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Scheduled to be completed this fall, the 30,000-square-foot clubhouse at Renaissance GC has put to rest any lingering doubts about the future of the high-end private club in Haverhill. Photo by Kevin Keller

Worth the wait

Last piece of the puzzle to be unveiled at Renaissance GC this fall in the form of a majestic new clubhouse quicker than the age old waiting game

By Bob Albright

They will always have the snack bar over at the Renaissance Golf Club in Haverhill.

A halfway stop nestled between the ninth green and the 18th fairway, the intimate grill and beverage counter with accompanying tent was always in the plans at Brian Silva's first signature course. It was never intended, however, to be the focal meeting place for what has proved to be a very resilient private membership.

That will all change this October when Renaissance owners David Southworth and Joe Deitch will deliver on their promise and unveil a prodigious \$9M, 30,000-square-foot clubhouse which will once again relegate the snack bar to just that and nothing more.

It has been a long time in coming for the membership, some of whom first joined the club as original founding members back in 2003 when it was just a rolling 197-acre parcel of scenic views off Kenosza Street in East Haverhill. Since then they have persevered through a series of hazards far greater than anything Silva could throw at them on his majestic, par-71 7,161-yard masterpiece. Three different owners, a foreclosure, and a plethora of broken promises make up the short list. Right on top of that list has been the failure by the previous owners to make good on the grandiose clubhouse that was permitted for back in the original purchase agreement, but was never built until now.

Today, however, you can't swing a 9-iron at the course without hitting a beaming member. Even the constant din of steel being positioned into place high above the eighteenth green is more often than not greeted with a smile by the golfer sweating out a testy 12-foot double-breaker on the green below.

"Absolutely, it's a great feeling just to see it standing there," said Jim Buckley an original founding member at Renaissance. "It's the last piece of the puzzle. It brings everybody's dreams to fruition."

Long time coming

That being said, you will have to excuse Buckley and his fellow members if they were starting to come to the conclusion that nothing other than an errant approach shot would land behind the 18th green.

"We did get the golf course that we were promised," he says, "but we got pretty much nothing but excuses after that. That's pretty much been the story."

The low point came a little over two years ago when the club was foreclosed upon and auctioned off in Haverhill in front of the assembled membership. The winning bid that April day went to the same man who had lost it in foreclosure to begin with, Paul Quinn, for \$13 M. When Quinn was unable to come up with the payment two months later, the future of Renaissance seemed very much in doubt.

If there was a positive that came out of those dire times it was that all the travails brought an already tight membership that much closer.

"They say that out of all bad things comes some good and I think that's the case here," said Buckley. "If anything, it galvanized us together. It has always been a very tight membership. You will find us all gathered together in that tent at the halfway house behind the 18th on most weekends and it just made us that much closer."

A definite turning point

Out of the foreclosure, the club's fortunes would soon turn around. Fairway LLC of Milwaukee, which held the mortgage, hired Southworth Development of Newton and its subsidiary, Southworth Golf, to run the course.

Less than a year later, CEO David Southworth would team with Joe Deitch, CEO of Commonwealth Financial, to purchase the course outright for \$9M. With an impressive portfolio of high-end golf holdings across the country and internationally behind Southworth Golf, the all too hazy vision of a clubhouse worthy of the championship course gained immediate clarity.

"Since David Southworth has come on, there has never been a question of things being done," Cliff Irons, another founding member at Renaissance, noted.

"Even more satisfying than seeing the clubhouse construction was seeing all the little things that showed his commitment to the course."

Irons says it took no more than a peek into course superintendent Jerome O'Donnell's maintenance building to know that the new regime was intent on finally realizing the potential that oozes from every vantage point at Renaissance. Within days of the acquisition, 350 new sprinkler heads arrived at O'Donnell's office, not to mention the bulk of the course equipment that had been repossessed during the foreclosure.

"It has been like night and day," said O'Donnell succinctly of the change. "Night and day really is the best way to describe it."

A new beginning

Brought in from The Ranch in Southwick, MA, another Southworth owned course, to oversee the day-to-day operations as general manager, Mike Robichaud says the construction of the clubhouse has finally quelled the last of any lingering doubts from the members. Serving as the primary liaison between Southworth Development and a somewhat skeptical membership, many of whom had already incurred substantial financial losses, has not always been the easiest of tasks.

"Those were challenging times and we were brought in here to provide a certain level of service and keep this club growing through a bad time," said Robichaud. "You would come to work every day and you knew that there was emotion involved, but there should have been emotion involved. Some of the stories you heard you just felt very bad about."

"The big thing is that you have to deliver on everything that you say you are going to do and that's what we have done. It's the reality and it's visual now where they can see it and they are all very excited and charged up about it."

A new home base

Suffice it to say, Southworth, 51, is so enamored of Renaissance that he's not only building a multi-million dollar clubhouse in the most trying of economic times, but also relocating the booming golf division of his company to Haverhill as well.

"We had been familiar with the golf course and it really is a truly amazing golf course," Southworth said. "It's not just good, it's very good. You couldn't relocate just to some place that was average. It had to be spectacular."

Greg Sherwood, the President of Southworth Golf, echoes those sentiments.

"It's a great golf course. They had struggled financially, but the conditions up here were always unbelievable," he noted. "That's what attracted us. You drive up here and the golf course was just fantastic. All we can do is get the clubhouse up and running and give Jerome and his staff the ability to maintain it at a high level."

"The clubhouse is super important, but it also was very important to build it the way the members want to have it and David Southworth has a great vision of the demands of the membership," Sherwood added.

All the frills

Creating a building to complement the immaculate course is no small undertaking, but it appears the Boston architectural firm CBT has nailed it. Among the wide array of amenities in the sprawling complex will be a fitness center, locker rooms, banquet room, a billiard room and grill to go along with a main dining room and two private dining rooms. That's not to mention the seven club rooms and one suite to accommodate members' overnight guests, a feature you will find only in the premier clubs in the area. With a veranda and balconies overlooking the picturesque 18th green, the clubhouse is likely to become a sought after venue for weddings and other functions.

There will even be a founder's room honoring the original members who took a leap of faith some six years ago and made the club a reality.

"That's a nice touch and something that they didn't have to do," said Irons. "It shows the respect that they have for the original group and what this place means to us."

No matter how extravagant the finished product, all members agree that it will always be complementary to the property that it sits on.

"There isn't anyone who doesn't have their breath taken away when they play this course," said Irons. "It was very important that the clubhouse reflected that and I think it will."

Buckley, who recently notched his first hole-in-one on Renaissance's demanding 199-yard uphill par 3 fourth, agrees that the focal point will always be the course. It's a point that is underscored by the fact that despite the club's topsy turvy past, Renaissance has been able to hold on to a substantial membership.

"The course has always been the glue that has held everything together," he says. "Finally getting a clubhouse to go with it? Well, that's just the icing on the cake."

Club Comfort

An overview of the new clubhouse at Renaissance GC:

Grand Opening: October

Cost: \$9M (approximate)

Square footage: 30,000

Architect: CBT of Boston

Location: right off the 18th green

Amenities: Great Room, grill room and lounge, billiards room, private dining rooms, banquet rooms, fitness center, locker rooms, two golf simulators, seven club rooms and one suite for members' overnight guests, club office area.

Weddings and functions: are currently being booked and are available with a member's introduction. Call the club at 978-556-0900 for more information.

