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After ‘magnificent’ U.S. Women’s Open, what’s next for Country Club of Charleston?

BY TOMMY BRASWELL SPECIAL TO THE POST AND COURIER

JUN 3, 2019 UPDATED 51 MIN AGO



A crowd of golf fans watch during the 4th round of the 74th U.S. Women’s Open Championship into day four held at the Country Club of Charleston Sunday, June 2, 2019. Andrew J. Whitaker/Staff

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Even before the final putt fell Sunday in the 2019 U.S. Women's Open, there has been a buzz about the Country Club of Charleston.

Has it met the expectations of the U.S. Golf Association? Do the players like the golf course? Has the greater Charleston community embraced the event? And what does the future hold for the partnership between the USGA and Country Club of Charleston?

Players have praised the golf course and haven't voiced displeasure over the conditions or setup. The USGA doesn't release attendance figures, but beforehand officials were hoping for 100,000 spectators for the week. There have been no traffic snafus, and the event drew visitors from all over the world and was expected to have an economic impact of about \$25 million on the Charleston area.

"From our standpoint, it's been a magnificent week. This is a special place, the Country Club of Charleston. We always knew that. We knew that before we had our Women's Amateur here (in 2013)," said John Bodenhamer, senior managing director of Championships for the USGA.

World Golf Hall of Fame member Beth Daniel, who serves as the honorary co-chair of the event and learned the game here, said the players are loving this year's Women's Open, especially the hospitality and the golf course. One big plus, Daniel said, is that the players are able to use the clubhouse.

"They are loving being in the clubhouse. Most Opens, the players aren't in the clubhouse. Instead of selling it, they gave it to the players, and it makes a huge difference to them," Daniel said.

Comments like Bodenhamer's and Daniel's are sweet music to the ears of Country Club of Charleston member Frank Ford III, general chairman of the tournament.

"I've heard nothing but superlatives, better than you could hope for," Ford said. "(The USGA) is ecstatic. We have the crowds, which they love. The players love the golf course. I think (the players) came in with a really good attitude because of Beth and knowing her.

“Our challenge has always been the traffic,” Ford said, “but I haven’t heard anything but good comments on transportation.”

Paula Creamer said the crowds and venue have “been awesome.”

“It’s been a good U.S. Open venue for sure,” she said.

“For us, I think it’s a really good layout. It can definitely play long, especially if the wind gets up. I get to hit a lot of drivers. So it definitely plays challenging on a few of those holes, and they can put some tees back or move them forward on a few that are playing challenging and need to be moved up. It’s a great layout and it’s in absolutely perfect shape for us,” Lexi Thompson said.

“There were so many people out there (Saturday). It’s great to see. I didn’t realize I was that much of a fan favorite. I felt like I was in the Solheim on some of the holes with the cheers. It’s an amazing feeling,” Lexi Thompson said. “If you make a bogey, they’re still cheering you on, rooting you on and keeping you upbeat. I feed off that. It makes the sport, honestly. The fans make the sport.”

Senior director Shannon Rouillard of the USGA said she was not surprised that the course has lived up to expectations, having done the setup for the 2013 U.S. Women’s Amateur that was played at the Country Club of Charleston.

“Paul Corder (course superintendent) and his staff have done a fantastic job preparing the golf course for this event to be here,” she said. “We’ve been very pleased with how the week has gone. It’s always nice when Mother Nature is on our side and we are able to control and really be at the wheel of the agronomics and water management and being able to control the green speed. We’re just really happy with the way things have gone.”

Rouillard said the USGA wanted to narrow the fairways by bringing in the rough in certain areas but still make sure it was recognizable as a Seth Raynor design.

“The players come here and expect to see the best-conditioned golf course they see all year. I think we were able to give them that,” Rouillard said.

Ford said the decision to have the players in the clubhouse was a home run.

“Every Open I’ve been to the last four years, it’s been a tent, a very nice facility ... The response (to being in the clubhouse) has been great: ‘Thank you so much.’ ‘We’re glad to be a part of the club for a week.’ That is exactly what we were trying to get out of them.

“We have a special food preparation place. We’ve run the whole gamut of recipes to make sure the French ladies, the Italian ladies, the Asian girls are happy. Our sushi was a hit. I think we were one plate away from running out.”

Club president Tony Mark called this year’s Women’s Open a “grand slam.”

“Even the members who were neutral have come up and told this was great. We feel good about that,” Mark said. He said the food was prepared by the Country Club of Charleston staff and has been well-received by the players. He said the club has treated it like “an only daughter’s wedding,” going all out in every way they could.

Food and hospitality is seldom an issue in Charleston, but what has been the reaction to the course?

“The architecture here, Seth Raynor one of the classic designers in the history of the game,” Bodenhamer said. “You come to a place like this and you just don’t have to do a whole lot to the golf course. It just takes care of itself. It’s been wonderful. The golf course, from our ability to present a U.S. Open test for the players, is as close to perfect as we can provide.”

With check marks all around, it begs the question: what’s next?

Daniel said another Women’s Open or a Senior Men’s Open would certainly fit the bill.

Mark said the club members need a rest after hosting the Women’s Amateur and Women’s Open in a relatively short time frame.

Ford said he didn’t want to speculate, but “I think we’ve proved we can do it on this piece of property.”

Asked if the USGA would like to return, Bodenhamer's response was quick and enthusiastic.

"Oh my goodness, we'd love to come back," he said. "Let me put it right out there and say that. We want to be respectful of the club. We're hopeful they've had a good experience. By every sign, I think they have.

"I think if the club would have us back. We'd love to come back for the U.S. Women's Open. We'd love to have a U.S. Women's Amateur. But we'd certainly entertain others as well. We love it here. This is exactly what we like to come to."

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