

McConnell Golf Making a Name for Itself in the Carolinas

The company will never be as ubiquitous as Troon Golf, but in the "Old North State," McConnell Golf has rapidly become a major player. Headed by healthcare entrepreneur John McConnell, the North Carolina-based company has quietly become one of the Southeast's most respected golf brands, and it did so almost by accident.



One of the Beautiful Holes at Sedgefield CC

McConnell netted multiple millions when he sold his Raleigh-based company, Medic Computer Systems, in 1997, then added greatly to the fortune almost a decade later, after buying, running and then selling A4 Health Systems. When his beloved Raleigh Country Club fell into disrepair and was on the selling block, he decided he might as well buy it himself.

That purchase and subsequent renovation lead to another, then another and another, and currently his portfolio includes seven, soon-to-be eight respected courses (including two across the border in South Carolina, the rest in Tarheel territory), including the Cardinal Golf & Country Club in Greensboro, Treyburn Country Club in Durham, Old North State in New London, The Reserve in Pawleys Island, S.C., and Musgrove Mill Golf Club in Clinton, S.C.

One of his most recent purchases has a current PGA Tour pedigree. The Wyndham Championship, to be contested the week after this year's PGA Championship, is held at Sedgefield CC in Greensboro. "If history is any indication, John McConnell will make significant enhancements at Sedgefield, which will upgrade what is already a beautiful club," explains tournament director Mark Brazil.



The 15th at Sedgefield

"We are very happy for the Sedgefield membership and McConnell Golf because this purchase is very positive. We know John and his track record is impressive, so we understand the significance of this transaction, how it will affect the Wyndham Championship's host course, and what it means for the future of the club and the tournament."

The tournament's original iteration was as the Greater Greensboro Open for almost 50 years, with Sam Snead claiming eight of those wins, a record that still stands for most victories at a single event on the PGA Tour. There have been four subsequent name changes, and while the Wyndham Championship roster of victors is more of a "Who's He?" than a "Who's Who?" (Brandt Snedeker, Carl Petterson, Ryan Moore and Arjun Atwal), at least the relatively recent past has provided trophy-hoisting names with a bit more star power, such as Davis Love III and K.J. Choi.

Already at Sedgefield, McConnell Golf has begun its renovation work most noticeably with a new Wall of Champions overlooking the ninth green that features all the past Wyndham Championship winners, along with a freshly painted water tower, major tree work and landscaping around the clubhouse, an updated clubhouse interior, four new brick columns adorning the clubhouse entrance, extensive bunker work on No. 3, and rerouted cart paths and stone-bridge renovation on Nos. 10 and 18.



A Rolling Green at Cardinal G&CC

However, compared to the work that McConnell did at the nearby Cardinal, his renovations at Sedgefield are a nickel on the dollar. The Pete Dye-created Cardinal course is once again, thanks to the influx of cash provided by the company, one of the most formidable tracks in a state that has no shortage of fine layouts.

When Dye first built it in 1975, the Cardinal quickly took a spot among the best venues in the state. At the time, the course was situated on 140 rolling acres in the middle of nowhere, the quiet countryside of the Piedmont region, an ideal location for golf. The heavily wooded, broad-shouldered routing, with its lakes and meandering Brushy Creek snaking throughout the property, has hosted some of the region's finest players.

With some form of water encroaching on nearly every hole, this par-70, 7,000-yard parkland beauty has been the site of both the Men's and Women's North Carolina opens, and the North Carolina Amateur. It is also home to the prestigious Cardinal Amateur, which has been contested on the grounds since the 1970s.



The 12th Hole at Cardinal

Despite its stellar reputation, financial difficulties plagued the club consistently. Ownership changed hands and the members eventually acquired the facility themselves, but both course conditions and the membership rolls continued to deteriorate, and some 30 years after its debut, the course was practically on life support. The irrigation system was antiquated, the greens were in bad shape, members were jumping ship, and the entire operation, bleeding Cardinal-red ink, needed a serious financial jumpstart.

McConnell, who had competed intensely with his older brothers on their homemade golf course back on the Virginia family farm, came to the rescue, and the Cardinal became the second course in the burgeoning company. He paid \$1.7 million for the cash-strapped property and poured in nearly \$5 million in renovations to the clubhouse and golf course, most notably hiring Dye to return and fully restore his original design.

"The Cardinal was practically at rock bottom when I bought it," recalls McConnell. "The golf course was worn out, many of the members had left and the clubhouse was very dated. There had not been any real investment in that facility in several years. But thanks to Pete Dye's renovation, it is now once again one of the toughest, but fairest courses in the state."

"I wouldn't call it dilapidated, but like any course that reaches a certain age, it needed updating," explains Dye. "I was elated to go back there and work on it, just as I've done at Harbour Town, the Ocean Course, Crooked Stick, TPC Sawgrass and many others over the years."

The work began in the summer of 2006 and continued for more than a year. Dye, in his never-ending quest to thwart technology, added bunkers and repositioned

existing ones much further down the fairways. He refashioned greens that had become slow, bumpy and two-dimensional, making them heavily contoured and slick. Thanks to the state-of-the-art irrigation system that was installed, conditions are once again lush.

The daunting nature of the redesign is readily apparent at the par-3 12th, which originally measured 160 yards across a lake. Dye moved the tee box around the lake and stretched the hole to 220 yards, with water in play the entire length of the hole and behind the narrow green. The redo earns high praise from the man who designed the treacherous island green 17th at the Stadium Course at TPC Sawgrass, and at least 100 other one-shot holes that make golfers shiver in their soft-spikes.

"I really think the Cardinal's 12th is my hardest par-3 ever," concludes Dye. "You can't ignore the water. It's everywhere you look. The course was well-known to begin with, and I really think we've made it much better than it was. It really jumps out of the ground now; it's as good as we could do."

And a visiting golfer couldn't do much better than to visit a few stops along the McConnell Golf Trail, which offers its guests a rare opportunity to comfortably travel around the Carolinas and play a geographically well-positioned sampling of some of the most prestigious private golf courses in North and South Carolina.

For more information about the company and its courses, visit www.mcconnellgolf.com.