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A Rebuilt Golf Course Renews a Neighborhood

By LARRY DORMAN

ATLANTA — When Tom Cousins, an Atlanta commercial real estate mogul, first floated his radical ideas to build a mixed-income housing community, using golf — of all things — as a cornerstone to help resurrect the decaying, crime-ridden neighborhood of East Lake, most of his colleagues and friends — even the mayor of Atlanta — said the same thing.

“They told me I was crazy,” Cousins said last week, smiling as he sat on the porch of a home across the street from East Lake Golf Club, where 30 of the world’s best golfers are competing for a \$7 million purse in the Tour Championship, the last of four events in the playoffs for the FedEx Cup.

Crazy was not the worst word Cousins heard to describe him and his plan to improve a neighborhood that was one of the worst crime zones in the country. He was opposed by many of the people he sought to help and by many government agencies.

“I wasn’t so sure about him,” said Eva Davis, a resident of the East Lake Meadows housing project since the 1970s. “We had heard so many promises before from other rich people who said they’d change things and never did. Why should we trust this one? He had to prove himself.”

Cousins, whose company had built much of the skyline of Atlanta, and who had been instrumental in bringing the N.B.A. and N.H.L. to the city, was not easily dissuaded.

He did what all top entrepreneurs do when confronted with seemingly insurmountable barriers to their ideas. He first surrounded himself with the best people he could find, then broke down the walls, literally and figuratively.

Now, 12 years after Cousins unfurled his plans for rebuilding East Lake, the revitalized community is not merely thriving, its vision is spreading across the South. Next week in New Orleans, the Bayou District Foundation will announce that it has financing in place for the first phase of a five-year, \$233 million revitalization project that replicates much of Cousins’s blueprint for East Lake.

It calls for the development of a mixed-income residential community where the former St. Bernard Public Housing Development stood before Hurricane Katrina. It includes two charter schools for the St. Bernard neighborhood, and the restoration of New Orleans City Park’s recreational and golf facilities.

The celebrated golf course architect Rees Jones, who restored East Lake Golf Club to the routing and bunkering that Donald Ross put in place in his 1913 redesign of Tom Bendelow’s original work, will do an overhaul of the golf course at New Orleans City Park.

The revitalization of East Lake began with the restoration of the golf club, but the two were not related when Cousins bought the club for \$4.5 million in 1993. The club, where Bob Jones learned the game and where Cousins grew up playing, had fallen into disrepair, and Cousins wanted to restore it.

It was not until later that year, after reading a newspaper article describing how eight New York City neighborhoods produced a majority of prison inmates in New York State, that Cousins learned that a similarly disproportionate percentage of state prison inmates in Georgia came from East Lake. He vowed then that he would find a way to do something that could change the environment in neighborhood.

“East Lake had the highest crime rate in the city of Atlanta,” Cousins said. “You would drive through there and see just hundreds of kids on the streets. They had no control over where they were born, and I thought to myself, Had I been born there, I probably would have been one of those people and wound up in jail.”

Soon after, East Lake Golf Club became a means to an end. Cousins decided to seek out 100 corporations willing to take a corporate membership for \$50,000 and to donate \$200,000 each, all of which would go toward financing the rebuilding of East Lake. That first \$20 million went toward the demolition of the East Lake Meadows housing project, the source of most of the criminal activity in East Lake, and the beginning of the construction of the Villages of East Lake community.

At the soul of the East Lake model is education. Where once stood a windowless bunker that looked more like a cellblock than an elementary school is the Charles L. Drew Charter School, an airy, open and gleaming building where 800 students attend kindergarten through eighth grade, 90 percent of them from the Villages, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Before the school opened in 2001, only 5 percent of fifth graders at the elementary school could pass the state math exam. In 2007, 78 percent met or exceeded state standards in math, and 88 percent did so in reading.

Golf is a big part of the program. Children are exposed to the game by the fourth grade, and some of their physical education classes take place at the adjacent public course named for the Georgia golf legend Charles Yates, where a 10-year-old First Tee chapter has also served more than 1,500 East Lake children and teenagers.

On Thursday, Martavious Adams, 14, stepped up to the first tee at East Lake to hit the second ceremonial tee shot to open the Tour Championship. The continuing theme of the Tour Championship at East Lake is Tradition and Hope, and hitting the shot to represent Tradition had been 97-year-old Errie Ball, the only surviving contestant from the first Masters tournament in 1934.

With hundreds in the stands surrounding the tee, Martavious stepped up to his ball and smashed it, with a slight draw, 293 yards down the center line. The crowd exploded with prolonged cheering. That is the hope golf has brought here.

“I’d like to play on the PGA Tour some day,” said Martavious, who also revealed he had become an A student. “Soon as I started playing golf, and saw how relaxing it was and how focused it made me feel, I was like, I can do this.”

It is all tied together. The Tour Championship produces \$600,000 for the East Lake Foundation every year.

The Foundation itself raises another \$1 million to finance the programs. And the Cousins family foundation has given many more millions to the cause.

Because of all this, it is possible to make the numbers work so that half of the residents in the Villages have their rents paid through government funds and that the other half pays market rates.

Tom Cousins has personally financed more millions, but he would rather not say how many. He would rather pass around the credit for the success, and pass the plan on to other cities.

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