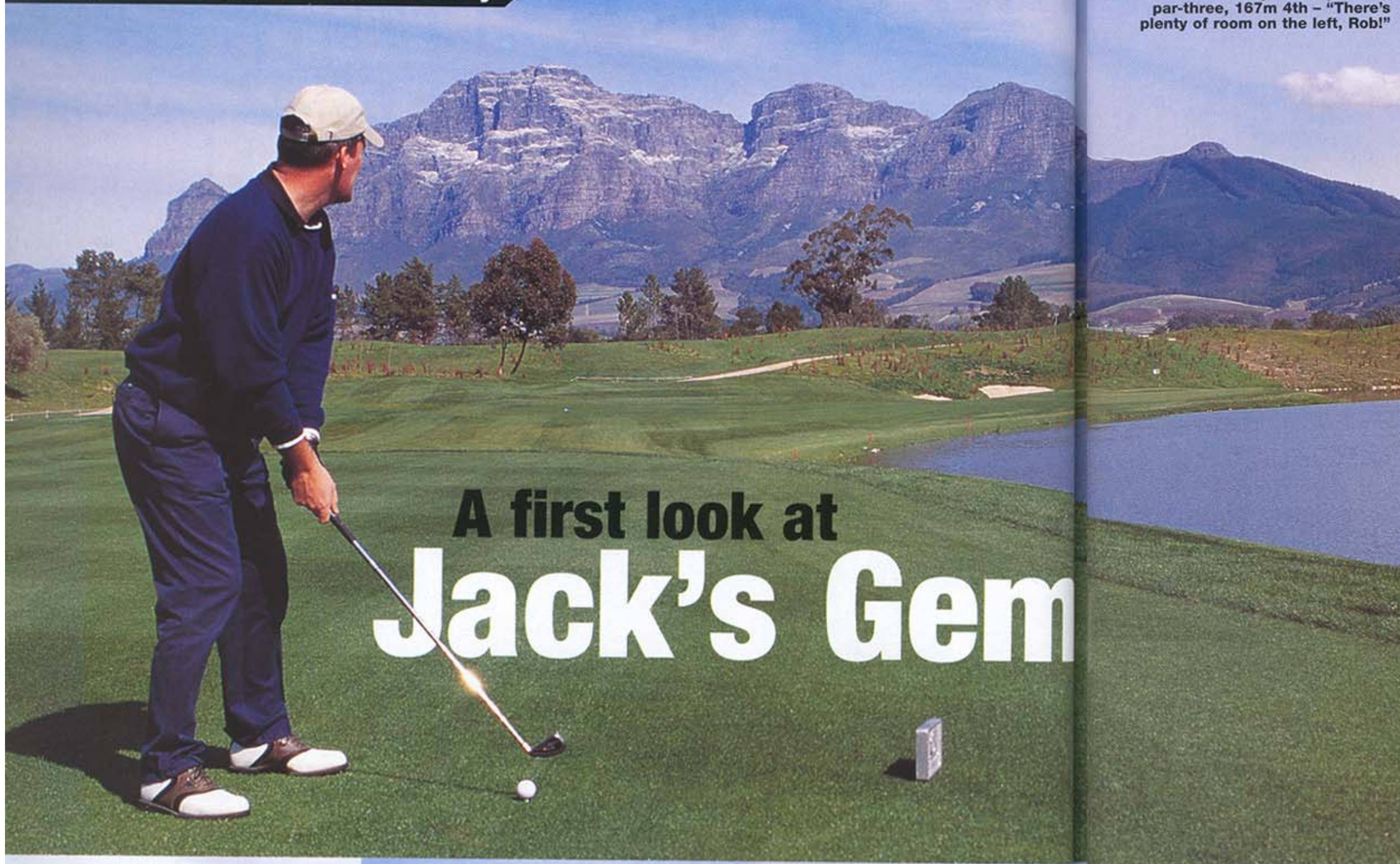


Rob Selley lines up on the par-three, 167m 4th – "There's plenty of room on the left, Rob!"



A first look at Jack's Gem

Pearl Valley opened for play in September and you'll be reading a lot more about the Franschoek layout in the months to come. BRANDON DE KOCK and a select few, however, were lucky to get an exclusive sneak preview...

For Capetonians, the third week in August 2003 will be hard to forget. When winter hits, we are regularly treated to snow-capped peaks on the distant mountains, but for the first time in living memory, it actually snowed on Table Mountain and Devil's Peak! For myself and seven other golf nuts, however, the week will be doubly unforgettable, because we were lucky enough to be the very first people ever to play a full 18 holes on Jack Nicklaus' signature layout at Pearl Valley.

For two days prior to our scheduled round, it rained hard enough to render most of the peninsula unplayable, so I phoned Rob Selley in the morning to make sure that all was in order. Rob is the newly-appointed director of golf at Pearl Valley – a gracious host, respected pro and a man in possession of the ultimate matchplay weapon: he's a right-handed golfer who putts left-handed! "Rob, I'm just wondering how the course is looking – are we still on?" I asked. "Buddy," he replied, "they spent 60 million bucks on this one – believe me, it's playable!"

The course is set against a mountain backdrop and, even without snow, you'll be hard-pressed to resist risking slow-play penalties to appreciate the views. From the outset, Nicklaus' bunkering defines the playing field with numerous large and perfectly positioned traps designed to test and challenge one's course management skills. His 'turning point' theory is apparent on every hole: put it in the right place off the tee and the required shape and shot to attack the green is obvious, but if you stray, you pay, and you'll probably be faced with obstructed views and deceptive perspectives.

When the first nine holes opened for play some months ago, it exhausted our supply of superlatives, which is a pity really, because we should have saved them for the back nine. Being the very first players to take divots and repair pitchmarks, our impressions of the course condition might be biased, but it still seems incredible that the GolfData team has managed to get the rye grass fairways and bent grass carpets so perfect and true in such a short time. But what really catches the eye on the back nine are the water hazards – large pools that mirror the mountains, with raised tees to complete the effect. The golf course is already a stunner, but when the housing adds definition to the layout and the beautification project lends a more manicured look to the flowerbeds and rough, Pearl Valley is going to be an absolute gem.

▶ If you live in or are visiting Cape Town, we strongly suggest you contact Pearl Valley on (021) 876 0761 and book a tee time! www.pearlvalley.co.za.

Reflective pool on the par-four 17th tee.

Bunkerville! The green of the par-five 5th.

Typical rocky creek on the par-three 12th

What view? I'm trying to concentrate here!

Daunting – the par-four, 408m 16th hole.

Just beautiful – whichever way you look at it.



First impressions...

Sandro Piaget, junior (French), handicap 2

On the way back to the airport, Sandro said: "It is one of the best courses I have ever played [and he has played a ridiculous number of courses around the world – Ed] and the greens and fairways were unbelievable. When you get the line right, you know it's in the hole when it's only halfway there." Sandro was unable to comment on the rough – he's never in the stuff!

Grant Hepburn, Logical Golf teaching pro, handicap 3

"The course is in pristine condition and the greens are truly remarkable in terms of texture, pace and consistency of roll. Lying in bed that night I could remember every single hole and that's always a good indication of the quality of a layout. For the longer hitters, some of the par fours and most of the par fives offered good birdie opportunities but were no pushover. Every hole offered its own challenge and I never felt that I was playing a 'fill-in hole'."

Peter Sauerman, golf historian, senior, handicap 7

"It's a 'parkland-links'! The undulating terrain gives it a links-like feel, but the quality of the playing surfaces, shot requirements and water hazards are definitely parkland. Those strange jagged tufts of grass in the rough worry me – they could become a fearful hazard, but the over-riding impression was of the bunkering, the 'amphitheatre-like' greenside mounding (it'll make a superb tournament venue) and the water hazards, all of which work together wonderfully to define the holes."

Alan Ramsay, Compleat Golfer chairman, senior, handicap 11

"The colour of the fairways and greens is striking – a deep, rich green! More importantly, the architecture of the green complexes is intriguing. It's welcoming for the average golfer and provides clear targets at which to aim. And then the water features – they are laid out so as not to make the course difficult for a mid-level golfer like me but still force the average player to think about what club to use and where to aim. A conservative approach would almost certainly bring rewards for the average player."

Phil Duffy, international businessman, senior, handicap 14

"The most significant impression was of unblemished fairways of a quality that most clubs would aspire to achieve. I have also never seen such clean putting surfaces, totally free from foreign grass or any other intrusion. Every hole, without exception, had me thinking about the next shot. The backdrops that frame each green invite attacking approaches and, once there, the greens provide a whole new dimension to the game. I believe it will live up to its name and prove to be a Pearl beyond price."

Gary van Loggerenberg, Sanlam sponsorship manager, mid-amateur, handicap 17

"Man, those bunkers really came into play! And not only for the long hitters, but for everyone – it seems as if they are strategically placed so that they are always a factor no matter who is playing off what tees. It also seems like a very user-friendly course – very fair and playable for the higher handicap players, but a real challenge off the back tees for the better players – a very memorable experience." □