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A Course Not To Miss

By Jeff Roberson

The University of Mississippi has been into campaign mottos and slogans for years, and they have proven to be effective and recognizable.

From “Good Things Are Happening At Ole Miss” in the 1970s to the more recent “A Great American Public University” and “Experience Amazing,” the Ole Miss Golf Course is now following suit.

“One college course you don’t want to miss.” That’s the new statement and slogan the golf course staff wants everyone to get used to and remember. And with good reason.

Now into its second summer since a complete renovation, the Ole Miss Golf Course continues to present an opportunity for those who visit to “experience amazing.”

Certainly the transformation of the entire facility, from the range and practice areas to the pro shop and grill to the course itself is remarkable.

“It’s amazing the people who come out here who haven’t been here in years that say ‘I can’t believe this place,’” said pro shop manager Gerald Barron. “It’s a very playable golf course. It’s challenging enough, but it’s playable. For the average golfer, this is a fun course. You can play back, and you can play shorter. From some of the holes out here, if you play back, you can get all you want.”

But the course is only part of the big picture. The change in the look of things begins a mile from the club house when you first drive into the facility.

“I had a guy tell me the other day he felt like he was driving into Pebble Beach when he drives up out here,” said Barron, laughing.

And while that might be a bit of a stretch, the statement has merit. The Ole Miss Golf Course isn't what it used to be.

"We're trying to link the golf course to the campus," Barron said. "We want to communicate that and also to look like that. The landscaping has been an important part of this place, just like the campus.

"We're also really focused on customer service," he continued. "That includes our student workers as well as our fulltime staff. People come to the golf course to have fun. We need to be a part of making that happen. Customers are important to us."

Barron and staff have had almost two years with the "new" Ole Miss Golf Course.

"In October it will be two years," he said. "Things have gone really well. Our memberships are growing, and a lot of good things have happened."

Barron explained further the memberships available, which may be viewed at the website www.olemiss.edu/depts/golf/.

"We have general public memberships. We have faculty staff. We have alumni membership rates. We have really good junior program rates.

"And we have something we introduced last year, and that's the non-resident rates. It's really designed for non-resident alumni, but also a lot of senior non-residents have taken advantage."

Barron mentioned a group of seniors who have started an association for those 55 and over.

"These guys have started it, and it's growing fast," he said of the Ole Miss Men's Senior Golf Association. "They've also helped grow our memberships. They've really got a lot of momentum."

One of its founders, Al Hughes, explains.

"We started around the first of April, and we now have 53 members," said Hughes, who got the group going, along with Robert Montgomery.

"Anybody over the age of 55 is eligible. We have members in age from 55

up to 88 currently. We have a tournament every Tuesday morning at 8:30. We have a really good time.

“One good result has been quite a few of them have become dues-paying (OMGC) members because of it. The whole thing was started because of people like me who wanted to play but didn’t know a lot of people. I had just moved back to this area (from Madison recently and before that San Antonio for 29 years). The course is nice, and everything here is first class.”

Tournaments continue to be an important part of what the OMGC does. The staff tries to be considerate of those who want to play when they are in town for games.

“We have several tournaments out here, but on Friday afternoons before home football games, we keep the course open for individual play,” Barron said. “Folks coming into town want to play golf. We want the course available, and we feel it is important to have that policy.

“Depending on game times, we do get some traffic on (football) Saturdays. If it’s a night game, we’ll have lots of play. Not so much for day games. But baseball and all sporting activities help us, if the time of the event is right.”

Barron said some alums outside the area are jumping on board with the non-resident fee, which is only \$50 per month.

“If some alumni are here a lot, they can join as a non-resident for \$50 a month and play anytime they’re here. We’ve got some already taking advantage of that.”

And there are other exciting events the course hosts.

“We have the (Ole Miss) Women’s Intercollegiate,” he said. “That’s getting to be a really big deal. (UM head women’s golf coach) Michele Drinkard has big plans for that event. This year she had 18 to 20 teams from all over the country. We got rave reviews from the teams and coaches who were here.”

And then there is this, for those with a historical perspective on the game.

“There is a hickory shaft group hosting a tournament,” Barron said. “The Mississippi group is playing the Arkansas group. They’re coming in here for two days. They’re going to have a guy with bagpipes. They’re doing it right. This was a central spot for the groups, and it should be a fun event.”

“We have a lot of charity events out here. The FCA plays a tournament here. The M-Club plays one. The ThyssenKrupp Tournament (formerly known as the Dover tourney) is here again this year. It’s the open date football weekend in October. That’s a great event.”

Barron explains, and Hughes concurs, that the Rebel Fairway Grill, located in the main building, is more than worth a try.

“They do a great job,” Barron said. “The food is excellent.”

“We usually finish up playing around lunchtime,” Hughes said. “Most of our guys just stay here to eat and enjoy it.”

There’s more coming for the OMGC, according to Barron.

“We’re working to have an online pro shop and online tee sheets,” he said. “We hope to have those in the next few months.”

Barron said helping develop the “new” Ole Miss Golf Course for nearly two years has had its rewards. He hopes people have enjoyed the changes, and he believes they have.

“If I could come up with one challenge, it would be just delivering at the level we want this golf course to be at the University it represents,” he said. “We believe now that when people think of this golf course, they think of the same quality and image that’s on campus. They see it out here. We have the funding and resources now to do that. The commitment of Dr. (Robert) Khayat was important. He wanted the course to be something the alumni and friends of Ole Miss could be proud of when they come to Oxford.

“We just try to keep building on that,” he continued. “We view the challenges as our momentum to keep moving toward our long-term vision. There’s just constant improvement. We continue to try to do little things that make it a first-class course.”