


 Lighted miniature putting course *Champions Trail*

New Family Learning Center in Duluth, Ga. Sets the Curve

By Sally J. Sportsman

The grand opening didn't go as planned. Lifelong optimist Ernie Boshers, PGA, admits that his spirits were dampened along with the golf course when rain fell during 21 of the first 26 days of operation at The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf.

"What did I do to deserve this?" he asked, only half in jest, one month after the March 6 opening of the 45-acre facility.

Despair soon turned to delight, though, for Boshers and his three partners at the family-friendly facility. When spring sunshine finally found its way to this Atlanta suburb, word spread quickly of the attractive new golf center. The fact that 30,000 cars a day pass the large sign on Satellite Boulevard advertising The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf plays no small part in announcing that here is a place where turning off the road can lead to pleasures including relaxation, fun, practice, play, game improvement and – a surprise to many – fine dining. Golfers and non-golfers alike are discovering all the facility has to offer, a welcome development for the owners.

"This is our 'field of dreams,'" says Chip Randall, president & CEO of Singleton Creek, Inc., the corporation the partners formed together, named for the creek that runs through the property.

Kevin McOmber, CFO, and one silent partner complete the four-member team tackling this venture. Years of planning, construction issues, bureaucratic delays and weather challenges are receding into memory now, replaced by the excitement of owning and operating a learning facility with short- and long-term success as its goal.

No Clowns or Windmills

Amenities at The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf center around *The Georgia Trail*, a 9-hole golf course featuring five par-3 holes and four par 4s. Five sets of tees allow players of all skill levels to enjoy the 2,254-yard layout. From the back tees, hole yardages range from

AT A GLANCE

The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf

2789 Satellite Blvd.

Duluth, GA 30096

770-497-GOLF (4653)

Website: www.gatrail.com

Owner(s): Chip Randall, Kevin McOmber and Ernie Boshers

Manager: Tony Skinner

Acreage: 50 acres

Landing Area: 30 acres

Poles & Netting: Yes

Lights: on Putting Course; soon to be on Range, too

Artificial mats: Yes, 26 stations

Tee stations: 26 outside stations

Grass tees: 26

Range Prices: Small: \$6.50, Med: \$8.50, Large: \$11.00

Mini Golf: Yes, 18 holes, par 42

Ball Inventory: Top Flite, 20,000

Range Pickers: Yamaha

Washers: Range Servant

Mowers: Toro and John Deere, approx. 12

Heated tees: No

Pro Shop: 600 sq. ft., \$40,000 owned inventory

Clubhouse: 8,000 sq ft, no simulators; custom club repair - yes.

Pros: Ernie Boshers, PGA, Don Richards, PGA

Food: Augusta's Restaurant, chef-managed, 80+ seats

Short Game: Yes, 1-acre short-game practice area

Expansion: Yes, depending on land availability



The handsome 8,000 sq. ft. clubhouse contains year-round indoor and outdoor dining available at Augusta's Restaurant.

191 to 436 yards. Ten lakes and several streams add to the beauty and challenge of the course. Rates for 9 holes of golf Monday through Thursday are \$20 to walk and \$25 with cart. Friday, weekend and holiday rates are \$25 to walk and \$30 with cart. Those wishing to play 18 holes receive discounted rates. For an annual fee, the Georgia Trail Loyalty Program provides reduced pricing on

miniature golf start at \$3 for children (12 and under) and \$5 for adults.

The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf also entices golfers with a 25-station grass driving range, a short-game center with a bunker, an 8,000-square-foot putting green and synthetic tee-lined turf for use on wet days. The hitting area on the range is rotated daily to allow it to heal properly and provide optimal

structure is planned for completion by spring of next year, although lessons are in full swing now.

Special events abound at The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf. Leagues, open to individuals or groups of players of all abilities, fill up fast. Men's, mixed, women's seniors', morning, afternoon and putting leagues are available. Many golfers compete in weekly events

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golf, food and beverage purchases and select golf-shop merchandise.

A lighted miniature putting course, *Champions Trail*, constructed from a technologically-advanced synthetic putting surface, replicates "real" golf with sand bunkers, fairways, rough and out-of-bounds areas. The par-42 putting layout, a to-scale replica of a 7,410-yard golf course, features no clowns or windmills, thus enhancing the realism of the experience for players. Rates for

practice conditions. Plans are that by this autumn, the driving range will feature lighting for evening use.

Instruction is available at the *Trail Golf Academy*, headed by Boshers, who serves as director of golf at The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf. Individual or group instruction and clinics are offered to men, women, seniors and juniors. Boshers, who has been recognized as a top instructor by *Golf Magazine*, *Golf Digest* and *Golfweek*, says an academy

for prizes. Children's birthday party packages, a popular draw, include a selection of meals and beverages combined with a round on the Champions Trail Putting Course or driving range, or a 45-minute clinic with balls.

The 7,800-square-foot cedar-columned, log-cabin-style clubhouse features a 360-degree wrap-around porch overlooking the golf course. A conference room seating 24 is available

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(left) The Georgia Trail, a 9-hole course features five par-3 holes and four par 4's with five sets of tees. (right) The range contains both mats and 26 grass tees.

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for golf or corporate meetings, and a fully-stocked pro shop features top-brand apparel and equipment, custom club fitting and abundant personal attention.

Players expecting to enjoy a quick bite after their round or practice session surely will marvel at the dining options. Augusta's Restaurant, managed by chef Mark Radell, offers appetizers, homemade soups, salads, sandwiches, entrées and daily specials of a caliber usually found at highly-distinctive restaurants. Yes, hot dogs and club sandwiches are popular choices, but so are banana-pepper calamari with Thai remoulade, tomato and mozzarella caprese, vegetable Wellington, shrimp diavolo, grilled salmon in lemon cream sauce and bacon-wrapped filet of beef au poivre, just to name a few. Desserts include sabayon, a marsala-flavored custard topped with fresh berries and whipped cream, as well as chocolate mousse, crème brûlée and peach cobbler. A kids' menu, gourmet coffee, a full bar and an extensive wine list complete the offerings. Year-round indoor and outdoor dining, combined with the stellar menu and service, is making Augusta's a sought-after destination not only for golfers, but also for locals seeking a fine business or leisure lunch, brunch or dining experience.

A Serendipitous Journey

To Boshers, the story of how he arrived at this place in his career is circuitous yet perfect. Born in York, Ala., he was introduced to golf at age 7 by his father, whose work in the construction business enabled him to have a schedule of 6 months on and 6 months off. Father and son learned the game together, without formal lessons, by playing at Green Acres Golf Course, an 18-hole facility close to home.

"My dad gave me a 9 iron and said, 'As long as you can keep up you can keep swinging,'" recalls Boshers, 47.

By age 9 Boshers found he could keep up, and by twelve he was nearly a scratch golfer. The seed for a golf career had been planted early, although Boshers wouldn't realize it for many

years. He played on his high school golf team at Austin High School in Decatur, Ala., and continued to play recreationally throughout college and beyond. He attended Calhoun Junior College in Alabama and graduated from Walker College in 1984 with a B.S. in Business and Personnel Management. Deciding he needed more direction and focus, Boshers joined the U.S. Army in 1986, where he earned military veterinarian and USDA certification through Auburn University and did his training at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Stationed at a naval submarine base in New London, Conn., as a member of the Army Veterinarian Corps, he ran a veterinary clinic and – no surprise – played for the Army golf team. Often traveling three or four weekends in a row, he played against the Coast Guard, Navy, Air Force and Marine golf teams and in an annual military conference tournament. Required to stay 4 years in the military, he stayed ten.

All along, though, Boshers longed to teach golf. In 1986, while still stationed with the Army in Connecticut, he started teaching during his off hours at a small range, where skilled players, both military and civilian, sought his advice. (The military golf course had no range or golf professional at the time.) His student numbers increased, and eventually Boshers decided to leave the military to teach golf full time. He moved with his wife to Winston-Salem, N.C., where, while earning a specialty certification with the PGA of America, Boshers served as director of instruction at a driving range and consulted on the construction of Silo Run, an 18-hole golf course. After 1 ½ years, they moved to Augusta, Ga., where Boshers became director of instruction at the Bill Madonna Golf Academy. The family then moved to Atlanta, where Boshers served as director of instruction at the Bill Madonna Golf Academy at Windermere in Cumming, which became Windermere Golf Academy when Boshers bought out Madonna's partnership interest in 2002.

By that time, Boshers had enlarged his interest in helping grow the game of golf and longed to own his own practice

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(left) A view of the 600 sq. ft pro shop. (right) A little après-golf anyone?

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facility. The story of how he landed at The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf is one of “angels at work,” he says.

“I was hunting for land in Atlanta where I could build a golf practice facility,” says Boshers, “but it was extremely expensive in the city, and I knew that making a go of it on the periphery would be a struggle. One day at a meeting at Gwinnett Community Bank, my banker asked me if I knew Chip Randall, an engineer who had purchased some land nearby for just such a facility. Meanwhile, Chip, whom I had never met, was having a conversation with his own executive banker at the same bank; she asked him if he intended to include any golf people in his venture.” Communication ensued, and last year Boshers became a partner in The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf.

“It was love at first sight,” Boshers says of the land. “We all really needed one another as partners, and we married our plans to make it all come together. The honeymoon is still in progress.”

Chip’s Dream

The land for The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf had been placed under contract in 2003 by Randall and his partners and was purchased in 2005. Randall, who earned a B.S. in Civil Engineering from Memphis State U. in 1988, designed the golf course. Having always nurtured a passion for golf, Randall had spent many years in corporate and municipal engineering; eventually he yearned for a change and a way to spend more time with his family. The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf represented an opportunity to realize those aspirations. Construction of the facility presented challenges, however.

“The wetlands on which the facility sits meant flood-plain issues,” says Randall, who also served as general contractor for the project. “Singleton Creek, our property line, is protected by the U.S. Corps of Engineers, creating a complex county

permitting process and logistical issues, all of which took time. Once those were resolved, we made great progress. The irrigation system is designed efficiently, recycling the water all around the property. The drainage is superb, with the beauty of the natural surroundings the main attraction.”

In fact, three sources of water help irrigate the property: natural drainage off the buildings and parking lot, drainage pipes and Singleton Creek. A system of ponds, streams and creeks allows rapid sediment reduction and distributes water evenly around the land.

In some ways, the recession might have proven beneficial during the construction process, the partners agree, as materials and labor costs were less expensive.

Even as construction concluded, it seems “the angels” had not yet finished their work. National Cash Register, which occupies a building on a parcel of land not far from the facility’s first hole, recently decided to move its corporate headquarters from Dayton, Ohio, to Duluth. A commercial property developer wished to construct 4 twelve-story condominium towers adjacent to the NCR headquarters. The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf sold 3 ½ acres for the project, and NCR sold 7 ½ acres. A major coordinated rezoning effort was undertaken to accommodate what will be the first high-rise buildings in Gwinnett County.

“NCR already is a great corporate neighbor and entity,” says Randall. “Now three to four hundred more people will be coming here. We are blessed. This new demographic will mean that people can live, work and play on our little spot. It is exciting.”

Randall, who was born in Atlanta, grew up in Chattanooga, Tenn. Introduced to golf at age 5 by his father at Valleybrook GC, he played on the golf team at Hixson High School, winning some tournaments. His love of the game never left him, and now he finds he is indulging in his dream.

The Plan Comes Together

Kevin McOmber, CFO, also is an engineer, having earned a

B.S. in Civil Engineering at Rochester (N.Y.) Institute of Technology in 1997.

"Chip and I worked together in the engineering business for ten years," McOmber says. "It has always been Chip's dream to own a golf facility. It looks like it will be a good investment."

McOmber came by his golf experience in a less official way than his partners. Born in Medina, N.Y., he grew up without formal exposure to the game. He and his high-school friends used to hike through the woods near a small public course, finding golf balls that had gone astray. He never became a highly-skilled player, although he now is taking lessons from Boshers, with promising results.

The greatest hurdle during construction of The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf, says McOmber, was "a lot of waiting. Everything took longer than we thought."

This past spring was the wettest spring on record since 1976, McOmber notes. Yet that setback now is becoming history. Word still is

getting out about The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf, but growth has been steady so far and feedback has been positive.

"We feel good about what we've got here," McOmber says. "We are proud of the course. The greens are maturing nicely as a result of all the rain. Our vision is taking shape."

The Vision

For Boshers, the plan is simple. He wants to be on the lesson tee, offering instruction, doing what he loves. He predicts his students will be blue collar, white collar and everything in between.

"We will be a lavender-collar facility," Boshers says. "We want to serve everyone."

The goals for The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf are to offer excellent customer service while providing an affordable, enjoyable golf experience to a wide range of golfers, from new to seasoned players. Although all marketing and advertising strategies have not yet been fully determined, a consistent outreach to the community will remain in effect. Already ties have been established with the Chamber of Commerce and other

community groups, according to Judy Putnam, marketing director. Local newspapers and magazines have been made aware of everything The Georgia Trail at Sugarloaf has to offer.

"We believe we can turn a profit by year two," says Boshers. "We would like to establish more locations in Atlanta, the largest city in the South, where we have a twelve-month golf season. And we believe our concept can be franchised to create more locations around the country."

For those wishing to build a practice facility in these challenging economic times, Boshers recommends selecting the site with care, keeping costs low and maintaining passion throughout the endeavor. In addition, he says, it is important to choose carefully the people who will be working with the public.

"Give a lot of thought to your hourly workers who greet and deal with golfers," Boshers says. "They will be the first and last people who touch your customers."

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