

These two Brunswick County golf courses have been sold. What it means for the properties

BY ALAN BLONDIN

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A hole on the course at Brunswick Plantation in Calabash, N.C. THE SUN NEWS FILE PHOTO

Chip Smith said he wasn't looking to sell his two golf courses in Brunswick County, N.C., but Heritage Golf Group was looking to enter the Myrtle Beach and Wilmington golf course markets and made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Heritage has purchased Brunswick Plantation & Golf Resort, which is just over the S.C. border in Calabash, N.C., and Cape Fear National Golf Course at Brunswick Forest in Leland, N.C., which is just south of Wilmington. Heritage president and CEO Mark Burnett said the company plans to convert Cape Fear from semi-private to fully private this year. It plans to keep Brunswick Plantation semi-private and open to the public with local memberships.

Heritage plans to fund improvements at Brunswick Plantation, potentially including re-grassing greens and other areas of the course, and upgrading the food and beverage offerings.

"The priority is going to be an upgrade of the golf course condition, not just the greens but also the bunkers. I think are all in play potentially over the next year or two to get a complete overhaul so we can take the consistency of the playing conditions up to another level," Burnett said.

He said Heritage is open to expanding in the Myrtle Beach and Wilmington markets.

“Between North Carolina and South Carolina, it’s certainly an area we wanted to find some opportunities to get some club presence,” Burnett said. “My hope is if it goes well - and we anticipate and hope it will - we absolutely would be interested in continuing to grow in both markets.”

Heritage purchased the courses last week from Atlantic Golf Management, which is headed by Smith and includes a couple of partners. Smith said the sales price for the two clubs combined was \$12 million.

Atlantic still operates the municipal Whispering Pines Golf Club and Aero Short Course through agreements with the City of Myrtle Beach and Horry County, respectively.



The clubhouse at Brunswick Plantation in Calabash, N.C., which will now be managed by Atlantic Golf Management, the same company that operates Whispering Pines Golf Club in Myrtle Beach. The Sun News FILE PHOTO

HERITAGE ENTERS THE MYRTLE BEACH MARKET

Burnett is the former president and COO of ClubCorp, the world’s largest private club operator.

Heritage has existed for a couple of decades, but Burnett’s group purchased the company in January 2020, when it had six clubs: three on Hilton Head Island, a pair of TPC courses in Florida and The Dominion Club in Richmond, Va.

It has expanded to 20 clubs in nine states with the Brunswick County acquisitions. “We’ve been in a pretty good acquisition growth mode since then . . . and we’re starting to get a little more geographically diverse,” Burnett said.

“We’re really in the process of transforming the company and putting our own stamp on it.

“We’re certainly much better capitalized. We’ve put millions of dollars into many of the clubs that we’ve purchased, including Hilton Head,” he said. “A lot of that is into the condition of the golf courses as well as a lot into the clubhouse amenities that we’ve been able to expand the footprints to be able to drive all aspects of the club environment. We really like private clubs, so that’s a big focal point for us.”

About one-third of the company portfolio is public courses.

This is the company’s first venture in the Myrtle Beach/Wilmington markets.

“Myrtle Beach is arguably one of the most competitive markets in the United States, but we know it real well,” Burnett said. “We thought it was an interesting opportunity, coupled with the one in Wilmington, to be able to get in and be a part of that market.”

Burnett likes the existence of rental condos and a rental business at Brunswick Plantation.

“We can really focus on stay-and-play packages, and we’ve got a pretty good marketing arm within our company,” Burnett said.

The company, headquartered in Herndon, Va., has a reservation call center in Hilton Head that can incorporate golf and accommodations at Brunswick Plantation.

“So we already have some infrastructure and are very experienced (about) how to go about the whole time share, call center, resort, partnering with hotels and being able to focus on delivering an overall experience for people who come into the market,” Burnett said.

Heritage owns and operates courses in nine states including Oyster Reef Golf Club, the 27-hole Shipyard Golf Club, and the 36-hole Port Royal Golf & Racquet Club in Hilton Head Island.

Other clubs are in Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Virginia, New Jersey, New York, and Florida.

“We’re looking forward to getting in and being a good neighbor with many of the competitors and hopefully working with many of them on different package opportunities,” Burnett said.



Cape Fear National opened in 2009, was purchased by Atlantic Golf Management in 2019 and was sold to Heritage Golf Group this week. PHOTO COURTESY OF CAPE FEAR NATIONAL

BUILDING ON SUCCESS

Burnett hopes to continue successful growth at both Brunswick County courses.

Atlantic Golf took over Brunswick Plantation in March 2018 and Cape Fear in September 2019.

Brunswick Plantation's 27 holes are designed by Willard Byrd. The original 18 is nearly 7,000 yards and opened in 1992. The additional nine opened in 1998. The golf course is restricted by a conservation easement, so it has to remain some form of open green space.

Smith said the course hosted about 62,000 18-hole rounds in 2021.

Cape Fear National opened in 2009. The 7,217-yard, par-72 course was designed by Sunset Beach architect Tim Cate and was named one of the Top 10 Best New Courses in America by Golf Magazine in 2010. It features forests of mature oaks, maples, pines and magnolias.

Smith said Cape Fear had 71 members when he purchased it. It now has 500 members with a waiting list, so outside play was limited to a few thousand rounds in 2021, largely through the Brunswick Plantation condos.

Burnett said the large development around Cape Fear is only about 50 percent built out so there's potential for a stronger membership. He intends to expand the clubhouse, possibly with an outdoor element.

Smith said the sales contract includes a Heritage commitment of at least \$1.5 million in improvements at Cape Fear.

"I didn't have any intention of selling," Smith said. ". . . We started talking and I told him we had the best year we've ever had and it would have to be a good number, and they came through with a good number. I think they'll be great at both places.

". . . We feel we've carried them from one level to another, and these guys have the funds and knowledge to take it up even another level, so I think everyone's going to benefit from the sale."

The courses enjoyed a resurgence in golf in the U.S. that has occurred during the global coronavirus pandemic.

"We had the best year in the business we've ever had," Smith said.

Smith said he'll assess whether Atlantic Golf will add courses again.

"I haven't made the decision whether I'm going to continue to look or enjoy golf and fishing a little bit," Smith said. "In my opinion it's not very much of a buyer's market right now. People have had good years and I've kind of spent my career on buying courses that needed work."

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