

TPC Sawgrass Ponte Verde, Florida

Architect: Pete Dye (1980)

Tees	Par	Yardage	Rating	Slope
Blue	72	6661	73.9	146
White	72	6103	70.9	137

Overview:

As the first iteration of Dean Beman's stadium course concept and the permanent home of The Players Championship, Pete Dye put together a course that would challenge the best players in the world and create iconic images in the minds of golf fans. The original design was impossibly difficult and somewhat controversial, but a bottomless well of tour money has allowed them to continuously tinker and improve the layout and get much more unanimous professional approval as a result. The reconstruction of the fairways and greens in the last decade plus the introduction of Sub-Air technology under the putting surfaces allow the tour to prepare this course as hard and fast as they desire.

Make no mistake about it, there is nothing timid about this course. Pete has a garage full of intimidation factors in his design repertoire and he dipped into that reserve generously in putting this together. Massive waste bunkers, huge mounding to mask landing areas, plumes of sage grass, and water galore amassed together make for a house of horrors to the average player. Truth is the intimidation is more psychological than real so the trick is to look beyond the surface veneer and focus on a playable line to each hole which he graciously provides. The combination of intelligent decision making and unwavering focus on a playable line can make for an enjoyable day.

Looking at the winners of The Players over 30 years you will see the unexpected names like Calvin Peete, Mark McCumber, Tom Kite, Lee Janzen, Justin Leonard, Fred Funk, and K. J. Choi. Look at runners up and you have Larry Mize, Mike Reid, Jeff Sluman, Glen Day, Jay Haas, and Scott Verplank. The common denominator is straight driving and competent putting on fast greens. Anything out of the fairway off the tee increases the challenge of hitting greens by a factor of 1.5 and the score goes up accordingly. This is target golf with serious penalty for missing your intended shot lines. The fast greens are very segmented and steeply sloped so regularly putting from outside the section that has the flag will have similar deleterious impact on your scoring.

As is recommended by the yardage book, pick a tee marker that is appropriate for your skill level. If your average drive is 235 or less play white, 235 to 250 play blended blue/white, over 250 play blue. Don't consider the back tee unless you have your name embroidered on your golf bag. The key is to have the driving areas reasonably within your range so you can actually enjoy the challenging approaches into the greens.

The sequence of the challenge is carefully architected. Both sides start a bit easier with scoring opportunities early, but ratchet up considerably around the fourth hole. The last three holes on both the front and the back make keeping a score in tact a whole lot of work. The eighth hole is a brutal par 3 7/8ths and the ninth will eat your lunch six ways to Sunday. Better than the finish at any of regular tour stops, sixteen,

seventeen, and eighteen collectively present opportunity for glory or disaster in equal measure. This is target golf at it's most extreme.

Personally I think the par 5 sixteenth is one of the coolest holes out there. For the long hitting pros going for the green in two is a must but there is a huge penalty for bailing out left to avoid the harrowing water that encroaches on the right. Any wind at all makes this huge green very elusive. Nothing more need be said about the iconic island green at 17, you have witnessed a boatload of heartache and misery in HD watching the broadcasts over the years. The eighteenth is as hard a par to make as you could ever imagine. Missing your approach into the grassy moguls right of the green can lead to a downright embarrassing sequence of recovery attempts.

In the last renovation they built a clubhouse that is worthy of being the home of the PGA Tour. You will find an endless offering of tour memorabilia to add to your study. The locker rooms, eating facilities, and practice areas are something to experience as well.

Playing the course that so adequately bevils the top 50 in the world each year is definitely a thrill. Just play it at a reasonable yardage and don't beat yourself up if Pete and Alice have their way with your scorecard.

Hole By Hole Analysis:

#1 Par 4 394/360yards

By Pete's standards this is a pretty benign opening hole, but it has the design features you will see throughout the day. The hole wiggles right off the tee and back to straight on the second but there is no percentage in taking on the forced carry on the right so hit a drive up the left adjacent to the waste area on the right that is separating you from the water. If you carry the corner you have grassy folds and that will envelope your ball which is no bargain. From the center of the fairway you should have a shortish iron to a narrow green slightly crowned and protected on the left by continuous sand. There is a pitching retention area long and left. This green is the flattest one you will see all day so don't get overconfident from this putting experience.

#2 Par 5 507/469

Here you will get a full dose of the visual hopscotch that Pete will give you throughout this round. This is a reachable serpentine par five that will give you one of your best scoring opportunities of the day. Drive straight away at the hazard in front of you-anything on short grass is fine. The back of the hazard is about 190 to center of the green. Choose to take a wing at the green (not advised) or pick lay up position carefully to get a number from which you can be aggressive-sprawling green requires a precise approach. The green is slightly elevated from the fairway so you have to land it on and feed it to the pin du jour.

#3 Par 3 160/134

This is a relatively simple challenge unless the wind is blowing out of the right. The balloon shaped green has a distinct tier across the center so your short iron needs to carry to the pin location. Sand in front and on the left should keep all but the most wayward left curves out of the hazard. So far you have played three relatively easy holes and you may be wondering at this point what is the big deal here. You are about to find out in a moment.

#4 Par 4 359/324

One of my favorite holes on this Pete creation, it is a finesse hole that demands patience and execution to avoid the evil decree. In a hole this short it is hard to figure how he got in a zig and a zag but he did. The proportion of the driving part to the approach part of this hole is pure genius. You hit a 220ish shot at the mounding in front of you on the left side of the fairway to leave yourself the shortest iron you can have in your hand for the second. From a fairway lie you will now elevate one to a tiered Forever Stamp set diagonal to a canal that fronts the green. The more you play to the left the more carry required. This green is steep from back to front so you can aim at the back right corner and let the ground bring your ball back toward the center and left of the green. Missing this green anywhere leaves a diabolical recovery pitch.

#5 Par 4 446/422

From here out the short finesse stuff is over-the gear shifts distinctly to demand greater length and more assertive shot making. This is a brutishly long par four-the #3 handicap hole on the course-a real par 4.65 if you ask me. Forget cutting any corners off this tee-the waste area and hazard on the right have a suction feature to it, so aim up the left center and let your arms extend. From there you have a long shot to carry across a narrow ribbon of fairway protected on the right by a series of bad sand experiences to a long and narrow green set on a right diagonal. This green is crowned and unassertive balls will fall off in all directions. Bogey here is a good score.

#6 Par 4 360/333

This is a very interesting shortish par four but it is no pushover I can assure you. Drive it to center across the waste area on the left leaving a short iron into a green penned in by eyelash bunkers on both sides, tall trees, pot bunkers, and some other undesirable grass depressions. One of the features of this course that amazes me is how skinny tall trees can be so much in your line of play-this is just good design. The green has distinct undulations so pay attention to the yardage book vis-à-vis today's pin location. Not an intimidating hole visually but you have to be articulate in your shot execution to make a good score here.

#7 Par 4 407/382

Next you have a bit of a replay of the fifth hole just a tad shorter but actually more difficult. As the number one handicap hole you are going to have your work cut out for you. Drive to center of a driving area flanked on the left by a waste area collaring the water. Your second has to take on the hazards/bunkering up the right to a green set on a 7 to 1 diagonal to your approach line. Best shape coming in is from the left trying to work up the line of the green. If you get it on this green the putting is very reasonable-miss it and all bets are off for a par save.

#8 Par 3 195/168

In spite of the length I think this is maybe the hardest par 3 to par all day. The pros play it from 240 so they really struggle with hitting this green but for the common man it is plenty hard to keep it on the putting surface and get away unscathed. The green is surrounded by sand and has a bit of a false front in the center opening to the green-so it is all carry for me. A center of the green shot putting out to the day's cup position is the safest way to play the hole. Pin seeking here will give you some bad ass short side recovery shots to play.

#9 Par 5 546/522

A fishmalt hopscotch affair if I have ever seen one. I think Pete and Alice must have had some disagreement on routing and obstructions here so they agreed to put in everything both wanted. As I said in the overview you have to avoid getting wrapped up in the intimidating feel of what you are looking at and pick the proper playing line for the hole with conviction. It is actually a fascinating par five-maybe the most visually interesting of the day. You could take a snapshot of this hole and carry it in your wallet next to the kids' pictures. Drive to center at the bridge you can see that crosses the hazard traversing the landing area. The shortest line and best angle at the green is up the left along the edge of the waste area but I expect you will give this more room to the right and take a slightly longer approach. Try to get it to wedge range right center to clear the trees on the left corner of the final bend. This is a very narrow deep green surrounded by nastiness and has distinct undulations that will feed approach shots to specific areas. Look carefully at the yardage book to pick an appropriate landing location.

#10 Par 4 388/351

The back side starts with a simple, partitioned medium size dog ear left par four. You drive it to right center of the driving area flanked by a long waist bunker on the left. Drive it far enough to clear the corner of the dogleg since there are some trees on the left that can block your line to the green that is tucked to the left. As you will see throughout the back nine, there is visual horror created up the right by a huge waste bunker you must carry to reach the green. The green is a kidney that wraps around the front right bunker. Once again the undulations in the green create three distinct areas where they put the flags-getting your ball to rest in the right one after your approach is key.

#11 Par 5 519/469

This was the one hole where Pete was clearly not taking his medication when he conceived it. It is a bizarre sequence of landing areas strung together like a charm bracelet which together lack any charm. The first leg is a drive across a waste bunker into a fairway landing area defined by a huge bunker constellation on the left. The next choices all seem silly. You can bump something up the right to the end of the fairway and leave yourself no angle at a perched green complex across the water collared by another long waste area. Or you can foolishly aim at the green which has an opening in front the size of a peep hole. Or you can traverse the huge bunker constellation in front of you to lay up to the fairway on the other side of all the feckmeil about 100 yards from the green. The last choice is the best choice if you have a clear path from where you drive ended up. You get an angle for you third shot that does not have to go over any more nasty except for a couple of arbitrary deep pot bunkers Pete through in for jeeps. Did I mention that this green is crowned with steep falloffs so it is like trying to get your ball to stay on top of an igloo.

#12 Par 4 332/313

A truncated short one where he is probably goading you to take a shot at the green but there is no percentage in that. Best drive is about 220 off the tee to the right center of the fairway to get a wide angle view back to the green set on the left. The green has bit of a falloff front left and back right but compared to what you have seen all day this is a piece of cake. You should take aim at the flag and make a good score here.

#13 Par 3 156/141

A very difficult par three considering the lack of length. The canal flanks diagonally on the left of a long green that sits pinched by pot bunkers in front. Waste bunker in front is just visual distraction. There are three distinct segments to this green so you are going to have to manipulate this shot on the ground to get it to end up where you want. The lowest section is back left and there is a high shelf on the right. Best shot is a draw that follows the ground contour to where the pin is located. Back right is nearly impossible to get close and keep it on the putting surface.

#14 Par 4 436/377

From here to the house everything is a primo challenge so pull up your britches and get ready to play. This may be the hardest par to make all day other than number 18. Long and technical dogear left that works around the canal and waste area on the left. Driving into that sand is a sure prescription for bogey or worse. The hole has a very serpentine appearance and plays accordingly. Drive to center of the landing area and you will have a longish club into a long green set behind a collaring bunker and some trees that obscure a left approach. Hit a draw to work around the trees and up the line of the green-anything that ends up on the putting surface is a huge plus.

#15 Par 4 416/366

This one plays somewhat similar to number 12. but is longer and turns the other way. Best drive is a fade to left center to get a look at the green on the right. Any miss to the left is better than the right-scores will go up incrementally from the right side. Second is a draw with a middle sized club into a kidney shaped green that wraps around a large bunker on the left. This is an important par to make since the last three will push you to the limit.

#16 Par 5 486/470

To me this is the coolest hole you play all day-it is nothing like it appears on TV. In spite of what you see on the scorecard this is a three-shot hole for mortals. The drive is straight forward-hit it long to right center to get a look around the corner at the lay-up area. Missing the fairway on any shot will take par out of the picture. Do not try to cut this corner on the left-the pine trees have tentacles that will grab your ball and leave you in pine straw with no angle. Now play the croquet shot to the center of the layup area at about 100 yards-the water on the right is definitely in play so do not get careless. You do not want to end up closer on the left because the trees growing out of the bunker about 75 from the green will block you out entirely. Going for this in two and missing left leaves you an halacious pitch from serious grass moguls. The green is an adventure all it's own-sticking out into the hazard just beyond a pot bunker-the slope of the green front right leans toward the water. Best approach is a tight draw that starts over the pot bunker and turns into the middle of the green. The putt down the hill to a right pin will be Starship Enterprise warp speed. You par this hole and it is a golf memory.

#17 Par 3 128/115

Now for the iconic Island Green At TPC Sawgrass. Your biggest problem here is the horrid images you have cataloged watching this hole bedevil the pros over the last 30 years. Truth is that if the wind is not blowing this is a simple 120 yard pitch into a receptive green on level to the tee. The green has a large jai alai wall in the middle which is where you should aim your pitch no matter the pin. Slam it into that wall and you stay on the green. This is not a time to be heroic and go flag hunting. Putting will be an adventure from there. If the wind is blowing all bets are off.

#18 Par 4 426/387

Absolutely as hard a finishing hole you will ever play and that is without the wind blowing. This is a firm dogleg left around the water from tee to green. Your eye says bail out right off the tee but the encroaching rough and trees on that side mitigate that strategy. You simply have to hit a solid draw that starts off the right edge of the fairway and follows the contour of the hole. Best shot ends up close to the hazard on the left to give you an aggressive shot line into the green. Any drive that ends up in the right rough requires a lay up-no matter how inviting you think the play is to the green in the distance. The green is set to the right with the water guarding the left and a field of grassy moguls on the right. There is no shot to be played from short right so you have to once again hit a nice draw that starts on the right edge of the green and turns to the center. If you end

up on the green, much like the last two holes, the two-putt is by no means certain. A par here is a double golf memory.