

August 2013

The Golden Years

By Steve Eubanks

More than two decades since opening, Golden Hills is still going strong

For many people, the golf business is a labor of love, a way of staying close to a game they've played and enjoyed for years. In other instances, golf course ownership is a family affair, with facilities passed down through generations.

There are, of course, exceptions. Gerry Barton, founder of Landmark Land, never played golf in his life despite building such courses as PGA West, La Quinta Country Club, Mission Hills, The Ocean Course at Kiawah Island, Oak Tree Country Club and Palm Beach Polo and Country Club. But Barton had been in land development and understood the business well before jumping in.

That wasn't the case for John Berry, a cattle farmer in South Carolina who came home to his family one day in the late 1980s and announced that he had just purchased a dairy farm in Lexington, just outside the state capital of Columbia. "I'm going to build a golf course," John told his wife and kids.

Befitting his working class bent, John didn't mean he was going to have a course built; he meant he, himself, was going to build it. So the elder Berry hired Ron Garl to design the course and he, along with his son, Chad, a high school student, cleared the land and shaped what is now Golden Hills Golf and Country Club. They saved money and resources by using the timber to eventually build the clubhouse.

"We couldn't do today what he did back then," says Dian Berry, John's daughter and the current general manager of Golden Hills. "Dad graded and brought his own equipment out here. He built the lakes and the roads. We did everything."

The course opened in 1988, and in time, the Berrys added a real estate development around Golden Hills, with John once again building the infrastructure. Meanwhile, Dian hit the business and government circuit in Columbia to attract members as well as outing and daily-fee play for the golf course.

"We had to be innovative because none of us had grown up in the business or knew anything about it, really," says Dian, whose brother Chad earned a turfgrass degree from Clemson University and now serves as superintendent. "That might have worked to our advantage."

Golden Hills also benefits from its location. A major thoroughfare skirts its bounds, bringing hundreds of potential customers by the entrance daily, and it's situated just a stone's throw from Lake Murray, the largest recreational lake in central South Carolina. "Having state government and, of course, the University of South Carolina nearby helps as well," Berry adds. "We're constantly working with industry leaders in the area to try to partner to become a recreational partner for them and provide a service for them that they need."

Those words sum up the philosophy that has made Golden Hills a success. The Berrys see themselves and their facility as a recreational partner in the community rather than a golf course in need of more outing



business. And by asking the simple question, “What can we do for you?” rather than telling people, “Here is what we have,” Dian has become the go-to operator in a region full of golf options.

“We just try to remain accommodating,” she says. “We still play it by ear as much as we can.”

Not coming from a golf background has allowed the Berrys to recognize obvious opportunities that often go overlooked by some traditionalists. For example, where a lot of club operators consider outing business a necessary source of income so long as the outing guests go away quickly and leave the course in reasonably decent shape, Dian views the outing customer as a perfect membership candidate.

“Any time we have an outing—and we host a lot of them—we use it as an opportunity to promote memberships by giving out discount cards or ‘Thanks for coming, please come back again,’ coupons,” Dian explains. “We know those people play golf, because they’re here playing in an outing, and we know they probably live and work in the area. So, really, why not invite them back and see if we can get them to join the club?”

Data mining the outing business for potential members makes perfect sense for Dian, since she feels as though the outing customer might not be as familiar with the facility as the regular daily-fee player. “We have to walk a fine line,” she says. “We’re a semi-private facility, so we don’t want to go too overboard in promoting public play to the detriment of our membership, but we also need to get as many people out here to see the course as we can.”

Local media has also been a big help, although the Berrys spend next to nothing on paid advertising. The State, South Carolina’s largest newspaper, has listed Golden Hills as the best public course in the Midlands, an honor that Dian works hard to exploit. “When we print something or send out a letter or a mailer, we’ll add the (tagline), ‘Come and play the best,’ or some variation of that. It has really helped set us apart from the competition.”

As for John Berry, he’s returned to the cattle farm, having never played a single round of golf in his life. “He hit the ceremonial first shot on opening day,” Dian says. “He was incredibly nervous, but he teed it up and striped it right down the middle. Then he walked off the tee and hasn’t hit another ball since.”

Chad and Dian play, but if Golden Hills continues in the Berry family, the story of their father’s only golf swing and his vision to build a course for a game he would never play will be the business’ lasting legacy.

Steve Eubanks is an Atlanta-based freelance writer and former golf course owner.

Golf BUSINESS[®] OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE NGCOA