Sierra Nevada owner discovers life after AGC

By DOUG SAUNDERS

GENOA, Nev. — Sierra Nevada Golf Ranch, a John Harbottle-Johnny Miller collaboration that opened for play in 1997, its pattern of numerous golf course promotions is nearly 20 years old. This past season, the business around the Carson River Valley, was built on a retired cattle ranch at a time when the surrounding Reno-Carson region was starved for golf venues.

But the surge of golf course failures during this period nationwide didn’t miss the High Sierra and this course soon became one of 24 faced with finding ways to be competitive in an overbuilt market. Sierra Nevada Golf Ranch was created under the guidance of its owner, Ronald Simek, who moved to Nevada in the mid-1980s. Simek, a Wisconsin native who worked in the timber industry, learned the importance of resilience in the ’60s when lumber prices dropped to the point that he had to find a new source of income.

With his brother, he suddenly found himself in the restaurant and tavern business. Simek sold his self-started business, Tombstone Pizza to Kraft foods and began to search the West for a new challenge.

“I bought this 3,000-acre ranch at first to keep it as a working ranch but when another golf course was built next to my land...” Continued on page 23

Owner-operator joins Interstate

Reece sees a lot of turnover coming in the next few years

By DEREK RICE

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Golf course owner and operator Deva Reece has moved into the sales side of the business by taking a position at The Interstate Companies of America Inc.

Reece said he believes his nearly three decades in the golf business will serve him well as he works to match buyers and sellers of golf courses in the Carolinas.

“I can bring a little bit of a unique perspective to trying to help people with respect to buying a golf course because I’ve owned an operator for 20 years,” Reece said. “I know how difficult it is to try to make a profit at it. I would have a special empathy for both ends, maybe more so than your average realtor.”

Sometimes, he said, that may come to laying the hard facts out on the table for an owner.

“If an owner is asking too much for a course, I can look him in the eye and tell him why. There’s no sense in asking a price if whoever buys it can’t repay the debt,” he said. “That being said, I really want to maximize everything I can for an owner. I’ve been on that side, so I know how hard it is.”

Unfortunately, Reece said, he may get many opportunities to help others unload their properties in coming years.

“If feel really bad about this, but there’s going to be a lot of turnover over the next five to 10 years,” he said. “There’s a saturation in most areas, as well as a combination of the economic environment in North Carolina and the rest of the nation. Plus, golf rounds are down. The revenue is just not there to support the debt load for a lot of golf courses.”

Part of the problem is that people continue to build golf courses based on unsound practices, putting pleasure and marketing at the top of the list. Continued on page 23

Thunderbirds course sold at auction

Rounds dipped in wake of mid-summer death

PHOENIX, Ariz. — The Phoenix Thunderbirds Golf Course, which has seen its share of trouble in the last year, has changed hands in a foreclosure auction. Phoenix businessmen Arturo Moreno and Ernie Garcia paid $48 million for the course, which Bank One put up for sale after The Phoenix Thunderbirds civic organization defaulted on a loan in September.

The course had been struggling to attract rounds since mid-summer when 13-year-old Nile Beeman died and more than 80 people reported getting sick after playing at the course in July. Suspicion for the boy’s death, which was later ruled to have been caused by the Norwalk virus, centered on the drinking water at the course. As a result, courses in the area, as well as nationwide, changed the way they handle drinking water. Beeman’s parents are said to be considering a lawsuit against the course. It was not immediately clear how a change in ownership would affect any potential lawsuits.

Since that incident July 19, reservations at the public course dwindled. Scott Henderson of the Thunderbirds told the Arizona Republic, “The straight skinny is that individual show-up-and-play reservations are down a lot. We’ll get through this, but the publicity is killing us.”

Thunderbirds GC opened early last year in support of the Phoenix First Tee program. The Thunderbirds will continue to operate a nine-hole course next to the 18-hole course in support of the First Tee. Continued on page 23

Cincy hires Billy Casper Golf

CINCINNATI, Ohio — The city of Cincinnati has hired Vienna, Va.-based Billy Casper Golf (BCG) to manage its seven municipal golf courses.

The multi-year agreement calls for BCG to provide the Cincinnati Recreation Commission (CRC) with a number of services, including agronomy, marketing and public relations for its Avon Field, California, Dunham, Glenview, Neumann, Reeves and Woodland courses. Continued on page 23

CORRECTION

In the management company list (GCN Jan. 2003), the listing for Meadowbrook Golf was incorrect.

The correct information should be Michael Kelly, 8390 ChampionsGate Blvd., Suite 200, Champion’s Gate, Fl. 33896-8388, phone: 407-589-7200, fax: 407-589-7223, email: mkelly@mggi.com.

Please e-mail managing editor Derek Rice at drice@golfcoursenews.com with any corrections to your company’s listing.

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