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PEDAL PUSHERS

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## COMFORTABLY IN THE HUNT

**THE HALLWAY IS LINED** with family photos, proud mothers and fathers flanked by their smiling progeny and a grinning retriever or two. Only these particular moms and dads have faces you just might recognize. There's the Golden Bear, Jack Nicklaus, and his wife, Barbara. There's Italian shotgun-maker Tullio Fabbri, whose engraved masterpieces start around \$100,000 with a five-year wait list. And there's former New York Giants running back Tucker Frederickson and World Golf Hall of Famer Nick Price.

The fellow you might not know is Stephen E. Myers, the reason all these other smiling families are assembled.

The lodge at Pine Creek Sporting Club in Okeechobee looks like something Ralph Lauren's tougher, more whiskery brother might have dreamed up. (In actuality, the credit goes to Marc-Michaels Interior Design in Winter Park.) It is elegant and masculine, with an old Florida ranch aesthetic evocative of Patrick Smith's *A Land Remembered*. Instead of cattle herders and Seminole Indians, though, ranch denizens are captains of industry, sports heroes and other affluent Floridians who yearn to get back to the land.

There are no manicured golf courses here. Pine Creek's 22 members-only ranches and 23 smaller cabins sit on nearly 2,500 acres of palmetto-fringed woodlands just north of Okeechobee. Pull down the long private road, and a covey of quail rises in a panic while improbably colored pheasants continue to pursue nibbles along the scruffy shoulder. Squint into the middle distance, and wild turkey brood hens convene for their own mysterious purposes.

A pioneer in the cable television industry, Myers already presided over a sporting paradise. He owns the Silver Hilton Steelhead Lodge in northern British Columbia, where steelhead stalkers land on the helipad all of September and October to match wits along the Babine River with these luminous, sea-

farang trout. For the avid outdoors enthusiast, that leaves a lot of other months of the year. A substantial landowner in Florida, Myers broke ground on Pine Creek in November 2008.

He enlisted the help of champion shooter Mick Howells to design a covered five stand and a sporting clay course with more than 40 throwers and English high tower shoots. Members can shoot trap and skeet or hone their skills on the rifle and pistol range. But the main attraction is the hundreds of acres of quail fields. We spent 24 hours tagging along on a quail hunt and enjoying this posh paean to Old Florida.

**1 P.M.:** Tim and Liz Williams of Boca Raton settle in at the dining room table in the lodge with Pine Creek sales director John Reynolds and Stephen Myers Jr., who takes an active role in the operations at the sporting club. Over lunch prepared by the club's executive chef, Christian Watson, Tim extolls the allures of Pine Creek. Within a quick flight of their primary residence (Williams pilots his own plane), it is more private than nearby Quail Creek but with an emphasis on community. They were early residents, buying one of the first 40-acre ranches in the club, hosting a party for 100 friends and family the day after their cypress-sided Cracker-idiom home was finished last year.

"We wanted something different," Tim says. "This is family oriented, and ultimately, Pine Creek is a social club."

Liz adds: "The concept of owning land is foreign to me — getting your hands in the dirt and shooting things. I'm a people person. I would have thought putting me on 40 acres would kill me. But with a clubhouse and the people here, it's the best of both worlds."

**4 P.M.:** Chef Watson, a graduate of Johnson & Wales culinary program, zips a golf cart over to the chicken coop. The Rhode Island reds are the best layers, their large, pale brown eggs the anchor for Pine Creek breakfasts. After that, he visits his hydroponic garden. Herbs, vegetables and a species that's a cross between romaine and bibb lettuce give him inspiration for the





Not far from the oak hammock tree house and horse stables, a fire pit is where members gather to discuss the day's quail shoot, at right.



More than 800 acres of quail fields are presided over by pointers at Pine Creek's first phase, which includes a members' lodge, at right, with four guest suites.



Billiards and a fully stocked toy barn entertain members at the lodge; a pool and fitness center, at right, are in the works.





evening's dinner.

**5 P.M.:** After a wild buggy ride along rough dirt roads across the length of the property, and a quick check of the 36-pen dog kennel, John Reynolds takes a brisk practice run through the claycourse.

**7 P.M.:** Members gather for dinner in the clubhouse, the first course a plate of cornmeal-crust quail, the fruits of that morning's hunt. Dinner is a desultory affair, with talk of the hunt to come and of Nancy Dale's books about Florida pioneer families. Dusk settles, and as the tree frogs start their nightly chorus, the thwack of billiard balls echoes from the clubhouse.

**7 A.M.:** Guide Bill Thacker loads the dogs onto the huge all-terrain vehicle. The assembled hunters don orange caps and stow their gear aboard. A companionable silence is broken only by the bay of one eager pointer.

Abbey, Thacker's favorite retriever, stays by his side, closely watching for visual cues from her master and from the pointer loping ahead, nose to ground, sniffing in neat squares as if lines were painted along the rich earth. The dog goes on point, and hunters move into position before Abbey flushes out a small covey. Molting, the quail are awkward fliers, the hunters swiftly

amassing a number of birds, which Thacker tucks neatly into his vest.

Mostly, the enjoyment comes from tramping around through stands of old oaks and loblollies, enjoying the crispness of the morning and the finely orchestrated dance between pointers and retrievers. As the sun rises high in the sky, the hunters think about heading for home, banging the dirt from their shoes as the dogs are kenneled once more.

**NOON:** Back at the clubhouse, a caravan of cars arrives. One of the members' daughters will hold her 14th birthday party at the ranch, the girls celebrating in Pine Creek's tree house. Built by local artist George Ivey using Seminole Indian techniques, it sits 30 feet up in a live oak hammock. Later in the evening, a couple of teenage "cowboys" hired from the town of Okeechobee will show up on horseback to entertain the birthday guests.

The plagues of mosquitoes and menacing bands of Confederate Army deserters in *A Land Remembered* may have been replaced by a private helicopter and 24-hour concierge service, but Pine Creek still manages to evoke some of that long-ago Florida pioneer spirit. It's still about family, fortitude and some trusty firearms. ○





Members include luminaries from Florida's business and sporting worlds; their guests use the lodge's four suites, at right.



A quick helicopter ride from either coast, Pine Creek is a back-to-basics paradise where kids can saddle up and ride along gentle bridle paths.



Steven E. Myers (in vest) is the founder of Pine Creek, its master plan maximizing indigenous landscape with minimal internal roads.

Photographs from Pine Creek Sporting Club