

West Lake CC Repositions Itself as “Full Family Club” by Brandi Shaffer



Under new ownership since May 2015, the Augusta, Ga., property has introduced casual dining options, spa services, a youth room and a kid-friendly water slide at the pool, and reports it is no longer hemorrhaging members. At the nearby Jones Creek Golf Club in Evans, Ga., General Manager Ray Mundy also emphasized the importance of creating a

“lifestyle club,” noting that golf has become the “four-hour game in a four-second world.”

With mounting debt, declining membership and a reputation some considered staid, West Lake Country Club in Augusta, Ga., entered its fifth decade in limbo, but a switch in ownership in May 2015 has repositioned the club, the *Augusta Chronicle* reported.

“West Lake wasn’t bankrupt, but it was in a death spiral,” Adam Murchison, Membership Development Director, said.

Upkeep at the club dwindled in tandem with operating revenues. And when the club did make capital improvements, it was usually at the cost of an assessment or adding another line item on a debt ledger, the *Chronicle* reported.

Concert Golf Partners, which also owns and operates **MacGregor Downs Country Club in Cary, N.C., the focus of C&RB’s April 2016 cover feature**, immediately paid off debt that had hobbled West Lake for years, including a \$6 million clubhouse renovation financed in 2006, before the housing market collapse threw the nation into recession. Drawing on capital reserves of \$150 million, the management company also pumped \$1.5 million into new projects ranging from a banquet hall expansion to a remodeled driving range, all without a single assessment on the membership, the *Chronicle* reported.

After a full year under new management, former West Lake Board President Michael Sommers said the club's no-assessment guarantee and emphasis on more family-focused activities is turning things around, the *Chronicle* reported.

"The golf course has always been great, but the social aspect is what was lacking," Sommers said. "They're putting the fun back in West Lake."

Murchison, who came on board just after Masters Week in April, said many of the club's new improvements, including the introduction of casual dining options, spa services, a youth room and a kid-friendly water slide at the pool, are designed to position West Lake as a "full-family club" and shake the old whiskey-and-cigar image of the past, the *Chronicle* reported.

"There's a much more family-oriented, youthful feel to it now," Murchison said.

The club is no longer hemorrhaging members. So far this year, nearly 92 new memberships—roughly three per week—have been sold. Murchison acknowledged the importance of non-golf amenities in an era when more young people are snubbing the sport for less costly and time-consuming leisure activities, the *Chronicle* reported.

"By the time you add everything up, you could be looking at six hours to play one round," Murchison said. "Not everyone can invest that kind of time, even on weekends."

That sentiment is echoed by Ray Mundy, General Manager of semi-private Jones Creek Golf Club in Evans, Ga., who said golf has become the "four-hour game in a four-second world." Mundy, an investor in the local partnership that has owned the Rees Jones-designed course since 2008, said middle- to high-end private clubs such are simply evolving to accommodate today's families, the *Chronicle* reported.

"The days of leaving the kids with the baby sitter on a Friday night and having drinks and dinner on white linen tables have changed," he said. "A better description now is 'lifestyle club.' People still want the golf, but they also want more family dining and more of a health club-type atmosphere."

"What makes West Lake different now than it was over a year ago is the fact that my members can now enjoy their club without worrying about managing it, assessments, employees and all of the other problems associated with running a business," said General Manager Richard Eyer.

Expanding offerings beyond traditional golf, tennis and swimming not only attracts new members, but often is welcomed by older members. “What you see at a lot of clubs is that the old guard loves the changes,” Reilly said.

Though golf serves as the common bond, private and semi-private country clubs are unique animals. The private Sage Valley Golf Club in Graniteville, S.C., doesn’t offer the traditional tennis and pool experience, but the 3,000-acre spread does boast a gun club and several rustic-but-luxurious cottages and cabins. Jones Creek members have access to a pool and tennis courts, but those facilities are owned and operated by the neighborhood’s homeowner association, the *Chronicle* reported.

Culture and clientele also run the gamut. At one end of the spectrum are the ultra-exclusive private clubs, such as Augusta National Golf Club, and legacy city clubs, such as the 118-year-old Augusta Country Club. With their old-school exclusivity and high-dollar membership and initiation fees, such clubs are generally immune to economic downturns or ebbs in golf’s popularity, the *Chronicle* reported.

At the opposite end of the line are lower-cost public facilities, such as Augusta University-owned Forest Hills Golf Club and Midland Valley Golf Club in Graniteville. When the economy slows down, such courses become the go-to places for cost-conscious duffers searching for less-pricey tee times, the *Chronicle* reported.

Caught in the middle are clubs such as West Lake, Jones Creek and Mount Vintage Plantation Golf Club in North Augusta, S.C., which essentially have the same costs, but not the financial support or prestige that the “old money” clubs have, the *Chronicle* reported.

Mount Vintage, for example, fell under ownership of a Tennessee-based bank during the recession and was turned into a public course by the management company hired to run it. After years of legal turmoil, the Mount Vintage homeowners’ association in August purchased the club, formed its own management company and eliminated the online reservation system that let anyone with an internet connection book tee times at the 27-hole course, the *Chronicle* reported.

“The thing is, there are very solid golf ownership and management companies, and there are some that are not,” said Gregg Karlberg, Mount Vintage resident and board member.

“Whoever you are getting involved in has to be vetted.”

Karlberg said the former management company had no incentive to provide good service because its client was the bank, not the club's members. "Having a golf club owned by a bank is not a good thing," he said. "Their objectives and the membership's objectives were not aligned."

For West Lake, which is several months into its second year under Concert Golf, the conversion to third-party ownership and management appears to be working, the *Chronicle* reported.

"Fridays and Saturdays are back to what they were 10 years ago," said Sommers, the former West Lake board member. "People are coming back and saying, 'Hey, this is a great experience.'"