

Farms to fairways an American trend

By J. BARRY MOTHES

GRANVILLE, Ohio — Larry Bruce has been farming central Ohio land for more than 30 years and, with the 20th century creeping to a close, he decided there might be a better use for some of his acreage.

Like an increasing number of farmers across the country —

particularly in the Midwest states of Ohio and Indiana and parts of New England — Bruce, 50, decided to build a golf course on land once used for farming, in his case dairy and grain. The result is The Links at Echo Springs, a moderately upscale, professionally-designed 18-hole daily-fee layout within an hour's

drive of Columbus. Nine holes opened last year and all 18 will be ready for play this spring ('97).

Bruce's golf course is one of the more ambitious in a recent batch springing up on farms. Many of these new courses are sited on family spreads that have been in operation for generations. But today, facing the tough

economics of small- to mid-size farms, and younger generations less interested in pursuing farming careers than their parents and grandparents, those farms face uncertain futures. Golf courses have become a popular option — not only owing to the lure of profits but also because they preserve the open space farmers have built deep bonds

with through the years.

Several of the new courses popping up on farms are nine-hole "Mom-and-Pop" operations. Men and women who once worked 18 hour days tilling soil, planting and harvesting are now working 18 hours a day mowing fairways, selling green fees, serving food and watering greens.

After years in the feed and animal nutrition business, Barb and Mike Grinstead built their nine-hole Meadow Farms Golf Course outside Austin, Minn. It opened in 1995. The sporty 2,150-yard layout winds across a farm they've owned since 1973. The Grinsteads have three employees — themselves and their son. They are considering adding another, longer nine, maybe in 1998.

Robert Stoddard of North Haverhill, N.H., converted 60 acres of his 400-acre Blackmount Dairy Farm into a 9-hole golf course with an adjacent driving range. Stoddard, a non-golfer, is thinking of adding another nine soon. Stoddard designed the course with help from his nephew, a groundskeeper. He said some of his inspiration came from watching golf on television.

Bruce's Links at Echo Springs, by comparison, sits on the high-end of farms-turned-golf courses spectrum. It was designed by Barry Serafin, an architect based in New Albany, Ohio. Serafin has had a firsthand view of this latest farmland-to-golf-course boomlet. He said 10 of his last 12 projects have been on farmland, from the 9-hole semi-private Bellefontaine Golf Club to the 9-hole public Kyber Run Golf Course in Johnstown, Ohio. He's also in the midst of reviewing four potential new projects — all on farms.

"Of course, we're in Ohio," said Serafin, "and once you expand out of residential area you're into farmland. But there are a lot of golf courses going up on what used to be farms."

For some farmers, turning part or all of their farmland into golf can be a bittersweet transition.

"There's always some hesitation about whether they're doing the right thing," said Serafin, "but things change. If they sit down and look at a business plan, they see the potential for profit... You plant it once and mow it and maintain it. The numbers are what really speak to them."

Most of the farmers turned golf course owners and developers are relative newcomers to the game and the business. Bruce only took up the game eight years ago. Before the idea of a full 18-hole course took hold of his imagination, he had one green with four different tee areas on his farm.

"All my friends tell me I'm the luckiest guy, and I am," said Bruce.

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