

Virginia course bucks trend and goes private

By HAL PHILLIPS

LEESBURG, Va. — In an era when private golf clubs are opening their doors to the public in record numbers, Stoneleigh Golf Club stands out. This 3-year-old Lisa Maki design, operated here by Billy Casper Golf Management, opened as a daily-fee, moved quickly to semi-private status and will soon close its doors to the golfing public.

"We work within the products. And the product dictated that this was the way to go," ex-

plained Rich Katz, vice president of marketing at Casper.

Stoneleigh opened officially on July 4, 1992, with a handful of founding members. Laid out over hilly terrain at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains 50 minutes from Washington, D.C., the club now boasts 209 members. The goal is 425, but the club will probably go completely private before that plateau is attained.

"As the membership level goes up, the public play goes down," he added.

"Right now, public play is allowed on weekends after 1:30 p.m. It's also allowed [earlier] on weekends after we reach a threshold number, and the public has been very understanding with regard to the limited availability. Because we've billed it as an exclusive place, people understand. But they're drawn to it because it's exclusive."

Casper's aggressive marketing plan includes:

- **Radio:** After trading rounds for air time with local Cadillac dealers — simple taglines on 30-second spots — listeners who visit the showroom and mention Stoneleigh automatically win two free rounds. "We valued our radio time, from a 10-second tagline on these Cadillac spots alone, at \$15,000," said Katz. "We've also had Bob Benning, the pro, on all-sports radio as a semi-regular guest. He talks about the making of a course; gives instructional tips."

- **Print:** Benning writes a regular column for the local 72,000 circulation weekly paper, discussing swing tips, etiquette and maintenance. The bio or tagline for each column reads: *Bob Benning is head professional at Stoneleigh Golf Club. If you have a question about this column or other golf matters, call...*

"We haven't had a formal media day, but we invite the media out there to play almost whenever they want. That has generated a lot of positive articles, from an airport flyer to the *Washington Times*. We have an open-door policy with the media."

- **Group outings:** "We've hooked into a lot of corporations," he said. "Some groups have switched their outings to Stoneleigh, as little as seven days beforehand, because we've been able to weather the drought. That's the value of saving money on the marketing end and shifting it to turf management."

- **Direct mail:** Casper created a direct-mail piece inviting a group of targeted, avid golfers to Stoneleigh for a free round. "Of course, you have to sit down and at least have a chat with our membership director," said Katz.

As public courses continue to flood U.S. markets, Stoneleigh has successfully set itself apart by heading in the opposite direction. And Stoneleigh isn't necessarily the exception to the Casper rule. Katz said Casper Management has eight courses in the Mid-Atlantic area pursuing a path similar to Stoneleigh's.

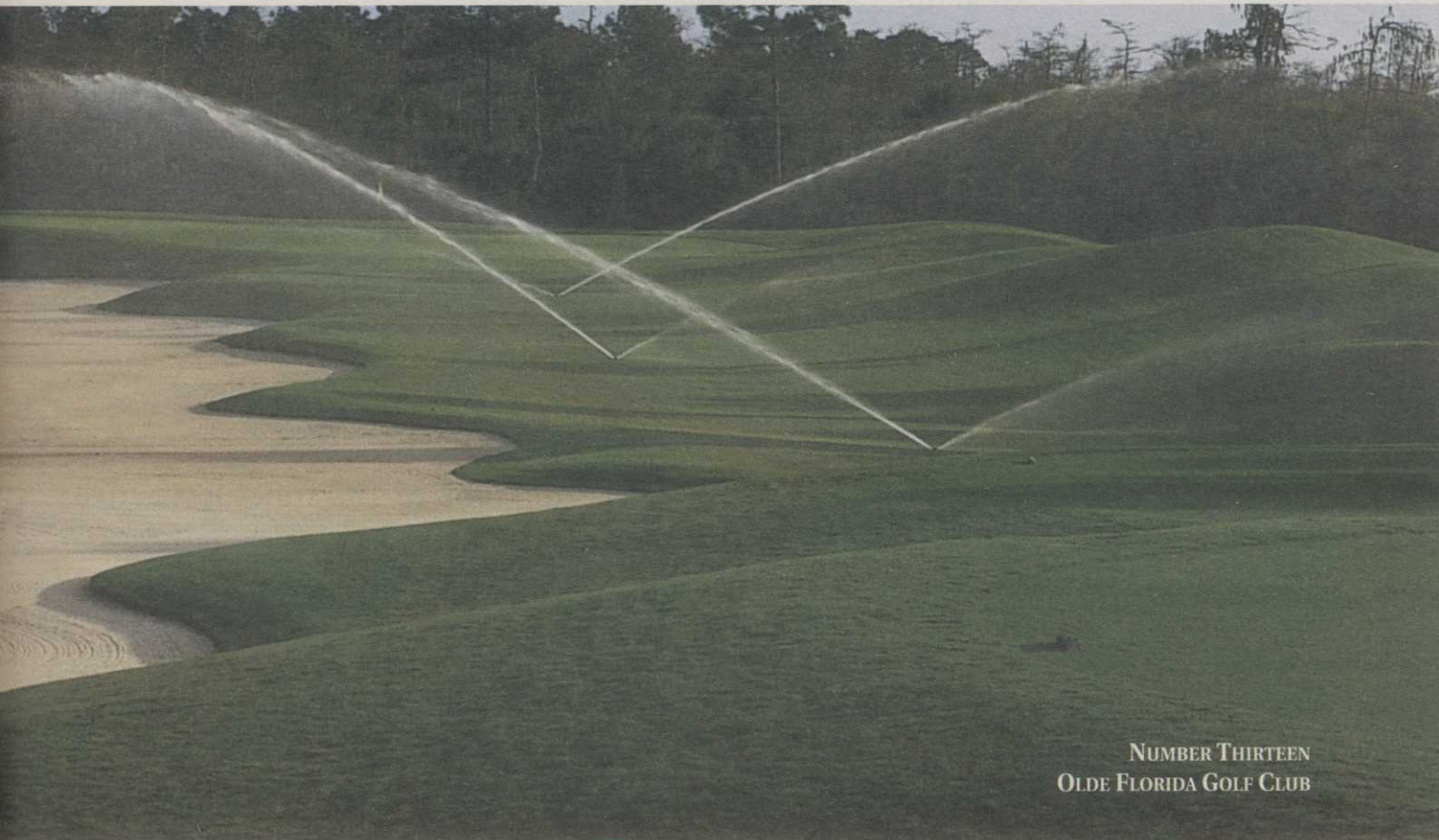
"There's a difference between public and semi-private," Katz explained. "We've been able to strike a delicate balance. The key is getting rid of the 'semi' from semi-private."

"The three buzz words you hear associated with new course openings these days are *upscale, daily, fee*. We don't mind being the antithesis to that."



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