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Open for business

Cottonwood Hills, a new golf course near Hutchinson, is ready to officially open this weekend

By Harold Bechard

The Hutchinson News

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The building of Cottonwood Hills Golf Club and, eventually, the surrounding master-planned community, has been a slow, but steady, process.

Four years ago, the 620-acre tract of land located six miles east of Hutchinson near 4th Avenue and Buhler Road was purchased.

Three years ago, construction of the golf course and surrounding residential development area began.

One year ago, nine of the 18 holes were opened.

This weekend, Cottonwood Hills will officially open its 18-hole course to the public, bringing yet another championship-style course for the golfing-rich area of south central Kansas.

When Cottonwood Hills LLC purchased the land in 2003, it projected the course would open in September 2004, with a grand opening in September 2005. But planning and development have taken longer than expected. The project was to be completed in phases, with larger, custom home lots surrounding the golf course.

"It's an exciting time for us," said former Hutchinson resident Lane Neville, the president of Cottonwood Hills who, with three other business partners from Arizona, purchased the land in 2003. "We started construction just about three years ago; we purchased the property four years ago. The first critical part of the master-planned community was, of course, the golf, and doing that at the right level was our main focus. We're just thrilled and excited to kick this thing off."

Cottonwood Hills pro and general manager Jeff McCormick said interest in the new course has picked up during the last few weeks. He said Tuesday morning that 125 rounds have been booked so far for Saturday's opening day and Sunday will be a big day as well.

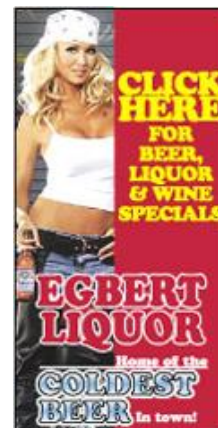
"There's a lot of anticipation, not only from our staff, but also the local community as well," McCormick said. "A lot of folks were wondering when all 18 (holes) we going to be open and we're just excited it's here, for sure. Hopefully, Saturday is a good sign of things to come."

"The traffic here, just with the nine holes open, during the last three to four weeks, has been fantastic. I mean, we've been really busy and the feedback from the public about the nine holes we have open has been tremendous."

A press conference has been scheduled for 11 a.m. Thursday to discuss the grand opening, with the media having the opportunity to play the course in the afternoon. At 7:30 a.m. Friday, six-time major tournament champion Nick Faldo will play the course and Baseball Hall of Fame shortstop Ozzie Smith is also scheduled to be present.

Faldo, a former Masters and British Open champion, helped design the course as part of the London-based Faldo Design Company.

"It first started as an idea from a pure golf standpoint just to look at it and see the quality and the natural beauty of the tract of land," Neville said. "From there, we could build the



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kind of course we wanted, and to do that we felt like we would be attract the residential interest. We just always felt like with the strength of Hutchinson and, of course, the size and strength of proximity to Wichita, we could do this."

Neville, who lives in Scottsdale, Ariz., but graduated from Hutchinson High, hopes to sell 25 to 30 home lots a year. He has been involved in land brokerage and land development for 21 years. Cottonwood Hills is the first golf course he has helped build. His parents still live in Hutchinson and his brother, Brad, runs the property as the projects manager.

Lane Neville said having Faldo's stamp on the course has been priceless.

"It's huge. He's such a recognizable figure internationally," said the 43-year-old Neville. "He has such a great eye for golf - he's proven that - and a real talent for design. His name is synonymous with success. He's been great for marketing."

The 7,260-yard (from the back tees), par-72 course will be a few miles from Prairie Dunes Country Club - a private course, considered one of the best in the world. And just down the road in Newton, Sand Creek Station, a public course, opened to rave reviews last year. But Neville said an extensive marketing and feasibility study by Price-Waterhouse-Cooper was completed before any money was invested and he firmly believes there is room for what he calls a "high-end" public course in the area.

"We felt the high-end daily fee was the way to go," Neville said. "Our attempt here was to create a public venue that was even a step up on all the other public opportunities (in the area). We believe that was the niche we wanted to fill and, from the reaction of the people in the market, that's what we're finding out."

Cottonwood Hills is one of 60 golf courses in 15 countries managed by Marriott Golf. Golf memberships purchased at Cottonwood Hills provide reciprocal benefits at any of the Marriott managed golf courses, including Doral Golf Resort in Miami, and Shadow Ridge Resort in Palm Desert, Calif.

McCormick, 32, came to Cottonwood Hills from Doral Golf Resort. The Oklahoma native has also worked at courses in Scottsdale, Ariz., (Saddleback G.C.), Lake of the Ozarks, Mo. (Tan-Tar-A Resort G.C.) and in Jupiter, Fla. (Ritz-Carlton Club). He was the golf professional for 2 1/2 years at Doral before coming to the Hutchinson area.

"My interest in this job and this position had to do with proximity more than anything else," McCormick said. "Knowing the type of terrain it was being built on, I knew the course had a chance to be special and I certainly haven't been disappointed with the finished project at all.

"This is close to home and a great place to raise a family. You can't beat the people in this part of the country."

Those who have played the nine holes at Cottonwood Hills for the past year or so will soon see a different course. Beginning Saturday, those nine holes will be Nos. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 2, 3 and 4.

"It's really a unique piece of property," McCormick said. "We have a lot of elevation out there - a lot of British links-style golf on the western half of the property and then you get over to the eastern half and you get into some prairie areas and stands of cottonwood trees.

"There are a lot of different ecosystems out here. It almost feels like three or four different golf courses, just from the way the surrounding property feels whenever you make your way around the 18 holes."

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