

Grande bargain

ALONG THE SOUTHERN BORDER OF TEXAS,
MANDEL MUNI STYLISHLY FILLS A VOID



COURTESY OF MAX A. MANDEL MUNICIPAL GOLF COURSE

By **Bradley S. Klein**

Laredo, Texas

Only under exceptional conditions today does a new municipal course make sense. With city budgets stretched and the private golf sector generally overbuilt, rarely can a sensible case be made for towns to get into the golf business. The good news from south Texas, in the border city of Laredo, is that the country's newest municipally built layout appears to meet those conditions.

Max A. Mandel Municipal Golf Course ("The Max" on shirts, hats and in local parlance) is a Robert Trent Jones Jr.-designed layout that sits astride the Rio Grande and is a tribute to local potential and international solidarity. It's also a wonderful course that makes ideal use of the site, with



Each month, *Golfweek* profiles a course that is on a Golfweek's Best list or might be a candidate for inclusion.

holes interwoven alongside arroyos, piles of abandoned mine tailings and that famous river dividing Mexico and the U.S. In a city whose main source of revenue comes from truck and tourist transit across four major bridges, The Max, which opened in 2012, could well

become a fifth span.

These days, border towns often struggle to overcome the stigma of being rundown centers of disrepute. Given that and other factors, city leaders here had good reasons to undertake a municipal golf course. They were looking to boost tourism, provide public recreation, encourage healthy activity among students at the city's eight high schools and enhance Laredo's image.

With only one private club and one other municipal tract in a city of 250,000, there was plenty of room for more golf – especially because the sister city of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, has only one course for its 375,000 residents. A crucial element in the golf development was a generous gift from the family of Mandel, a longtime Laredo resident, businessman and



Mandel Municipal's par-3 ninth hole, with the Rio Grande to the right

benefactor – 270 acres of what used to be farmland and a gravel quarry.

The location, 20 miles northwest of historic downtown, is a bit of a drawback, with travel to and fro requiring an encounter with some of the region's notorious truck traffic. But once there, the setting makes for idyllic golf.

Jones and his design associate, Mark Voss, worked closely with the golf construction firm of Landscapes Unlimited to bring the project in on budget – \$8.6 million for everything, including a 10,000-square-foot clubhouse and banquet hall. Day-to-day operations have been leased to Foresight Golf, a management firm that hopes to use The Max as a national showcase of its operating skill.

Correction: Make that an international showcase.

Rater's notebook:

Max A. Mandel Municipal Golf Course

1. Routing: 8

Contiguous, returning nine-hole loops bring the Rio Grande into play on five holes. There are two modest crossings; from the ninth green to the 10th tee across the clubhouse area and from the 12th green, behind the range to the 13th tee.

2. Quality of shaping: 7

The scratchy, naturalistic mounding of the remnant tailings is an ideal counterpart to the mostly rolling features that were built in here. Much of the creativity was focused on the bunker shapes, with the greens located on modest natural settings or built up ever so gently.

3. Overall land plan: 7

The Rio Grande is there at the clubhouse, then comes into play variously on both nines, whether on the right, left or just behind a green. Arroyos are worked in as strategic elements occasionally, with one forced crossing (at the par-4 13th) and one optional traverse (at the par-4 18th).

4. Greens and surrounds: 5

Strategy of the approach line usually is set by placement of a bunker diagonally into one lowered side of a green, with at least half of each putting surface accessible through runoff.

5. Variety and memorability of par 3s: 8

Good range, with clubs stretching from 9-iron to 3-hybrid from the 6,643-yard tees. Long ninth hole has a perched green set right by the river. The scenic drop-shot 15th, only 138 yards from the back, offers the Rio Grande as a dramatic backdrop (and would benefit from tree clearing to create an infinity edge).

6. Variety and memorability of par 4s: 7

The strengths are the contrast between the long and short par 4s. The intimate fourth hole, 315 yards from the back, is tempting

to have a go at it when the prevailing southerly wind is up, whereas the 322-yard 14th offers risk without reward to a driver. The long seventh hole, 451 yards from the back, is semi-blind over a hill and down to a hollow of a fairway, then off across broken ground to a green set low and to the right.

7. Variety and memorability of par 5s: 4

The short third, 521 yards, brings the river's floodplain into play as a strategic element on the inside of the driving zone. At the layout's one pinch point, the long double-dogleg seventh provides no reason not to play the adjoining third. The big, sweeping, dogleg-right 17th is the only hole that looks too open and out of sorts.

8. Tree and landscape management: 6

Mesquite trees abound, a functional if unattractive species in such density. Trees have been cleared from arroyos but a bit more removal from the river's edge would help. The occasional palo verde is a welcome, colorful relief. Secondary roughs of gramma, bluestem and foxtail provide ideal textural relief that's also playable.

9. Conditioning: 7

Good, solid establishment of turf types for greens (Tifdwarf Bermudagrass) and tees, fairways and roughs (Princess 77 Bermudagrass) in a very warm climate with less-than-ideal soils.

10. "Walk in the park" test: 7

Easily walkable, visually attractive and a fascinating engagement with the region's topography and culture.

Overall: 5.9 (not cumulative)

We're back to earth with a facility devoted to real, fee-paying players and everyday golf. In Laredo, the border is the cutting edge. Six months after opening, it already has reached No. 40 on Golfweek's Best Municipal Courses list.

>> 27700 FM 1472, Laredo, TX 78045 >> 956-726-2000; themaxlaredo.com

>> Par 72; 7,069 yards (74.5 rating/132 slope)

>> Green fees: \$33.50-\$46 plus tax (resident); \$46-\$56 plus tax (nonresident); \$26 plus tax (seniors, weekday); \$13.50-\$19 plus tax (juniors/college students); includes optional cart; walking always allowed.