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Shooting for Perfection

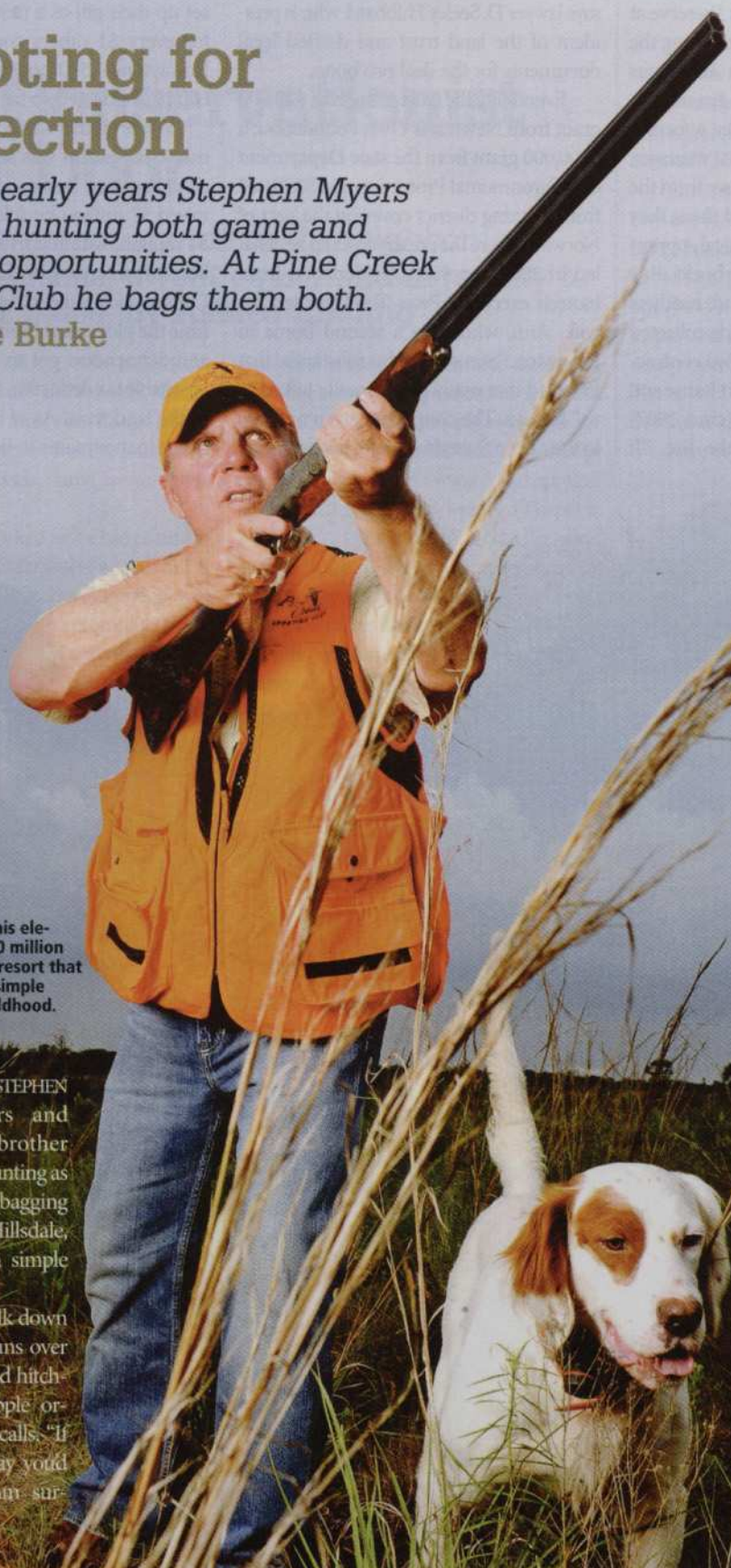
Since his early years Stephen Myers has been hunting both game and business opportunities. At Pine Creek Sporting Club he bags them both.

By Monte Burke

Stephen Myers in his element: spending \$30 million to build a hunting resort that harks back to the simple things from his childhood.

WHEN STEPHEN Myers and his brother fell in love with hunting as kids in the 1960s, bagging birds near their Hillsdale, N.J., home was a simple endeavor.

"We'd just walk down our street, shotguns over our shoulders, and hitchhike to some apple orchards," Myers recalls. "If you did that today you'd have a SWAT team surrounding you."



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Now an energetic 61, Myers has yearned to return to that time ever since. A highly successful career got in the way. Myers cofounded U.S. Cable in 1975 and, as chief executive, built it into one of the biggest privately owned cable operators in the U.S.

Now the business that left little time for anything else is enabling Myers to pursue his dream. A little over two years ago he founded the Pine Creek Sporting Club, a 2,500-acre hunting plantation in Okeechobee County, Fla., 80 miles northwest of Palm Beach.

Florida is riddled with members-only second-home communities, like the John's Island Club and Windsor Club, both in Vero Beach. Most revolve around a golf course. Pine Creek is centered on quail hunting and sporting clays. The clays are used for an elaborate form of skeet shooting. It replicates the hunting experience by taking place on "courses" whose stations mimic various hunting scenarios in which clay pigeons fly out at different angles, heights and speeds.

Using \$30 million of his own money for land and improvements, Myers hired Mick Howells, a professional British shooter, to design his clays course, complete with a tower and five stands.

Myers' vision is to bring together members who, like him, want a sporting club "that gets back to some of the simpler things we grew up with." He has set it amid native pines, old-growth oaks, cypress stands and broom grass and built a 7,000-square-foot lodge with a dining room, bar and library. Plans call for a club with 70 homes. Of these, 25 will be ranch houses, each on 40 acres of land. The other 45 will be 3,400-square-foot two- and three-bedroom cabins along the shores of man-made lakes.

The 40-acre parcels run from \$800,000 to \$1.2 million and the ranch homes up to \$3 million. The cabins go for \$600,000 to \$800,000. All the structures are in the Florida cracker architectural style, with cypress shingles to fit into the natural landscape and covered wraparound porches. Myers has sold six ranches and a dozen cabins so far. He expects to have half of Pine Creek's planned homes sold by the fall.

Owners pay another \$20,000 in annual

dues to access the lodge, hunting and other amenities. Myers has used 1,100 acres of Pine Creek for quail- and dove-hunting fields. Members can also go after turkey, wild boar and white-tailed deer. To help them along the way, the club employs three full-time hunting guides as well as a dog handler who is in charge of a mix of 40 Labrador retrievers and English pointers.

"Steve has a great place at Pine Creek," says Jack Nicklaus, the golfer, golf course designer and Pine Creek founding member, who hunts there a few times a year. "It's a great concept for those who like a variety of shooting and hunting activities."

For a club to be a great getaway, of course, it must cater to its members' more

Spending \$30 million to re-create "the simpler things we grew up with."

prosaic needs as well. In addition to its hunting guides, Pine Creek's 18 employees include a concierge and staffers to stock home refrigerators before members arrive and take out the trash after they leave.

"I want someone in Palm Beach to be able to call us, tell us what they need and have everything taken care of by the time they get here," Myers says.

To cater to families, Myers is building a pool and spa and putting swimming platforms in the middle of the lakes. For riders there are ten horse stables and a network of bridle and hiking paths. Canoes can navigate a 3.5-mile stretch of canals.

It's a lot to coordinate, but Myers has been juggling various aspects of a business since graduating from St. Louis University in 1970. Early on he formed limited real estate partnerships to develop small strip malls in the Northeast. He likewise used partnerships to roll up small cable TV operators beginning in the mid-1970s and benefited from the industry's expansion when satellite downlinks dramatically increased the size of its footprint.

Myers stepped away from the chief executive role at U.S. Cable a decade ago but

remains involved as its chairman and controlling shareholder. The move allowed him to refocus on real estate and start putting together the pieces that would eventually lead to Pine Creek.

His first step was the purchase of Silver Hilton, a steelhead-trout lodge on the Babine River in British Columbia. Myers completely rebuilt the lodge and guest buildings and brought in new high-end jet boats—all of which, he says, cost him an unspecified "substantial sum."

In 2003 he purchased the 5,000-acre Flying G Ranch near Okeechobee City with Tucker Frederickson, a former New York Giants number one draft pick. The Flying G is a working ranch with up to 2,000 head of cattle and a quail-hunting operation. Myers recently listed the property for \$50 million. In 2005 he paid \$16 million to get the land for Pine Creek from the Rollins family, owners of the Orkin pest-control empire. Unlike his previous two acquisitions, this one came with bare bones. The only original building remaining is the Rollins' old lodge, which is now Pine Creek's staff quarters.

"I basically had a blank canvas," Myers says. "I'll paint 80% of it. The membership will paint the rest."

That's taking longer than he'd first envisioned. Thanks to the recession, Myers expects his original two-year time frame for selling out Pine Creek's properties to stretch to four or five years. It currently has 35 members, half of whom own no property and instead are on one-year "trial" memberships for \$20,000 each. Myers admits the club likely won't ever be a big moneymaker, but he's not too concerned.

"It's more important that it turns out exactly right," he says. "If that takes a couple million [dollars] more, so be it."

Myers spends a few days a week at Pine Creek, shuttling from his Palm Beach home. It's not all quail and canoes. Myers is forever making lots of to-do lists to improve the property and its amenities.

"Occasionally I do sit on my porch, have a cigar and just take it all in," he says. "This is a great place for me to spend the next 20 years."

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