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## **GARDEN OF EDEN**

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# GARDEN OF EDEN

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**By Mark Button**

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## COVER STORY

## Garden of Eden



**R**ebuild it, and they will come. The Moody Gardens Foundation banked \$16.5 million on that premise with its newly redesigned course set to open in June.

Along with the recently upgraded Galveston Island Country Club, the city's new public course aims to bring quality golf back to the island.

For years, area residents called Galveston Island Municipal Golf Course, which has been renamed Moody Gardens Golf Course, a virtual money pit. The facility suffered annual losses of more than \$200,000 in operating costs for several years. Last year, after a contentious battle for the management contract with Landry's Restaurant owner Tilman Fertitta, the City of Galveston turned the property over to the Moody Foundation, which signed a 40-year agreement.

With assets in excess of \$1.7 billion, the Moody Foundation is the state's largest private foundation. Without seeking compensation or profit, it provides funding and underwrites deficits for the \$450 million Moody Gardens complex, which includes a 425-room hotel, a 65,000-square-foot convention center, an IMAX theater, indoor aquarium, rain forest and space museum.

Now it adds a golf course to the Moody Gardens portfolio. The course is still owned by the City of Galveston, but is completely managed and underwritten by Moody Gardens.

"In Galveston, you can ask five people about something and you get seven opinions," said Buddy Herz, general counsel for the Moody Foundation and

an integral figure in the Moody Gardens course renovation. "This golf course is the first thing I've been involved with that everybody in Galveston loves. We've had nothing but positive feedback."

When Crenshaw Golf conducted its 2004 study on the old layout, however, the returns were anything but encouraging. The facility needed about \$7 million in renovations to the course and clubhouse, according to the report. Not only was the Moody Foundation unfazed by the dollar figure, the group flexed its financial biceps and dedicated more than twice that amount to breathe new life into a course built in 1974.

Tourism always has been a major component of Galveston's economy and the city has had a public golf course since 1931. The current location next to Scholes International Airport is the course's fourth spot on the island.

With the abundance of outstanding public and private courses from Huntsville to Lake Jackson, New Ulm to Mont Belvieu, the quality of golf on Galveston Island doesn't get much attention. Not at the state level, and, to be brutally honest, not in Houston, either. It's a shame, especially since the country club is the oldest private golf club in Texas, having been established in 1898.

Not to worry. The proud, sand wedge-yielding islanders need not bristle at the lack of respect much longer.

GICC, located on the island's west side, boasts a membership of 1,300 with 250 stockholders. The club took the first step toward improving

## Garden of Eden

## COVER STORY



Galveston's golf in 2003, when it spent about \$1.5 million to resurface greens and green complexes, re-do bunkering and upgrade landscaping. Club members also recently voted in favor of spending another \$4 million on a major clubhouse renovation.

Now Moody Gardens has taken the torch with its pricey redesign. The idea is to entice local golfers to stay close to home for their regular rounds while attracting more tourists, including conventioners and Houston golfers, to travel to the island, debit cards in hand.

"I think it will have a very positive impact on the economy," said Steven LeBlanc, Galveston's city manager. "We have not had a great public golf course. With this addition, as far as the golfing community, it'll be a tremendous draw. Hopefully, it will attract a lot of good tournaments. On top of that, it's just a beautiful place to go, even for birding and walking."

It's clear a new chapter in Galveston's history is being written—one that should create a reputation for stellar golf on the island.

"We're going to have two wonderful courses to play," said Donnie St.

Germain, GICC head pro. "One that's public and one that's private."

The Moody Foundation hired one of Houston's top architecture firms, Jacobsen/Hardy Golf Course Design, to build the new public course. Local resident Hardy, also a decorated instructor and author, was a natural fit for the project, and not just because he offices in Houston. He and partner Peter Jacobsen, along with architects Rex Van Hoose and Brian Johnson, handled the renovation work at GICC.

The men have become intimately familiar with the area—its challenges and limitations, as well as its beauty and potential.

With a resume of first-class facilities such as local favorites BlackHorse Golf Club, the Member Course at Redstone Golf Club and the recently opened Golf Club at Grays Crossing in Lake Tahoe, the firm may list Moody Gardens Golf Club as its next celebrated accomplishment.

"Two things really attracted us to the project," Hardy said. "It was the fact that the golf course needed a complete re-do. It wasn't going to be a fix-up

**'In Galveston, you can ask five people about something and you get seven opinions. This golf course is the first thing I've been involved with that everybody in Galveston loves. We've had nothing but positive feedback.'**

**—Buddy Herz**

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**Jacobsen/Hardy Design raised the ground at Moody Gardens Golf Course as much as five feet in some places to help improve drainage and add links-style, undulating movement to the fairways.**



## COVER STORY

## Garden of Eden

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job. Also, the Moody Foundation people have a great reputation for doing things the right way. They were very committed to bringing the best golf they could on that property. That's a great commitment on their part and it was an attractive combination."

Moody Gardens, with grants to help the city of Galveston from the Moody Foundation, allocated about \$16.5 million to the project.

It included total reconstruction of the golf course, including the complete re-routing of the first five holes. It cost \$2 million to renovate the clubhouse, which was completely redesigned by Morris Architects. And \$2 million was spent to expand an existing desalination plant, which helps cleanse the city's effluent

water that is piped in from about two miles away. The final \$1.5 million was invested in a steel maintenance building that can withstand winds of up to 140 mph.

"We think that a premier, first-class golf course serves two roles," Herz said. "One, it's good for island residents. It's our gift to the Galveston citizens, a first-rate golf course with reasonable greens fees. Two, it will attract tourists to Galveston who want to play a top-notch golf course."

Green fees for residents are \$25 Monday-Thursday and \$30 Friday-Sunday and holidays. Non-residents and tourists will pay \$44 during the week and \$64 on weekends and there's an \$11 cart fee. The course also offers twilight, senior and junior rates.

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## MOODY GARDENS GOLF COURSE

(formerly known as Galveston Island Municipal Golf Course)

**Moody Gardens has spent \$16.5 million renovating the golf course and clubhouse at the old Galveston Island Municipal Golf Course in hopes of turning it into one of the state's top public courses.**

**'We think that a premier, first-class golf course serves two roles. One, it's good for island residents. It's our gift to the Galveston citizens, a first-rate golf course with reasonable greens fees. Two, it will attract tourists to Galveston who want to play a top-notch golf course.'**

**—Buddy Herz**



## Garden of Eden

## COVER STORY

# Environmentalist happy with Moody renovation

**J**ackie Cole wouldn't budge.

The former member of

Galveston's city council put herself in harm's way to stop the uprooting of a grove of oak trees on Moody Gardens Golf Course during the construction process.

Cole was part of a citywide group that celebrated the millennium in 2000 by planting 2,000 trees on Galveston Island, including a grove of live oaks that helped frame one of the fairways at the public golf course.

Although she left city council about the time Moody Gardens won the management contract bid to renovate and operate the new public track, Cole said she saw the construction plans, which showed the oak trees were not going to be disturbed.

"I happened to be at home on a day when they were doing bulldozing work," said Cole, a veterinarian. "They were clearing a section near the grove of oak trees. I asked them what was going to happen with those trees. They said they were going to be bulldozed."

Cole took action. A self-proclaimed "environmental warrior," she was part of an Austin group in 1970s that climbed trees and remained there for hours to protest the University of Texas' plans to eradicate the trees in favor of what she called "progress."

With two bulldozers approaching the 16 oaks she helped plant, Cole found herself in a similar situation with Moody Gardens Golf Course.

"So I just stood in front of the trees until they could get an answer to me about what they were going to do with the trees," she said. "I wasn't going to move."

She stood her ground for almost an hour but said the atmosphere was civil. She never felt that her safety was in danger, she said.

Buddy Herz, general counsel for the Moody Foundation and an acquaintance of Cole's, was on the property giving a tour at the time.



Galveston environmentalist Jackie Cole stopped bulldozers from uprooting a grove of oak trees during the golf course renovation project.

Cole buzzed Herz on his cell and told him about the situation.

"I pulled her aside and asked her what she was doing," Herz said. "I said, 'Those bulldozers could have killed you. You're lucky the second one saw you.' She said, 'I was making my point. They can't cut down those trees.'"

The trees, which ranged in height from 8-12 feet, went untouched that day, but everyone involved knew Cole was serious. A compromise was necessary. The Jacobsen/Hardy Golf Course Design team was creating a links-style look to the course, and the oak trees didn't fit into the design plans. Instead, about 700 palm trees were moved or added to the property. Cole understood that—she's an occasional golfer—but she wasn't giving in.

Eventually, the oaks were saved and moved to a clearing behind the 14th green, where they'll grow to 40-60 feet tall.

Herz, who said Cole was a fine member of city council and considered her a friend, was pleased that the problem was solved and construction could continue. Cole was

even more enthusiastic with the outcome.

"(The new location) is a very nice place for the trees," she said. "As the trees grow larger, they're going to provide a beautiful backdrop screen for that area."

Cole, who has lived on the island for 22 years, said she wasn't opposed to the renovation project. She did think aspects of it could have been handled better, but she's optimistic about how the new course will help the city's economy and image.

"I'm excited about it," she said. "I think it'll be a really positive thing for the island and the golfers. They've made it a first-class course while working to make it affordable to the residents."

—Mark Button



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## COVER STORY

## Garden of Eden



Proponents of the renovation of Galveston's public golf course believe it was essential to attracting more tourists and conventions to the island as well as providing a needed amenity for residents.

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"We want to keep Moody Gardens Golf Course at the level of the three best city-owned golf courses in Texas," Herz said.

"Those are Memorial Park, Tennyson Park in Dallas and Cottonwood Creek in Waco."

In order to transform the property into that stratosphere, there was much work to do.

Jacobsen/Hardy started designing the new course in August 2006. They broke ground in March 2007 and construction was completed late last year. The course has been growing in since then and crews were still renovating the clubhouse in advance of its reopening.

It has come a long way in a short time.

The problems with the old public facility were as numerous as they were daunting. Topping the list was a deteriorating clubhouse and the lack of a proper maintenance budget. Until the course closed for renovations, it hadn't benefited from any capital improvements since 1989 because the city couldn't afford it. The upkeep was compounded by a faulty irrigation system and a

poor variety of grass for the salty, seaside environment.

The course itself sat just a foot above sea level, and the Bermudagrass couldn't recover from the routine flooding from storms. Further, the intrusion of damaging saltwater into the soil made it next to impossible for management to maintain a quality, consistent playing surface. Jacobsen/Hardy teamed up with contractors Gilbane Development, the 135-year-old company that built the Vietnam War and World War II Memorials in Washington, D.C., the George R. Brown Convention Center, Reliant Park Convention Center and all of Moody Gardens, to address these issues.

To start, the crews unearthed about 200,000 cubic yards of dirt by digging deeper into existing lakes. They used the dirt in a balanced cut-and-fill plan to raise the course and help with drainage and flooding. In some spots, the fairways were raised anywhere from 2 to 5 feet. All told, crews moved around 500,000 yards of dirt.

Next, the Moody Foundation brought in Dr. Ronnie Duncan, an expert on Paspalum, a highly saltwater-tolerable grass that

**'We've had a very, very active spring. We currently have 14 townhomes under construction. In the past three weeks, we also have had seven of our large homes go under contract. People recognize the investment potential a home on a golf course offers.'**

**—Kelley Sullivan,  
Evia Real Estate**

## Garden of Eden

## COVER STORY



Houston teaching pro and course designer Jim Hardy oversaw the renovation of the old Galveston municipal golf course.

## LOST AT SEA

*Galveston was home to Texas' first course, but it washed away in the 1900 hurricane*

**I**n 1900, Galveston was a city with unlimited potential. It was the state's leading port, a center of education, the first Texas city with electric lights and home of the state's first legitimate golf course.

By 1896 there were attempts at golf courses in Texas, most notably a group of Dallas golfers who came up with a crude layout that can only be described as holes in the ground.

It wasn't until the 1898 founding of the Galveston Country Club that golf officially arrived in Texas. The 30 charter members represented the cream of Galveston high society and were presided over by prominent steamship agent Charles Fowler. The club received its charter in the spring of that year, making it the first official golf club in the state.

The new club found a perfect site for a links west of the city in a subdivision known as the Denver Resurvey, a real estate venture by some prominent Coloradoans.

"In horse and buggy days (the Denver Resurvey) was a good hour's drive from town and so it seemed very rural," remembered Katherine Veder Paules in an oral history on file at Galveston's Rosenberg Library. The Resurvey was located at the present-day location of 53rd street...about a five minute drive from downtown Galveston.

The golfers built their course right next to the ocean, right beside the Fort Crockett army outpost on a site where the San Luis Hotel now stands. They hired traveling Scotsman Mungo Park Jr., nephew of the 1974 British Open champion of the same name, as the first golf course architect and winter professional in Texas golf history. A clubhouse was built and the new course officially opened on Nov. 30, 1899, with most of Galveston society in attendance.

With a professional hand to guide its construction, a clubhouse and a charter, Galveston Country Club was at the forefront of golf in Texas. But it wouldn't last. A 1892 ad for lots in the Denver Resurvey cryptically bragged on its safety, boasting "the highest elevation in the city."

On Sept. 7, 1900, a hurricane of epic proportions almost completely destroyed an unaware Galveston. More than 6,000 people were killed, the worst natural disaster in United States history. Of the 30 homes that stood in the Resurvey, only three were left standing. Bodies were everywhere. Veder Paules' family was one of the few survivors. She described the devastation that only days before had been Texas' first golf course community:

"No streets or roads were visible," Veder Paules said. "The wreckage piled high obscured every familiar landmark. We picked our way where we could. Sometimes in ankle deep water and mud, sometimes in water waist deep where great holes had been created by the current."

In the scope of such devastation, few likely gave thought to Texas' first true golf course, buried at sea.

—Alex Blair

also conserves up to 25 percent more water than Bermuda, which will help cut operating costs.

"You'll no longer have that tremendous decline of Bermudagrass until you get a heavy rain that washes the salts out and makes the Bermuda look good again for awhile before it goes back into decline because of the salt conditions," Hardy said. "You won't have that. The Paspalum will stay a very good-looking turf all the time."

Hardy said everyone involved wanted a sweeping, links-style course, and more than 700 palm trees were either brought in or moved to help frame fairways and create optimal target lines. Gilbane and Jacobsen/Hardy worked closely with the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers to identify and steer clear of protected wetlands and native grasses.

During the redesign, sensitive areas were enhanced and highlighted by shaping the landscape around them. Hardy said he'd never worked on a project in which everyone was so cognizant of being environmentally responsible.

"As the summer comes, all the native areas will have coastal, wispy

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With the wind serving as the course's main defense, Moody Gardens will challenge the mettle of even the best golfers on blustery days.





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grasses, fescue and saltwater reeds," he said. "They're going to help 'pop out' the golf course in a three-dimensional way. It's going to be absolutely beautiful...it already is."

To further help with daily and weekly maintenance, Jacobsen/Hardy more than doubled the amount of in-ground sprinklers on the course—from about 500 to more than 1,100.

Another drastic improvement golfers will notice immediately is the expanded driving range.

"The old golf course had a small, irons-only range with a road on the right side of it that made it dangerous if anyone happened to slice the ball," Hardy said. "It was almost more of a warm-up range rather than a practice area."

Jacobsen/Hardy fixed that.

They had to re-route the first five holes to accommodate the change, but Moody Gardens now has a full-sized driving range.

"That's important for a course like this," Hardy said. "A lot of

resort guests love to go hit balls and enjoy the day that way."

The course stretches to 6,814 yards from the tips, but with five sets of tee boxes, all golfers should be able to find their comfort zone. Of course, most golfers want something a little different than the next when it comes to a course's playability. Many vacationers seek out resort courses with comfortably wide fairways and few forced carries. Travel is enough of a headache. Once they tee off, some just want to relax, enjoy the day and post a good score. Others want to be challenged and tested. They want to be rewarded for great swings and understand the harsh penalties for errant shots.

Thus, Jacobsen/Hardy walked the thin line between giving Moody Gardens

resort-like qualities and championship golf course elements.

Some of the resort-like features include a front-nine format of three par 3s, par 4s and par 5s. That gives long-hitters an extra par-5 on which to get greedy and the trio of par 3s serve as an equalizer for everyone.

"When you're on par 3s, everyone is hitting their irons from the same distance," he said. "Whether it's 186 yards, 133 or 213, you're all hitting from the same distance and that levels the playing field out a little."

Jacobsen/Hardy also realized the best defense for any island is the wind. When

the winds are 8-10 mph, locals consider it a calm day. Rarely does the island experience days with no wind, and when it's blowing 20 or more mph, it obviously will dramatically impact golfers.

With that in mind, Hardy said he, Jacobsen, Van Hoose and Johnson paid close attention to roll-out spots in fairways and near greens.

"Wherever we could, we tried to keep the course as 'bouncing-friendly'

as we could," Hardy said. "We tried to eliminate spots where it called for the golfer to throw the ball up into the air and bring it down like a feather."

Just like down the road at GICC, there's an intrinsic beauty to an island golf course. Windblown dunes, swaying palms, jagged-edged bunkers, colorful flowers and native grasses provide sensory stimulation at every turn. That kind of picturesque atmosphere adds to the resort-like nature of both courses and Hardy said Moody Gardens will only get more attractive.

"The Moody Gardens folks, over time, are going to bring the same kind of botanical beauty to the golf course that they're famous for down there," he said.

**'As the summer comes, all the native areas will have coastal, wispy grasses, fescue and saltwater reeds. They're going to help 'pop out' the golf course in a three-dimensional way. It's going to be absolutely beautiful... it already is.'**

**—Jim Hardy**

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## Garden of Eden

## COVER STORY



With a root system twice as strong as Bermudagrass, the Seaspray Paspalum grass at Moody Gardens is the most salt-tolerant in the world.

## Paspalum grass could revolutionize golf turf

One of the reasons the old Galveston Island Municipal Course struggled over the years was because of its grass. The Bermudagrass used on the facility—now renamed Moody Gardens Golf Course—was a bad fit from the start. Resting a mere 12 inches above sea level, it was next to impossible for the Bermuda to recover from routine storm flooding. Adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico and dissected by Sydnor Bayou, the destructive nature of the ever-present saltwater that continually intruded on the soil profile made it difficult to maintain a quality playing surface.

The result was patchy fairways barren of grass.

Even while playing “winter rules,” when golfers allow each other to roll the ball in the dormant fairways to find good lies, decent tufts of Bermuda often were nowhere to be found. The poor conditions prompted many local golfers to seek greener fairways, leaving Galveston’s public course to sit mostly idle and lose a reported \$200,000 a year. Golfers flocked to Timber Creek Golf Club in Friendswood, Magnolia Creek Golf Club in League City and other nearby, mainland courses with healthier conditions.

That exodus could end soon.

Island golfers and visiting tourists won’t have to travel far to find excellent playing conditions when Moody Gardens Golf Course reopens in June. The renowned Jacobsen/Hardy Design team raised the course as much as 2 to 5 feet in spots to help with drainage and was seeded with a highly saltwater-tolerant type of grass called Seashore Paspalum. The fairways, tee boxes and rough were seeded with Seaspray Paspalum, a cultivated variation of Seashore Paspalum. The greens were seeded with Supreme Paspalum, yet another variation.

The grasses were developed by Dr. Ron Duncan, the nation’s foremost expert on Paspalum and the man in charge of the grassing portions of the renovation projects at both Moody Gardens and Galveston Island Country Club.

Moody Gardens was the first golf course in the continental United States to have been seeded with Seaspray Paspalum, according to Duncan, vice president of Boerne-based Turf Ecosystems.

“Paspalum is the most salt-tolerable grass in the world,” Duncan said. “It’s much more forgiving in terms of managing the grass. You

don’t have to throw the kitchen sink at it to get it to fit its environment because of its extensive root system. What you have is a Kentucky Bluegrass look in a warm-weather grass. Golfers love it.”

Paspalum, which has been around for more than 30 years and has several variations, has been the answer for numerous seaside courses with conditioning and maintenance challenges caused by saltwater. SeaIsle 2000 Paspalum, also developed by Duncan and his associates in Oregon, was used at Hawaii’s picturesque Turtle Bay Resort, home to Champions Tour and LPGA Tour events. Closer to home, Duncan used SeaIsle 1 to seed the greens at Galveston Island Country Club, which continues to transition its fairways from Bermuda to Sea Dwarf Paspalum.

“(The Paspalum) is coming along wonderfully, the members love it,” said Donnie St. Germain, GICC’s head pro. “It’s very difficult to chip out of. You have to land your ball on the green. If you don’t, the ball checks up like Velcro.”

Agronomist Bud White, the director for the USGA’s Mid-Continent Region Green Section, said he was excited about the potential of the new playing surface at Moody Gardens.

“It’s a great playing surface,” White said. “They’re not giving up any quality from a playability standpoint...I doubt they could turn around (Moody Gardens) without Paspalum. It’s been a godsend as to what can be done in coastal areas.”

With stiff blades that look and feel like Zoysia, Paspalum is able to tolerate the damaging effects of salt because of its extensive root system. Paspalum’s roots are twice as deep and strong as Bermuda, Duncan said. Water conservation is a second benefit of Paspalum. The grass conserves up to 25 percent of the water needed to maintain a typical golf course and water is one of the most expensive costs associated with recreational turf grass, Duncan said.

“The thrust of the Paspalum movement is twofold,” Duncan said. “It’s about the cosmetic appeal—it’s simply beautiful—and it’s about the environmental aspects, the water conservation. More Houston courses should start to look at Paspalum because of its look and environmental benefits.”

— Mark Button



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June 22	Woodlands CC (Oaks)
June 29	GC @ Cinco Ranch
July 12	Cypresswood GC (Cypress)

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All that stated, however, golfers teeing it up at Moody Gardens for the first time shouldn't expect a simple day of fairways, greens and two-putts. If the wind whips, it's not a traditional resort course that allows you to hit bad shots and recover easily. The fairways are surprisingly undulating, which can lead to uneven lies. There's water in play on all but four holes, including the stretch of Nos. 10-12, where Sydnor Bayou skirts the right edge of all three fairways.

In addition to all the golfers eagerly waiting the grand opening of the new facility, many island real estate companies are excited about the changes.

LeBlanc, the city manager, said property values will rise in the area, especially the closer you get to the public course.

Evia Real Estate should benefit the most, as the company owns 93 acres of land, including 15 acres of freshwater lakes, directly adjacent to the new course. Evia currently has 130 townhomes and 230 single-family homes planned for construction. Zoned as a Traditional Neighbor District, the Evia Galveston subdivision features classic architecture designs reminiscent of homes commonly seen in Charleston, S.C., New Orleans and Galveston.

Plantation-style, Victorian and Craftsman homes are being built up and down the streets next to Moody Gardens Golf Course. They range in size from 18,000-45,000 square feet and all are required to have spacious porch areas, adding to the relaxed island vibe.

"We've had a very, very active spring," said Kelley Sullivan, who oversees marketing and sales for Evia. "We currently have 14 townhomes under construction. Seven are already under contract and they're not completed yet. In the past three weeks, we also have had seven of our large homes go under contract. People recognize the investment potential a home on a golf course offers."

To wit, Sullivan said the data Evia

collected from the National Association of Realtors and Urban Land Institute showed that properties on or near a golf course have the potential to appreciate 15-20 percent in the first year alone.

It appears the entire island will benefit from the massive upgrades to its pair of golf courses. While the country club still has work to do to get its facility in the shape to which it aspires—once all the fairways are transitioned to Paspalum, the course should be in the best condition the members have ever seen—the opening of Moody Gardens Golf Course should bring business to GICC, too. Although GICC is a private club, the city's four major hotels are corporate members, meaning their guests have access to the

**'The Moody Foundation people have a great reputation for doing things the right way.**

**They were very committed to bringing the best golf they could on that property.'**

**—Jim Hardy**

course remains, however. Will it be able to make a profit?

"Our projection is that the loss from operations may be as high as \$500,000 for the first full year of operation," Herz said. "I think it may lose money for as many as three years until word gets out about what a great course it is. The secret to success is to increase the number of rounds played from approximately 22,000 in 2006, the last year the old course was open."

Backed by the deep-pocketed Moody Foundation and given the wild success of Jacobsen/Hardy public facilities such as BlackHorse, chances are strong that the course will be successful. Everyone directly or indirectly involved in the project—from Hardy to Herz, Sullivan to Pushak and LeBlanc—has gushed about their sincere appreciation to the Moody Foundation for its continued generosity.

Along with the ever-improving GICC, the Moody Gardens Golf Course seems destined to achieve its mission of finally bringing great golf to Galveston. **HL**