

BY GODFREY ROBERT

NEW GARDEN IS PRETTY AND TEMPTING

RENOWNED DESIGNER RTJ II UTILISED EVERY SPACE
WELL IN THE CHALLENGE WITH REDUCED LAND

It is par for the course to play pars or, contrastingly, double pars from the popular blue tees on the 5,704 metres new Garden layout.

Such is the invitation of Tanah Merah Country Club's refreshing par-71 Garden course where many holes entice one to play regulation golf, but scores could inflate because lurking on the serene-looking layout are water hazards and sand traps that threaten.

No doubt, this reality applies mainly to high-handicappers and septuagenarian cart-pullers for whom the new Garden is an ideal playground when juxtaposed against the club's other tough Tampines course that normally leaves these enthusiastic "oldies" languishing in three-figure territory.

So the new Garden is a perfect complement to the Tampines layout, leaving majority of the members with the option to conquer or be conquered.

Ideally, the professionals and low handicappers would choose Tampines, but what the new Garden offers is great fun and sheer enjoyment, enticed by the belief that it hones one's short game and calls for precision play.

Hole 3, for instance, demands focus and composure. It is a 498-metre par-five from the blue tee, as a long meandering serpentine hole punctuated by a central "decision" bunker at 289 metres from the tee.

The best angle into the green will be taking on the central bunker and approaching the bunker-guarded green from the right side of the fairway. But how many of us can be consistently accurate?

Or take the par-three Hole 14 at 174 metres from the blue tee. The island green was reimagined from the original design and the large surface at 1,100 square metres (optical illusion from the tee makes it look much smaller) requires perfection, nerve and skill.

The lightning quick playing surface leads many wood-shots racing into



Bunkers and water are significant features at the new Garden course.



TMCC director of golf Ian Roberts (left) guided the media on their enjoyable round on March 5.

water, although ideally it can be tamed by good iron shots made better by a slight backspin.

Tanah Merah Country Club last month unveiled the new Garden Course designed by renowned golf course architect Robert Trent Jones II (RTJ II), who has re-shaped the famous layout into an enjoyable, delightful and resort-style course.

The new course officially opened for members on Feb 10, 2020 after 11 months of

redevelopment. The unique design features an outward 9 holes, inner 6 holes and centre 3 holes, which have been masterfully designed by RTJ II.

The reduced land area – from 64 hectares to 54 and now 44 – did not stifle RTJ II's creativity as he embraced the limitations by utilising every available space on the green canvas.

The new iteration of Garden boasts a quality course with a host of long and short holes wrapping through

lakes, peninsular teeing areas, tree corridors and strategically placed bunkering to match all styles of play.

Pity it is very unlike the original par-72 Garden, a world-renowned true championship course that had staged some of the world's best events such as the Lexus Cup, HSBC Women's Championship, Johnnie Walker Classic and Tiger Skins and paraded Major winners such as Ian Woosnam, Ernie Els, Vijay Singh, Padraig Harrington

and Sergio Garcia.

However, RTJ II's bold vision of the course falls into his design concept to create one that is "of the earth... for the spirit" and it is easily evident in his carefully-thought-out work on the layout which requires golfers to negotiate the terrains and ensure proper shot placements.

"At Robert Trent Jones II (RTJ II) we approach every golf course project with a series of fundamental design principles that guide our work. The pillar of our design philosophy is that every project is site specific. We listen to the land and work with it to create the best golf design possible on every unique site," says RTJ Design.

One of the unique features of RTJ II Design is appropriately named Ribbon Tees which have been placed at the course.

They were noted as the newly creative idea of the original 21st century. It's "into" the land and "of" the land – eminently natural – and it doesn't feel like a tee "box," and you have many options for the markers. They may, however, be canted, so beware.

You have to find the place within the markers where it's flat or where you can use the grade to help shape your shot. Experts of the game have lauded RTJ II on their Ribbon Tee creations that were a feature of Chambers Bay at the 2015 US Open.

Away from the greens, refurbished works have been done on the Garden Golfers' Terrace and the locker rooms to give a more contemporary and resort-style feel to the Club.

Says TMCC president Ho Beng Huat: "The new Garden invites strong iron play on a surface that makes you believe that you can conquer but perfect execution is not easy as there are hazards."

As 20 journalists uncovered the gems at the new Garden on a windy media day event on March 5, a pro bagged an impressive 67 while a high-handicapper shot 69 for one nine.

Didn't I say, that was par for the course?

photos: TMCC, Tharm Sook Wei