Miss. coast becoming major golf destination

By PETER BLAIS

GULFPORT, Miss. — A Myrtle Beach, S.C.-based marketing company plans to turn this fast-growing coastal region into a major golf destination that will supplement Harrison County’s burgeoning gaming industry. International Golf Resources’ President Donald Wizeman has inspected 30 potential golf course sites and expects to announce plans for six or more projects by year’s end. The first new course could be on line by early 1996, he estimated.

“The casinos are packed evenings and the players want something to do during the day. Golf makes a lot of sense,” said Wizeman, who is reportedly receiving a $3,000-a-month retainer, incentives and expenses from local and state sources to attract golf developers to the area.

Wizeman’s fee is being paid one-third each by the county Tourism Commission, Development Commission and state tourism office.

In the past two years, 14 floating casinos have opened in Harrison County. Government officials have welcomed the revenue into the area’s formerly depressed economy. But they have also feared the area becoming overly dependent on gambling.

Earlier this year, a Harrison County delegation traveled to Myrtle Beach to discover what made that city’s golf business tick, and whether the concept might work back home. While in South Carolina they met Wizeman, who has helped bring together landowners and golf developers in Myrtle Beach, Florida and Williamsburg, Va.

Wizeman was hired in late June. He quickly identified potential golf sites. Most sit well above inland rivers and streams, and in the 300- to 400-acre range.

He then contacted landowners, asking whether they would...

Marty takes offensive in Southeast U.S.

By PETER BLAIS

FAIRHOPE, Ala. — Defense may win championships, but offense makes money, according to Thomas Marty.

“Golf clubs generally operate in a defensive mode,” said the president of Marty Golf Management Inc. “They try to cut costs to increase profits. But you can only be so efficient.

“We can get down to that low operating number. But we’re much more offensive minded. We’re a marketing and management company. We try to drive the revenue side.”

Birmingham, Ala.’s Pine Tree Country Club — the 11th management contract the company has inked since its founding 10 months ago — is a prime example, Marty said.

Marty and leasee Jon Kimerling agreed to invest $1 million to upgrade the 26-year-old George Cobb-designed course. With that financial commitment in hand, Marty said the company sold 70 new memberships in six weeks.

Marty’s offensive mindset was apparent at Billy Casper Golf Management Inc. He helped found the Washington, D.C.-based firm, which grew into one of the country’s major management firms during his 4½-year tenure as senior vice president of operations.

Seeking to return to his native Southeast, Marty recruited Casper Vice President of Operations William Ochsenhirt and former Arnold Palmer Golf Management executive William Fitzpatrick. Together they formed their own management company 20 miles east of Mobile.

Marty likes the threesome to a football coaching staff.

“I’m the offensive coordinator, Bill [Ochsenhirt] is the defensive coordinator...

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Miss. coast adding golf component

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be interested in donating 150 acres to private golf developers while retaining the remaining acreage to develop into house lots or mixed-use project that would benefit from an adjoining, daily-fee golf course.

That list of potential sites as well as information on tax incentives and demographics will become part of a formal development package Wizeman expects to complete this month. He will distribute the information to golf developers he believes may be interested in coming to the Mississippi Gulf coast.

The area has 17 courses already. Mark McCumber-designed Windance Country Club in Gulfport is one of the best known.

"The existing course owners want us to bring in additional development and golfers, too," Wizeman said. "It would give them the chance to raise fees and make improvements. It's unusual but very nice to have that kind of support from existing course owners."

Wizeman predicts course developers will have little trouble obtaining building permits since the generally highland sites have few wetlands and local government favors the golf destination concept. If construction of six to eight new courses gets underway next year, they will open just about the same time 3,000 hotel rooms currently under construction are scheduled to come on line. Another 2,000 rooms are planned and could be ready by late 1996. That would bring the total number of hotel rooms to 11,500, a 77 percent increase over the 6,500 currently available.

"If you filled those rooms, you could build another 25 courses down here," Wizeman said.

Once the development package is complete, Wizeman will start work on a marketing program to attract golfers. One of the keys will be a centralized reservation system with a single (800) number visitors can call to reserve airline tickets, car rentals, accommodations and tee times.

"Gulfport has more air carriers [5] serving it than Myrtle Beach [2]," Wizeman said. "They had 200 charter flights land here in June for gambling groups."

Still, Wizeman expects most golfers will drive rather than fly to the Mississippi Coast. That's similar to Myrtle Beach, where 90 percent of golfers use ground transportation to reach the links.

The Midwest golfer will be the area's target market, Wizeman said. And course operators will market heavily, he predicted.

"They spend more money on..."