
FEATURE

JAMES WILLIAMS
JA JEBEL ALI GOLF RESORT



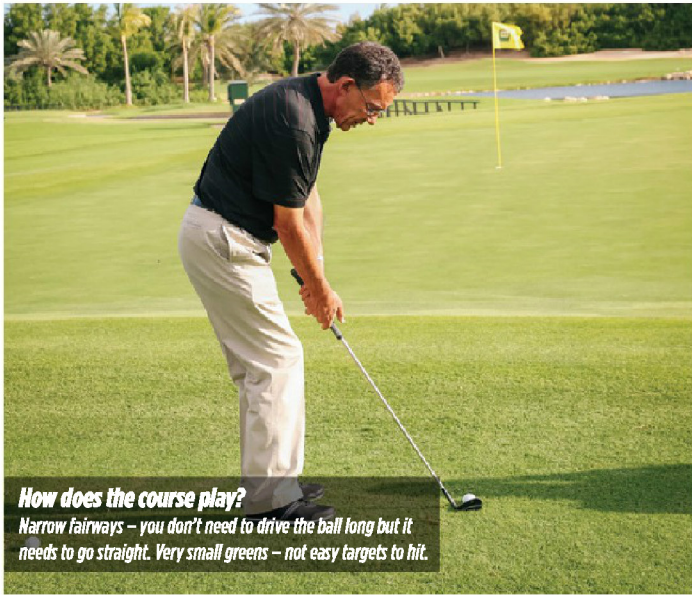
LIFE'S A BEACH AT JA GOLF RESORT

ONE THE UAE GOLF SCENE'S TRUE ELDER STATESMEN, JAMES WILLIAMS, DIRECTOR OF GOLF AT THE JA JEBEL ALI GOLF RESORT, DISCUSSES THE ENDURING SUCCESS OF DUBAI'S ONLY TRUE RESORT COURSE DURING HIS 18 YEARS AT THE HELM, THE RECENT RENOVATIONS THAT HAVE BEEN TAKING PLACE, AND HIS THOUGHTS ON BRAND AMBASSADOR RAFA CABRERA BELLO'S SUCCESS.



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How does the course play?
Narrow fairways – you don't need to drive the ball long but it needs to go straight. Very small greens – not easy targets to hit.



James Williams knows a thing or two about golf in Dubai. The Englishman came to the region in 1987 to take up his position as the first Head Professional of the Middle East's first grass course, Emirates Golf Club.

After ten great years at the Omega Dubai Desert Classic venue he moved to Jebel Ali to open the region's first true Resort course. He's witnessed first-hand the explosion in the UAE golf scene as a multitude of new world-class courses have sprung up over the last two decades and all the while, in his role as Director of Golf, he's ensured that the par-36 nine-hole Peter Harradine-designed beachside track at the JA Jebel Ali Golf Resort continues to set itself apart by offering something different to every other course out there.

The club received a huge feather in its cap earlier this year when former Desert Classic winner Rafa Cabrera Bello, a regular at the course who has just competed in the Rio Olympics and has qualified for Europe's Ryder Cup team for the first time, became a JA Resorts and Hotels Brand Ambassador.

The course has been closed for refurbishment over the summer and Worldwide Golf caught up with Williams to find out what players can expect when it reopens later this month and what he thinks of Rafa's latest achievements.

Worldwide Golf: When did Jebel Ali first open from a resort and from a golf perspective, and what was its main agenda? Was the idea to target the local market or an international market?

James Williams: The hotel opened well over 30 years ago, before golf really came to the Middle East. We added golf in 1998 because we saw the need for a golf course with a hotel, alongside a beach, which offered a more family-oriented experience. The golf course has nine holes and although we would love to have 18 holes, I think that having nine holes is good for the tourists. The wife has the option to use the spa facilities at the hotel whilst the husband plays a round for a couple of hours – or vice

versa! The golf side of things fits in so well with all the different facilities we have here in the hotel. There is a big local market as well, as golf has become huge here in the region with big European Tour events and lots of championship courses. Ours is a lovely little resort course that caters to both regular and occasional golfers who obviously also enjoy the championship courses – but ours is very pretty, not too long and at a more-affordable price if you're playing regularly and we always strive to offer true heartfelt hospitality.

WE HAVE A GREAT FORMULA BUT WE ARE ALWAYS TRYING TO IMPROVE IT. WE HAVE GOT THE BEACH, SWIMMING POOLS, LOTS OF SPORTING ACTIVITIES AND LOVELY RESTAURANTS. HOPEFULLY WE HAVE A VERY BRIGHT FUTURE.

JAMES WILLIAMS

WWG: Championship courses have been built all over the UAE at a rapid rate for the past two decades, how has JA Jebel Ali Golf Resort maintained its popularity? Is the facility going to change or will you stick to your successful formula?

JW: I think we must move with the times but it's a wonderful resort hotel that facilitates for every sport and has lots of things for the family to do. I firmly believe, that it can only get better. Dubai is growing much faster towards Jebel Ali with the new airport situated ten minutes away

from here and with the EXPO 2020 coming up, so it's an exciting time for us. We have a great formula but we are always trying to improve it. We have got the beach, swimming pools, lots of sporting activities and lovely restaurants. Hopefully we have a very bright future.

WWG: There's been some work going on at the course over the summer, tell us about that?

JW: Yes, it has been a hectic, long, hard-working summer! Golf is an all-year-round sport in the UAE but of course it quietsens down during the hotter months. This quieter period provided us with a window of opportunity to close down the course and upgrade certain areas that really did require some immediate care and attention.

Although serving us well, our old irrigation system was showing signs of wear and tear so we installed the latest Hi Tec Toro system. This work is now nearing completion in readiness for our re-opening on September 8, and, after a settling down period, we can look forward to more efficient coverage of the grassed areas and better quality fairways, roughs and greens whilst using less water (not only a scarce commodity but also an expensive one!).

We have also replaced our original Bermuda grass greens with Pure Dynasty Paspalum which, again, once established and matured, will provide us with surfaces of the highest quality and I am confident they will be very well received by both our local and international guests.

Although our intention was not to change Golf Course Architect Peter Harradine's lovely original design, we have introduced a few greens changes and I'm eager to listen to the reaction to them from our guests. I think everyone will be very pleasantly surprised!

WWG: You started sponsoring Rafa Cabrera Bello earlier this year – how did that come about?

JW: We met the very affable Richard Rayment, who is Rafa's, manager a few years back at the Omega Dubai Ladies Masters when he was accompanying Amy Boulden, an exciting

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CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?

TIGER WOODS HIT HIS FIRST EVER GOLF SHOT IN THE MIDDLE EAST AT JEBEL ALI GOLF RESORT IN 2001. HERE A CROUCHING JAMES WILLIAMS WATCHES HIM IN ACTION.

Hardest Hole on the course?

Stuart Fee (Head Pro at Jebel Ali) thinks: Hole No.4

It's the longest par four and always seems to play into the wind that can cause any player difficulty. It's 435 yards but the conditions often make it play longer than that. There's plenty of water surrounding the green, which can ruin any player's round.



young lady golf professional he also manages. We saw benefits for JA Resorts & Hotels in sponsoring Amy, especially due to the fact that as a company we have been linked with the professional side of golf for many years. JA Resorts & Hotels has been the Official Hotel and Caterer for many years of both the Omega Dubai Ladies Masters and of course the world famous Omega Dubai Desert Classic since 1989. Having had success from the sponsorship of Amy we therefore felt that with Rafa being so talented and showing great signs of realising his obvious potential it would be of great benefit for us to have representation on men's professional tours.

WWE: What has he been like to work with as an Ambassador?

JW: Rafa, as anyone interested in professional golf will tell you, has been a revelation over the past 18 months. There is hardly a tournament where he isn't in contention and he has quickly climbed the world rankings to reach the upper echelons of the game, recently culminating in his automatic selection to represent Europe in the place Ryder Cup for the first time having just returned from the Rio Olympics where he represented Spain. So we are absolutely delighted for Rafa and his manager Richard for what he has achieved in the game. It could not have been better for us as one of his sponsors.

Rafa is a sponsor's dream and I can say that having been involved in the game for 40 years. He's a great player and a good looking guy with a swing to die for but, very importantly, he's a real gentleman. He's so nice and easy to work with – a normal down to earth chap,

always smiling and very dedicated with time for everyone. We see him a lot at JA Golf Resort, he often plays on the course and he always has time for everyone. We are delighted and privileged to have him representing JA Resorts & Hotels and we wish him every success at the Ryder Cup in the USA in September.

WWE: Although it is a nine-hole course, Jebel Ali is a tough test for any level of golfer. You've had some spectacular players participating in the Dubai Desert Classic curtain-raiser, the Jebel Ali Challenge Match, such as Tiger Woods, Colin Montgomerie, Darren Clarke and Lee Westwood. Did they enjoy the course and did it prove to be more of a test than they anticipated?

JW: I think people tend to get the impression that a nine-hole course is all par 3s and that they can be torn apart. It is a beautiful golf course, it is fun and it is affordable to play on, but it is challenging as it has narrow fairways. I like to say that it's a typical course manager's course. We have been fortunate being a sponsor of the Dubai Desert Classic over the years, which allowed us to host the Challenge Match, which is a charity event prior to the Desert Classic. We have had some greats playing here. You mentioned some in the question but it was unbelievable seeing stars like: Tiger Woods, Mark O'Meara, Ernie Els and Seve Ballesteros competing here over the years and I can assure you that they found the golf course to be quite a tricky track – not length-wise, but keeping the ball in play with small greens. It is a good test from the back tees. The middle tees are ideal for mid-high handicappers so everybody seems to love it.



Rafa Cabrera Bello:

JA Resorts & Hotels Brand Ambassador

WWE: You're sponsored by JA Resorts & Hotels, what do you think of the course and hotels they have in Dubai?

Rafa: I'm very proud to be associated with such a wonderful company in JA Resorts & Hotels and the people and friends I have made within the company over many years. I have established these friendships over many years of participating in the Omega Dubai Desert Classic – with friends such as David Thomson the CEO of JA Resorts & Hotels and James Williams to name just a few.

WWE: What do you think of the course and of the JA hotels in the region?

Rafa: I really love playing and practicing at the JA Golf Resort – it is a wonderful nine-hole resort course which I regularly enjoy playing with my friends. James Williams and his staff are terrific! The management and staff are so friendly and welcoming – it really feels like coming home. I have wonderful memories in winning the Challenge Matches with Lee Westwood prior to the Dubai Desert Classic. I have stayed many times at the beautiful JA Palm Tree Court at the Jebel Ali Resort and now reside in Dubai at the JA Oasis Beach Tower which is amazing. I hope to find time this year to visit the JA Manafaru Resort in the Maldives as I have heard so many wonderful reports of this island paradise.

WWE: Which is your favourite hole on the course?

Rafa: My favourite hole is the picturesque eighth. It is a challenging par 3 played from an elevated tee to a green guarded by an expansive lake on the left side and bunkers on the right side of the green. The hole has a beautiful view back towards the original iconic JA Hotel.