Canadian firm eyes affordable public-access niche

By PETER BLAI S

TORONTO—Providing affordable public golf is the goal of a newly formed management company started by a well-heeled businessman from this Canadian city.

Elliot Lewis recently founded Granite Golf Course Development Inc. to acquire, develop and manage low-cost, daily-fee courses, according to company spokesman Bruce Stephen. Lewis has recruited numerous investors and a major credit-equity firm, Stephen added.

Granite is negotiating purchase agreements on several courses, primarily in the U.S. Sunbelt, and is close to signing a deal to develop a new layout in the Southwest, Stephen said.

Plans are to announce the acquisition of several courses and a development contract by late winter or early spring.

"We're looking to provide quality golf in the low- to mid-price market," Stephen added. "We don't want to exceed the $50 to $60 level anywhere. Here in Pittsburgh (where Stephen's office is located), for instance, the top price we'd consider would be about $35."

In their rush to develop upscale, daily-fee layouts, Lewis believes management companies have largely overlooked the low- and mid-range courses or left them to Mom-and-Pop operators who have owned their facilities for many years.

"We think we can deliver a course with the same quality of the upscale layouts, but at a much lower price," Stephen said. "There is a lot of waste in courses being built today and more money spent than necessary on middle management."

"We're not going to build a Pine Valley or Shadow Creek and charge only $40. But we can deliver a good course for a low price," Lewis has been involved in many businesses, but this is his first venture into the golf industry, according to company spokesman Bruce Stephen.

The Canadian businessman has recruited several impressive individuals to his advisory board including PGA Tour professional and course designer Dan Pohl, who will represent the company on the Tour and act as a design consultant; Jim Von Ehr, founder of the Alpsys Corp. (which Micromedia purchased last year for $69 million), will advise Granite on integrating the Internet with golf course development and acquisitions; and Carol "Mickey" Norton, part owner of the Chicago Bulls of the National Basketball Association.

The for-profit Special Services Group of the Arizona Golf Association will provide consulting services ranging from business to consulting services concerning courses to issues concerning courses.

"We've contracted with some of the best people in the golf business to consult on our courses," Stephen said. "That will allow us to run them with lean staffs on lean budgets."

Calendar of events

March
7 — GCSSA Technician Training Seminar on Reel Mowers and Grinding Methods in Farmington, Conn. *
7-8 — GCSSA seminar on Basic Turfgrass Botany and Physiology in Farmington, Conn. *
11 — GCSSA seminar on Lake and Aquatic Plant Management in Cincinnati. *
12 — GCSSA Technician Training Seminar on Reel Grinding and Turf Equipment Maintenance Scheduling in Galena, Ill. *
12-13 — GCSSA seminar on Disease Identification and Control in Philadelphia. *
14-15 — GCSSA seminar on Design Construction and Renovation for IPM. *
19 — GCSSA Technician Training Seminar on Calibration and Safety of Pesticide Application Equipment in Grand Rapids, Mich. *
19 — GCSSA Technician Training Seminar on Small Engine Maintenance and Repair, Woodbridge, Ill. *
20 — GCSSA seminar on Critical Tree Management in Buffalo. *
21 — GCSSA seminar on Negotiating in Springfield, Ill. *
22 — GCSSA seminar on Wildlife Management and Habitat Conservation in Springfield, Ill. *
26 — GCSSA seminar on Calibrating and Safety of Pesticide Application Equipment in East Allen, Ill. *
* For more information contact the GCSSA Education Office at 913-832-4430.

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