

Touring golf has never left the First Coast since and this year's Players marks the 54th consecutive year the PGA Tour has played in the area.

But it did go through a cosmic change in 1977.

The Players begins new era

The PGA Tour had broken away from the PGA of America in 1968 and in 1974, tapped a former player, Deane Beman, to become its second commissioner. Beman oversaw the launch of The Players in 1974 and in the first three years it rotated sites in Fort Worth, Atlanta and Fort Lauderdale.

But Beman wanted The Players to be more like the Masters: an annual event rooted at one golf course, with the Tour's headquarters in the same place. He also wanted the tournament moved to the early spring (it had been in the summer its first two years) to a warm-weather site, but didn't want to infringe on events that already had strong title sponsors.

The Florida events in Miami, Fort Lauderdale and Orlando didn't fit the description. But the GJO didn't have a title sponsor and Beman saw potential in the Sawgrass Country Club and the First Coast.

"We were determined to find a place that had an existing tournament site but we didn't want to benefit ourselves at the expense of an existing sponsor," he said. "But we also wanted a community that would fully embrace giving their own event over and becoming a partner with our event so we could both do better. We wanted one with strong community support and that's what we found in Jacksonville."

Beman moved the tournament and the Tour headquarters to Ponte Vedra Beach. The only hitch came when he couldn't reach an agreement with the Sawgrass Country Club to purchase the course.

He went across A1A, bought 417 acres from developers Paul and Jerome Fletcher for the symbolic figure of \$1 (the Fletchers made millions more with the real estate and commercial development on land they still owned after the Tour came to town) and with architect Pete Dye designing the most controversial golf course in history, the modern era of touring golf on the First Coast began with the construction of the TPC Sawgrass and the Stadium Course.

Spreading the wealth

A century of professional golf has resulted in billions of dollars to the area economy and has touched nearly every fabric of life on the First Coast.

The most recent study by the University of Florida pegged the economic impact of The Players Championship at \$150 million annually. The tournament, in turn, has donated more than \$90 million to charity since 1977, which has been used to build medical facilities, fund medical research, feed