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LONG ISLAND

TALLGRASS COUNTRY CLUB

Mainstreaming a 'gem'

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Bruce Barnet called the 150 acres that make up Tallgrass Country Club in Shoreham "a hidden gem." But since buying the club a month ago, the Long Island developer wants it hidden no longer.

"In every way, it resembles the feel of a private club," said Barnet, who along with his sons, Alex and Christopher, runs Barnet Holdings. "I've played several courses so far this year; none look like our course. It's in magnificent condition right now."

On April 8, Barnet acquired Tallgrass, a links course designed by Gil Hanse.

Barnet turned over club operations to Leisure Properties Management LLC, headed by Ed Wankle, a former New York Parks deputy commissioner, who played a behind-the-scenes role in Bethpage Black attaining the 2002 U.S. Open. (Wankle has a copy of former USGA president Judy Bell's autobiography in which Bell writes, "Thank you for bringing the Open to the Black.")

Catering giant Lessing handles Tallgrass' food and beverage services, which Barnet says allows his staff "to focus solely on golf."

The course, just 5 years old, was in good condition - it was once part of the Delalio family's sod farm - but suffered from an identity crisis; the primary problem a dissuasive \$85 weekend greens fee.

"Last year, we were priced the No. 2 daily fee course, next to Long Island National," Barnet said. "We brought ourselves down. By doing that, we can encourage a lot more play. Because we were so upper end, people drove right past us to more economical courses. I really think it's a hidden gem here."

Current fees, including golf cart, are \$60 during the week, \$75 on weekends and, for those wishing to tee off between 6-8 a.m. Monday-Thursday, \$39.

With the U.S. Open coming to Shinnecock Hills, the nation's pre-eminent links course, in June, Tallgrass head professional Jim Schutte said his course is planning to take advantage of the similarities to Shinnecock.

Corporate tent holders looking to play during Open week will get a list of "places to play" on the Island by the USGA. Tallgrass is on the list.

"We're similar to Shinnecock, as far as being a links course goes," said Schutte, formerly a Mill Pond professional. "The biggest thing is we have fescue [that will grow in by June], which in prime season is going to be pretty thick. We only have one water hole, fescue, deep rough. The greens are very undulated but very playable."

Tallgrass plays 5,613 yards from the white tees, 6,148 yards from the blues.

Schutte said the course did 24,000 rounds last summer and he hopes for "at least" 30,000 this season. Wankle said the course has all the attributes to make that number a reality.

"I agree, it's a hidden gem," Wankle said. "Once public golfers realize this is here, they'll see this is one of the finest courses in Suffolk County. And that's not coming from Ed Wankle. That's coming from professionals I've taken there. Once it's discovered, and it hasn't yet, it will be the course of choice."

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