

Olde Sycamore Stands Out, Defies Cliches

Tom Jackson design is making waves in the Charlotte market

By Howard Ward
Editor

MINT HILL, N.C.

You can pull out all the clichés in attempting to describe Olde Sycamore Golf Plantation.

It's a hidden jewel.

It's off the beaten path.

It's one of golf's best-kept secrets.

It's the best golf course in the state that no one's heard of.

Then you can throw all the clichés away and just tell it like it is. Olde Sycamore is a wonderful golf course in a location that is entering a boom stage.

You'd better stand back, folks, because this could be one heck of an explosion.

Olde Sycamore was designed by Tom Jackson, a Carolinas Golf Hall of Fame course architect, and opened 10 years ago. It has been operated by B.V. Belk, a commercial real estate developer who nursed the course through the growing stages.

But Belk thinks the time has come to take the wraps off his project. The ever-expanding Charlotte population is spreading to the area, brought into convenient proximity by the I-485 beltway.

That foresight led Belk to begin preparations two years ago to make Olde Sycamore the success that he envisioned it could be. He increased the maintenance budget, authorized a total bunker renovation project and called Jackson in for a review of the course layout.

"We reaffirmed our commitment to make it one of the best courses in the Charlotte area," Belk said. "I felt we had to get the golf course in excellent condition, so we've been working hard on that. Tom Jackson came back and went over every hole to see what we could do to make it better. He recommended a few minor changes and we've done that. The greens are in great condition and the whole course is about as good as it can be."

Mark Burnette came to Olde Sycamore from Myers Park Country Club in 1999 as course superintendent and his work has earned accolades from members, guests, the owner and the course architect. It doesn't hurt that Burnette's wife, Tina, is a certified horticulturist and is also part of the team.

"Mark has turned the golf course around," Belk said. "He watches after it like it was his baby, and his wife does all of our tree planting and flowers. Come here in April and you might think you were in Augusta."

Belk is smart enough realize that his expertise is in real estate, so he's hired Signet Golf Associates of



Olde Sycamore's par-4 ninth hole with clubhouse in background

Pinehurst to oversee day-to-day operations of the golf facility.

"They have people in their company who specialize in certain areas," Belk said, "It's not just one opinion. As a group, they analyze each department, keep up with the numbers and devise good marketing plans. I can see that it's already running a lot smoother.

"Running a golf course is a full-time job if you want to do it right, so we've got a good team out there now. I'm real happy with the way things are going."

Ted Staats came back to Olde Sycamore because he liked the direction the club was headed. He was general manager from 2002-05 and was brought back by Signet in the same role.

"This gives us the benefit of having someone on-site who understands member relations and how to create a first-class experience for members and guests," said Signet president Peter Dejak. "Ted had positive results at Olde Sycamore before leaving to pursue other opportunities and we feel he can duplicate that success."

Staats thinks the potential is unlimited.

"It's great to be back at Olde Sycamore," he said. "This is one of the premier courses in the Charlotte area. This is a fast-growing area and we're a big part of it.

"We're highly regarded in the Charlotte area and it's just a matter of getting people from outside to come and see us. We're really expanding our market through the Internet, newspapers and magazines."

Olde Sycamore is a semi-private club that allows

open play. Green fees range from \$45 to \$55 during the week and \$65 on weekends and holidays. Lodging and dining accommodations can be arranged nearby for package outings.

Doug Ballenger has been the head professional since coming on board in 2006 from Pine Lakes Country Club in Mint Hill.

"This is just an excellent golf course," he said. "You have to really think your way around the front nine. It's a very playable course, but it's challenging because you have to plan your shots. It's very eye-appealing and it doesn't beat you up.

"In my opinion, it's the best manicured course in Charlotte that isn't private. Signet has put the professional touch to a good property. They've put a shine on it. Rounds are up and membership is increasing. This has always been a good course, it's just been a matter of taking it to the next level and getting the word out."

Belk is confident enough in the club's appeal that he's acquired 260 acres for new development adjacent to the course. Sycamore Estates is expected to grow to more than 400 homes.

"I'm told by the builders that people choose Union County because of its lower taxes and good school systems," Belk said. "The location is perfect because it's directly off Hwy. 218 and close to the I-485 interchange."

Home prices are expected to start around \$600,000 and residents will receive membership incentives to Olde Sycamore.

To arrange a tee time at Olde Sycamore, call (704) 573-1000, or visit www.oldsycamoregolf.com.