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THE OLD AMERICAN GOLF CLUB

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By Mark Button

THE OLD AMERICAN GOLF CLUB



A view of the 18th hole at Old American Golf Club.

There may come a day when the name Tripp Davis resonates as loud and clear to golfers as the names Tom Fazio and Pete Dye. If that happens (more likely “when” it does), golf writers and golfers likely will point to The Old American Golf Club in The Colony as one of Davis’ first original masterpieces of golf course architecture.

Further, by the time Davis’ fast-rising star reaches its apex, The Old American will have grown in and become one of the absolute premier courses in Texas. Even now, a few months shy of its scheduled grand opening in the fall, it is spectacular. Playing it for the first time, one is amazed that, hole after hole, there is no let up in interesting design features, daunting challenges and awe-inspiring views.

It’s simply a classic golf course designed by one of America’s best young architects.

During the past few decades, Fazio and Dye made themselves household names with golfers for their imaginative, challenging

architectural designs. The 42-year-old Davis is on a similar path. He’s been designing original courses since 1996 and is best known in the Metroplex for his Old World creations at The Tribute Golf Club. Built in 2000, The Tribute annually is rated as one of the top public courses in the country.

The Old American was built adjacent to The Tribute on the edges of Lake Lewisville and is owned by same company, Matthews Southwest. The Tribute was inspired by some of Davis’ favorite holes on courses in the British Open rotation, including Scotland’s Postage Stamp at Royal Troon (est. 1878) and the Road Hole at St. Andrews Old Course (est. 1552).

The Old American, which offers annual memberships with limited fee play, features up to six tee boxes per hole with profuse jagged-edged, unkempt bunkers dotting the terrain. The oft-gnarly, windswept sand traps are everywhere, reminiscent of early American courses, where wind, weather and sand served as par’s defense.



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—Tripp Davis

In that vein, most of the holes on The Old American skirt the lake, exposing golfers to confounding winds. The majestic course was designed with two of Davis’ beloved early American courses in mind, National Golf Links of America (est. 1911) and Shinnecock Hills (est. 1931), both which are located on Long Island, N.Y.

“The Old American is the most strategic course I have done,” said Davis, who also recently completed the renovation of venerable Preston Trail Golf Club in North Dallas. “It’s the most complete in terms of every detail being right, in my mind. The Tribute has been ranked as one of the Top-75 Best Public Courses in the U.S. for the last several years, and The Old American is a more strategic test over a more interesting piece of land. So I would expect The Old American to be more critically acclaimed.”

As beautiful as the property is that houses The Tribute, the stone’s-throw-away acreage at The Old American is even more stunning. Ten holes border the lake and all but four holes offer views of

the water. There’s a six-hole stretch on the back nine in which the lake’s edge is in play on every hole...which also means those holes are highly exposed to natural elements.

“It is very much designed to appeal to drama in match play,” Davis said. “I really haven’t developed a favorite stretch of holes. As the wind changes even slightly, what constitutes a ‘stretch’ of holes changes, too. I will say that holes 16-18 are as fun a stretch of closing holes to any course I have played, and No. 15 possibly is the hardest hole on the course.”

Davis, who played college golf at Oklahoma, shares the credit for the inspired creation with his friend, PGA Tour major champion and Dallas native Justin Leonard, who assisted on the project. The two highly skilled golfers—Davis is a decorated amateur who still competes, schedule-permitting—met while Davis was at OU. Leonard was a senior at Lake Highlands High School when Davis was a senior in Norman.

COVER STORY

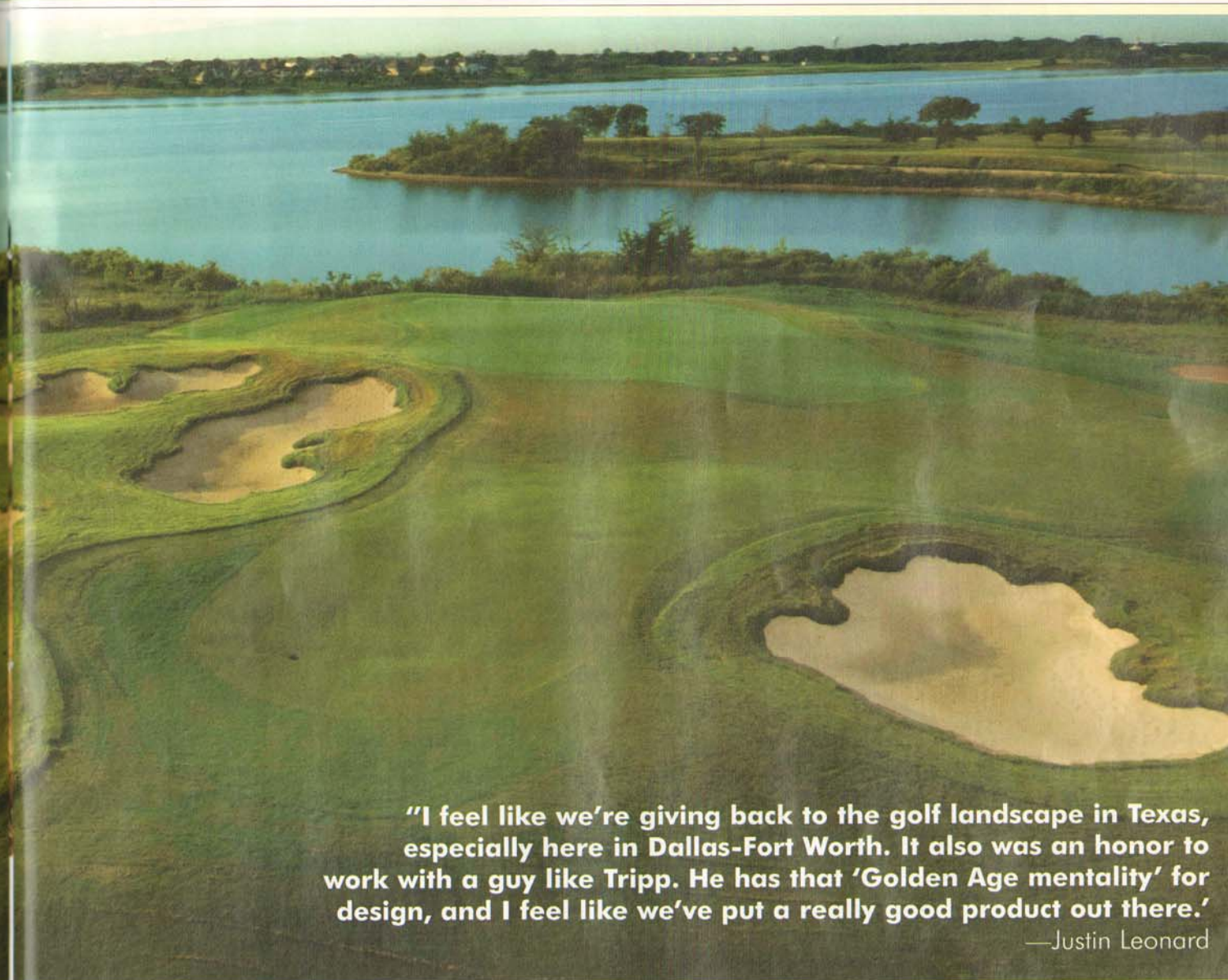
The Old American Golf Club

The Old American Golf Club

COVER STORY



A view of the eighth green, looking south toward the lake.



"I feel like we're giving back to the golf landscape in Texas, especially here in Dallas-Fort Worth. It also was an honor to work with a guy like Tripp. He has that 'Golden Age mentality' for design, and I feel like we've put a really good product out there."

—Justin Leonard

Leonard, before signing with the University of Texas, made a recruiting trip to OU, and Davis was his host for the weekend. The two hit it off and became fast friends. Later, Davis was contracted to build a resort course in Colorado. The investors wanted a "name player" attached to the project as well, and Davis suggested Leonard.

Investors loved the idea, and Davis and Leonard began the project in 2001. Unfortunately, after investors sank \$10 million into the course, the project was put on hold because of financial instability.

The Colorado project remains unfinished, but Davis believes one day it will be revived. Regardless, The Old American is Leonard's first completed golf course design project. Davis has 13 original designs to his name, including Raven Nest Golf Club in Huntsville.

"There are a lot of reasons why The Old American is such a special project to me," said Leonard, a 12-time winner on the PGA Tour including the 1997 British Open at Royal Troon. "For one, it's close to home. That allowed me to be more hands-on. I was able to take a day or half-day and drive up to visit the site during various stages of design and construction.

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and I feel like we've put a really good product out there."

So does Cameron Doan, the head professional at Preston Trail.

Doan has been in the golf business 20 years and has dealt with many architects. He said of all the designers with whom he's worked, Davis is the only one he'd call "the complete package."

"Tripp has the best combination of design, playability and agronomics of anyone in the business," said Doan, who has experienced The Old American. "He did a great job of using the water features around Lake Lewisville and land that was there. The way he shaped the golf course makes it look like it's been there a long time."

That was one of the project's goals, hence the name of the club.

Another goal was to make the course playable for golfers of all skill levels. Every golf course claims to have that high on their priority list, but Leonard made sure of it. That's how Nancy Leonard, Justin's mom and a 20-handicapper, became an integral piece to The Old American's ultimate design.

"Justin was really good at challenging me as much as anything," Davis said. "We probably sat down 10 times during the project, just going over details. He was out during construction probably another 10 times. He was very involved in how we were structuring the greens and the tee box angles and location.

"Mrs. Leonard was a common theme during construction. Justin constantly would ask me, 'How is my mom going to play this hole?'"

Although his job dictates he competes against the best golfers on the planet, Leonard also plays in dozens of pro-ams every year. He sees all kinds of swings, all manners of different skill levels. He tells amateur golfers to find ways to enjoy the course they're playing. For some, Leonard said, a course's look and feel provides enjoyment. Others like tracks on which they can post good scores. Still others enjoy high-end amenities or different features.

"It's hard to appeal to all of those," said Leonard, whose wife Amanda gave birth to their fourth child in April. "When I'm looking at a hole or property—even more specific, a bunker or approach shot into a green—the goal is to challenge a player like myself and, at the same time, make it playable for a 10-handicapper, 20-handicapper and a 30-handicapper.

"I know what's it like for them, and I see how they play golf courses. There needs to be angles to play to so my mom can bounce a shot into a green. Or maybe it's a shorter forced carry or even no forced carry. It's really challenging, but I think we really did that at The Old American."

The course, which will play much longer on windy days, meas-

ures 7,174 yards from the tips. That number shrinks to 5,215 from the forward tees with four different total yardages available in between. More than just a cliché tagline, every golfer reading this story will be able to find the right set of tees at The Old American to create the requisite challenges, risks and rewards for their handicap.

Both students of the game, Davis and Leonard also are history buffs, especially golf history. The two spent time last summer playing Shinnecock Hills, which has played host to four U.S. Opens, a U.S. Amateur and a Walker Cup, and National Golf Links, home of the first Walker Cup in 1922. Davis and Leonard played several rounds on both courses, all the while making notes on the different features they'd like to incorporate into The Old American.

One of the most distinctive attributes is the "eyebrow" effect to the bunkers at The Old American. There are a total of 139 diabolical sand traps on the courses. All of the demanding fairway bunkers were perfectly placed to grab every golfer's attention on the tee box, regardless of skill level.

Davis and Leonard loved the way Shinnecock's bunkers were windswept with rough edges. Looking from the tee box toward the green, the front ends (entry points) of the bunkers are mowed down tightly, but at the back end (closer to green), the grass is left to grow



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Preston Trail Golf Club

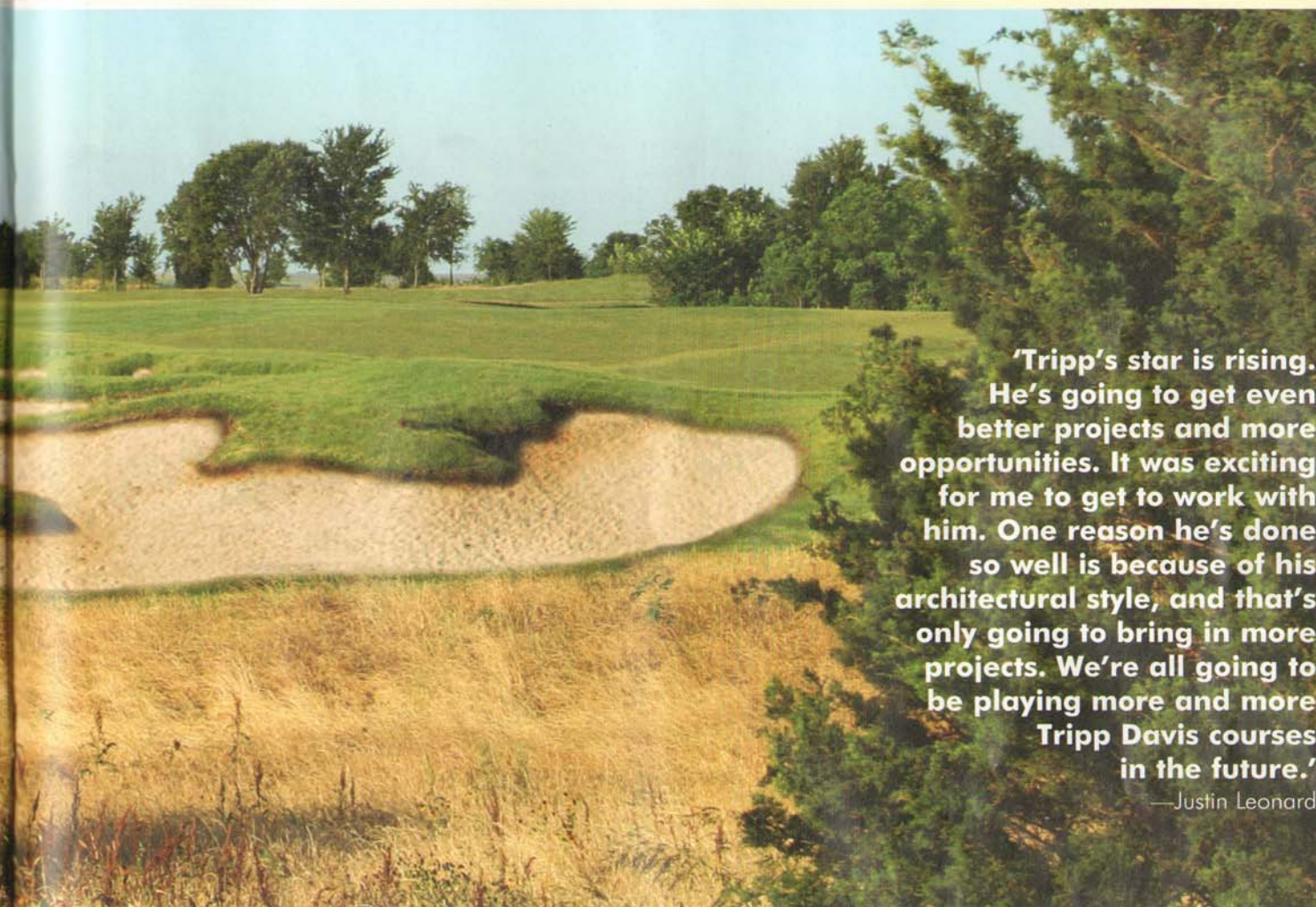
COVER STORY

The Old American Golf Club

The Old American Golf Club

COVER STORY

This view of the eighth hole shows the old-school bunkering found at Old American. There are more than 100 bunkers throughout the layout.



'Tripp's star is rising. He's going to get even better projects and more opportunities. It was exciting for me to get to work with him. One reason he's done so well is because of his architectural style, and that's only going to bring in more projects. We're all going to be playing more and more Tripp Davis courses in the future.'

—Justin Leonard

high and natural.

It gives the bunkers "eyebrows" (also called mustaches) and creates a unique, timeless appearance. It also can make for difficult shots back to the fairway should your golf ball stick in the grass above a bunker's lip rather than roll back down into the sand.

Davis used the par-3 fourth hole at National Golf Links as inspiration for the sixth hole at The Old American. It measures 206 yards from the back and just 157 yards from the forward tees. There's a big bunker about 20 yards short of the green and four more traps surrounding the putting surface, which is tipped up at an angle back toward the tee box.

It's a classic "Redan" hole, in which the front of the green is open and accessible. The back of the green features a bank, and past that, everything falls off into a bunker or the rough.

"If you go long and get into one of those bunkers, you have virtually no chance to get it close to the pin," said Davis, who grew up playing East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta and took his first job at age 16 working for Rees Jones during construction of a now-defunct private club. "It'll be tough to make a par from behind the green."

Davis explained that the original Redan Hole is the 15th at North Berwick in Scotland (est. 1832), and the design also was used during the Civil War as an embattlement fortification.

"From a military standpoint, the idea was to build these embankments and clear an area when the opposition would come straight at you," Davis said. "And you're sitting at a 45-degree angle. Back then, everything was about flanking. So what you were doing was

drawing them into the front opening, and then you come around and flank them on both sides."

It's these kinds of touches to The Old American that give it such an ageless feel. The cart paths are comprised of decomposed granite—they look like old dirt roads—and the benches, trash cans, flags and flagsticks all were designed to embrace the Golden Age ambiance of the experience.

"The decomposed granite cart paths fit in with the whole feel of the property, which is emblematic of courses built in the 1920s and '30s," general manager Jeff Kindred said. "It wouldn't have been realistic to have concrete cart paths back then, so that's why we went with the decomposed granite. It gives golfers the feel of what golf was like in that era."

Kindred explained that you won't find ball washers on the courses. The flagsticks are made of wood; the flags are cotton. There is nothing ornate about these touches, and outside of the golf carts and GPS system, all the details were made to look as if they could have been constructed in the 1920s or '30s.

As for the 18 holes themselves, each is like a puzzle. It will take a few times playing The Old American to understand the best places to target on each hole. That played into Davis and Leonard's goal of making it a strategic course.

"It's a golf course with fairly big fairways, so you're not really pressured off the tee to hit it extremely straight," Davis said. "But you are challenged off the tee to put the ball in the right positions because, depending on where the pins are, you have to be on a cer-

tain angle to get at the flag.

"It's not just, 'Go up the right side of the fairway on this hole,'" Davis continued. "The strategy changes depending on where the pin is. It depends on where the wind is coming from, because there are a lot of exposed holes."

The experience begins with a pair of long par 4s. The first hole measures 442 yards and requires a forced carry (from the back tees) over a pond, which also runs up the left side of the fairway and pinches closest to play near the green. The hole has six fairway bunkers, including a pot bunker in the middle of the fairway about 140 yards short of the green.

It's not the easiest of starting holes. Be sure to warm up properly.

The second hole is even longer at 487 yards and features a dogleg left to a green that slopes away from the fairway in back and is heavily protected by bunkers.

"That golf course doesn't waste any time getting to the point," said Tony Belzer, a 4-handicap who recently played The Old American. "This is a golfer's golf course. If someone is looking for tricked up holes, it isn't for them. If you're looking for a pure test of golf in a classic setting, then you're going to love this course. I can't wait to play it again."

The front nine is highlighted by three par 3s, another example of how Davis and Leonard went their own way, unconfined by modern-day standards. The Old American is a par 71, with the front nine playing as a par-35 loop. Shinnecock Hills, by the way, is a par 70. National Golf Links is a par 73.

"We just built the holes to best fit the land," Davis said.

Most of the back nine plays alongside one of the eastern edges of Lake Lewisville. The loop includes two shorter par 4s, the 409-yard 13th and the 351-yard 16th hole.

After the tricky par-3 12th, which plays directly at the lake and thus into the wind, the 13th is a bit of a reprieve. The par 4 plays uphill, usually downwind and might have the most trees surrounding the fairway and green on the course. It's a beautiful golf hole with a significant "parkland" feel to it.

The subsequent offering is a double-dogleg par-5. At 588 yards, the 14th hole is the longest on the course. Most days it's a three-shot hole, with the drive shooting straight back at the lake. The fairway then bends right and back left again closer to the green, which is slightly elevated. If played conservatively, birdie is within reason.

That's not exactly the case on the next hole.

Davis calls the 15th hole, "possibly the hardest on the course." The 488-yard par 4 plays along side the lake; the shore skirts the left side of the hole. The fairway bends slightly to the left and plays to an elevated green. Davis urges all golfers to check the pin placements on each hole before teeing off; the 15th hole is a perfect example as to why.

When the pin is tucked in the back of the green, Davis explained, it's wise to hug the left side of the fairway for the best angle at the hole for your approach. The opposite is true for front pins on No. 15. Play up the right side for the optimal results.

Either way, par is a great score.

COVER STORY

The Old American Golf Club



"The thinking was to make the 15th the hardest the course gets before you finish with possibly the three best birdie opportunities," Davis said. "It's still hard to score overall, but you leave a good taste in their mouth. For match play, you could come to the 15th trailing 4-down and still be very much in the match, as No. 15 is a hard par and Nos. 16, 17 and 18 are all potential birdie holes."

The 16th plays away from the lake and uphill. A generously wide fairway invites golfers to bang the driver, but a pair of deep, pot bunkers split the fairway about 90 yards short of the green. For most golfers, driver or even 3-wood might carry to the bunkers, so the safe play is to lay back with a hybrid or 5-wood.

"Man, there are a lot of well-placed bunkers out here," Belzer said, standing on the 16th green. "They're all right at the tip of where you're apt to hit it from the tee box for your skill level."

The Old American finishes with a classic, risk-reward par 5. From the back, the 18th measures 552 yards with water up the left side from tee box to green. Two long fairway bunkers separate the left edge of the fairway from the water, and it takes a drive of 280 yards to carry both. A safer, less aggressive line is out to the right of the fairway traps.

Five sand traps, including another long one short and left, protect the green. The best play is to lay up to a comfortable wedge distance with your second shot so that you can lob a high, soft shot into the green. Davis said it's tough getting up and down from the tightly




THE OLD AMERICAN

GOLF CLUB

1001 Lebanon Road
The Colony, TX 75056
www.theoldamericangolfclub.com
469-585-4150

Designers: Tripp Davis and Justin Leonard

General Manager: Jeff Kindred

Opens: Fall, 2010

Fairways / Greens: Premier Bermuda / Mini Verde

Par / Yardage: 71 / 7,174 (Leonard Tees); 6,920 (Tournament);

6,760 (Back); 6,366 (Middle); 5,765 (Up); 5,215 (Forward)

Membership Information: 469-585-4150

mowed collection areas to the right and behind the final green.

"The four finishing holes had the most specific consideration in how they work together," Davis said. "We wanted a closing stretch of very opportunistic holes preceded by possibly the hardest hole on the course."

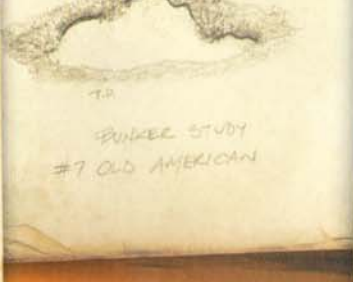
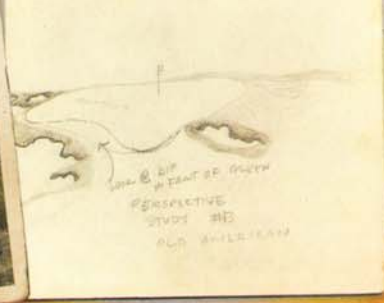
For Davis, The Old American may be his best work to date. He's made a name for himself with some celebrated restoration work, including Preston Trail and Northwood Country Club in Dallas, Oak Tree National in Oklahoma, Sunnehanna Country Club in Pennsylvania and Waterwood National in Huntsville. He's currently

working on a 36-hole project for Turtle Dunes Country Club in Acapulco, Mexico, which is sure to be a gem.

But The Old American promises to stand atop Davis' early masterpieces and will only get better in time.

For Leonard, he couldn't be more thrilled about his first completed design project. The opportunity to work with Davis on The Old American and creating a Golden Age-era experience has been a career highlight for the former British Open champ.

"Tripp's star is rising," Leonard said. "He's going to get even better projects and more opportunities. It was exciting for me to get to work with him. One reason he's done so well is because of his architectural style, and that's only going to bring in more projects. We're all going to be playing more and more Tripp Davis courses in the future." **TL**



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Classic American golf. In the tradition of greats like Shinnecock and Prairie Dunes. Designed by Tripp Davis and 12-time PGA tour winner Justin Leonard, The Old American stands ready to prove the test of time. Crafted along the shores of Lake Lewisville, The Old American is as beautiful and demanding as it is authentic.

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