

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.

Bruce's golf course is one of the more ambitious in a recent batch of golf courses 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 golf courses preserve the open space farmers have built deep bonds with through the years.

Several of the new golf 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 drinks and sandwiches 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

In the Heartland, family farms make way for golf

Growing trend makes for affordable, accessible courses



The Links at Echo Springs is a Barry Serafin design, laid out on a portion of the Bruce Family farm in Granville, Ohio.

sporty 2,150-yard layout winds across a farm they've owned since 1973. The Grinsteads have three employees at the course — themselves and their son. The Grinsteads 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 nine-hole golf course with an adjacent 200-acre driving range. Like the Grinsteads, Stoddard, a non-golfer, is thinking of adding another nine soon for a full 18-hole layout. Stoddard designed the golf course with help

from his nephew, a professional groundskeeper. He said some of his design 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. The course 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 golf course design projects have been on farmland, from the nine-hole semi-private Bellefontaine Golf Club to the nine-hole public Kyber Run Golf

Course in Johnstown, Ohio. He's also in the midst of reviewing four potential new golf course projects — all on farms.

"Of course, we're in Ohio," said Serafin, "and once you expand out of the 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 a golf course 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."

Jim Shoemaker had farmed all his life in Zionsville, Ind., on land that had been in his family since the early 19th century. He had his vision for a golf course while recuperating in the hospital from a heart attack. Shoemaker, 75, and his brother, Bill, 71, teamed up to develop the nine-hole Hickory Bend Golf Course.

"It's been very hectic and it's quite a challenge," said Shoemaker.

The Shoemaker brothers were spurred to build a golf course partly because they didn't want to see high-priced real-estate development take over their community, which is in a town of about 5,300 people just outside Indianapolis.

"Housing is popping up everywhere around here," said Jim Shoemaker, who started playing golf at age 50. "We wanted to stay a green area and this is the only way we could accomplish it. We also got tired of chasing cows around."

Interestingly, the private 18-hole Wolf Run Golf Course sits right across the street from Hickory Bend, where greens fees are \$8 for nine holes and \$15 for 18 holes on weekdays. "We feel we're giving the average guy a place to play golf without robbing his pocketbook," said Jim Shoemaker.

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. The new Links at Echo Springs covers about 220 acres, only half of which was farmable. Bruce and his family still own another 850 acres and farm grain. Now he's eager to get the new nine open this spring at Echo Springs, fulfilling a dream he's been carrying around for more than three years.

"The first thing I told my investors [partners Rock Van Wey and Melvin McInturf] was, we're going to find water and have double-row irrigation," said Bruce. "There's going to be no housing. And, we're going to have Echo Springs in the name because that was the name of the farm when I bought in it in 1969."

"All my friends tell me I'm the luckiest guy, and I am. But it all happened in one damn day. I came home one day after talking with Rock and Melvin and told my wife, 'We're going to build a golf course.'"

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