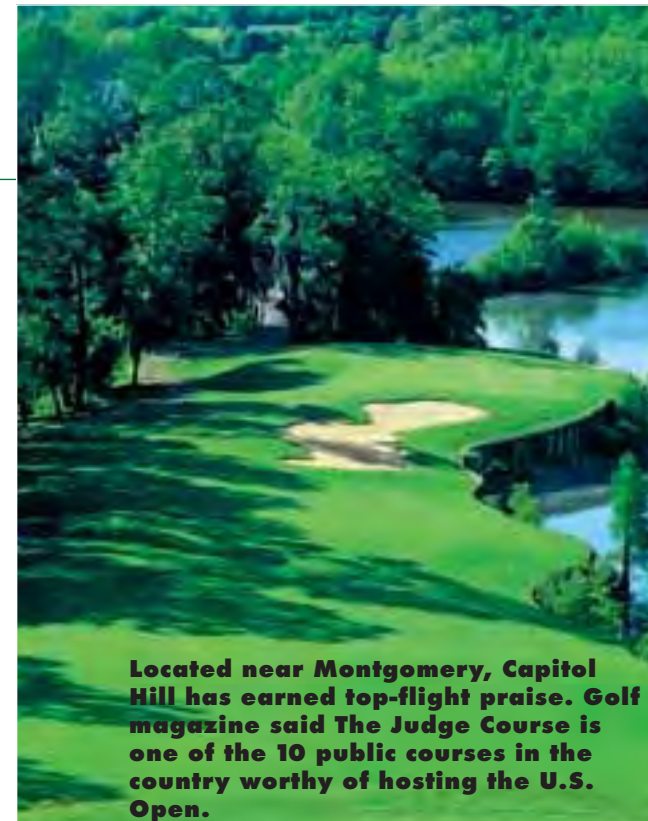
In addition to the golf course, construction is well underway on a 258-room hotel, according to Steve Miller, Ross Bridge Golf Resort and Spa general manager.

"The hotel will have 20,000 square feet of flexible meeting space for conventions," says Miller. "The meeting space includes a terrace overlooking the golf course."

Miller says Canada's famous Banff Springs Hotel inspired the design.

Ross Bridge is designed to host "a major tournament event," says Cannon. He's already talking with offi-

**Located near Montgomery, Capitol Hill has earned top-flight praise. Golf magazine said The Judge Course is one of the 10 public courses in the country worthy of hosting the U.S. Open.**



a golf course, but it means a whole lot more to the community and to Alabama," Cannon says. "Our direct economic impact is tremendous. We've had more than a \$1 billion impact on this state."

Bronner says the trail has been instrumental in recruiting businesses such as Mobile Aerospace and Mercedes to Alabama.

"Companies want to see that we're not looking for someone to help us out,

but that we're helping ourselves," he says. "A company doesn't come in to help a town but to make money. It looks at the social infrastructure."

Excitement is high in Hoover over the development's scheduled opening next spring, says Bill Powell, executive director of the Hoover Chamber of Commerce.

"This \$50 million resort connected to the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail is a crown jewel for Hoover and for the Birmingham area," Powell says. "We think it will have a tremendous economic impact."

That's a logical conclusion. Cannon says golfers on the RTJ Trail spend an average of \$185 per day.

"We do a lot of corporate business," he says. "More than 200,000 golfers who played the trail this year were from outside Alabama."

"When we're going into an area and I talk to Kiwanis Clubs or other groups, I tell them, 'this is

Golfers likely are more interested in the quality of courses than in dollars and cents. They won't be disappointed.

"There are a lot of great golfing venues, but the neat thing about the trail is the beauty of Alabama," says Bronner. "Each course is a totally different adventure."

"At Myrtle Beach or Hilton Head, the topography is basically the same. Here, you go from the mountains in the Birmingham area to the wetlands to the new courses in Hoover and on the Tennessee River. They're dynamically different."

While it's nice to be recognized in glowing media reports, Bronner is often reminded of the trail's popularity in other ways.

"I was in Spain recently and saw a guy wearing a Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail t-shirt," he says. "This trail has made people everywhere knowledgeable about Alabama."



**Creeks, marshlands and lakes add to the challenge of Magnolia Grove in Mobile. The Falls and Crossings courses were listed in America's Top 50 Affordable Public Courses, and the Short Course was recently named the best par 3 course in America.**



Canada's famous Banff Springs Hotel inspired the design for a 258-room hotel (below) at Ross Bridge. The hotel will have 20,000 square feet of flexible meeting space for conventions.

## THE COURSES

Renowned golf course designer Robert Trent Jones came out of retirement in the early 1990s to design the Alabama trail that bears his name. From north to south, the courses offer varied scenery, topography and difficulty.

### Hampton Cove

HUNTSVILLE

This 54-hole facility at the northern terminus of the trail boasts two dramatically different courses. The Highlands Course emulates Scottish links. The River Course, laid out on former soybean fields, is the only Robert Trent Jones layout without a single bunker. Hampton Cove also includes the Short Course, with water in play on 11 holes and a large double green accommodating the 10th and 17th holes.

### Silver Lakes

ANNISTON/GADSDEN

Rolling terrain on the edge of the Talladega National Forest enhances the golfing experience at Silver Lakes, named by Golf Digest's Places to Play as one of the nation's Great Value public courses. The Heartbreaker's nine holes are considered

by many to be the most challenging nine on the trail from the championship tees. Elevated tees at the Backbreaker nine afford sweeping views of the Appalachian foothills.

### Oxmoor Valley

BIRMINGHAM

Built on former mining land owned by U.S. Steel, Oxmoor Valley golfers test their skills on the roller coaster fairways of the Ridge Course and the Valley Course's 18th

hole, nicknamed "The Assassin." Like Silver Lakes, the Short Course made Golf Digest's Places to Play Great Value list.

### Grand National

AUBURN/OPELIKA

Both the Links Course and Lake Course at Grand National were in the top 10 of Golf Digest's list of America's Top 50 Affordable Courses, and with good reason. The par-four 18th hole on the Links is



Both the Links Course and Lake Course at Auburn/Ope- lika's Grand National were in the top 10 of Golf Digest's list of America's Top 50 Affordable Courses.



Cambrian Ridge has the distinction of being featured in the 2003 Links Microsoft Golf Game.

the trail's strongest finishing hole, while the island green on the Lake's 15th hole is considered by many to be the single prettiest hole on the trail. More than half the holes of the Short Course touch scenic Lake Saugahatchee.

Among the events hosted by the Grand National are the 1997 Nike Tour Championship and the 2000 NCAA Men's Division 1 National Championship.

A recent addition to the trail's resort division is the Lodge and Conference Center at Grand National. There's an indoor/outdoor pool, health club and tennis facilities at the Lodge, which includes 129 rooms and 15 suites. Corporate guests can make use of 15,000 square feet of meeting space and a meeting amphitheater.

### Capitol Hill

PRATTVILLE

Located near Montgomery, Capitol Hill has earned top-flight praise. Golf magazine said The Judge Course is one of the 10 public courses in the country worthy of hosting the

U.S. Open and ranked the Legislator as one of its Top 25 Worthy Newcomers. Capitol Hill's three 18-hole championship courses offer more than 1,500 acres of golf and natural beauty.

The Legends at Capitol Hill, a 90-room hotel, has a one-to-one staff/guest service ratio plus award-winning chefs who offer a delicious sampling of Southern cuisine.



Huntsville's 54-hole Hampton Cove course boasts two dramatically different courses, one of them reminiscent of Scottish links.

### Cambrian Ridge

GREENVILLE

Cambrian Ridge has the distinction of being featured in the 2003 Links Microsoft Golf Game, but it's even more fun to visit in person. The courses – the Sherling, Canyon, Loblolly and Short – combine picturesque terrain with challenging natural features. From the clubhouse veranda, golfers can see 30-mile views of Southern forests.

### Highland Oaks

DOTHAN

Three nine-hole championship courses boast both the longest and most classically designed holes on the trail. Highland Oaks, located in the southeast corner of Alabama, is home to the Highlands, Marshwood, Magnolia and Short Course. The feature hole of the Magnolia is the 416-yard 5th, where a split-level fairway offers an option off the tee.

Highland Oaks hosted the 1999 Nike Tour Championship and the regional finals of the 2001 Golf Channel Drive, Chip & Putt competition.

### Magnolia Grove

MOBILE

Creeks, marshlands and lakes add to the challenge of Magnolia Grove, located in Alabama's gracious port city. The Falls and Crossings courses were listed in America's Top 50 Affordable Public Courses, and the Short Course was recently named the best par 3 course in America. Magnolia Grove hosted the 1998 Nike Tour Championship and the 1999-2001 AFLAC LPGA Tournament of Champions.

Golfers can stay at the nearby Grand Hotel; built in 1847, it's one of the South's premier vacation spots. ■