

SOUTHERN DELAWARE GOLF CLUB LOOKS TO THE FUTURE AND REPURPOSES THE FOUNDATION FROM THE PAST.

By: Delaney Cha



On April 15, the new Southern Delaware Golf Club (SDGC) located in Milford, Delaware will open its course to its members after a total overhaul and renovation of the property.

Since February 2022, Bill Kupfer - the Director of Agronomy - and his team have been hard at work to reshape the course and bring it back to life.

"I was the first one here a year ago around this time," said Kupfer. "I got here and the grass was three feet tall over the whole property; you couldn't see anything."

After the original course, Rookery North/Shawnee Country Club was closed at the end of 2020, developer Tim Johnson of the Johnson Company purchased the property in December 2022. Through the purchase, Johnson decided to keep the original site plan of the property and maintain it as an 18-hole golf course. In doing so, a complete renovation of the course and the buildings on the property would need to take place.

"It's been a lot of planning on my part and being connected with the owners, they have been amazing to work with," said Kupfer.

Since February 2022, Kupfer and his team have increased playability and the overall aesthetic look of the course by remodeling the greens, reshaping the fairways and tee boxes, and cutting down trees.

"Currently, we're doing detail work now," said Kupfer. "We have probably gone through 2000 trees that were pruned, mainly for aesthetic view and playability, but also for agronomic purposes. We wanted more sunlight, more wind flow."

Kupfer continued, "The whole creek goes all the way back to the rest of the property. We've already started cleaning it out a bit. We want it to be wide open all the way through. For years, it was left untouched and was overgrown. It sat dormant for about two and a half years because no one was here. We want to expose the creek and make it nice for the players."

"I'm not saying this just from a superintendent or agronomic side, but also from the golfer's side. Playability matters. When everything is overgrown, it makes players waste time. The player will try to find their ball, then back up the pace of play."

Just in the past year, many changes have been made to the course layout besides the pruning of trees.

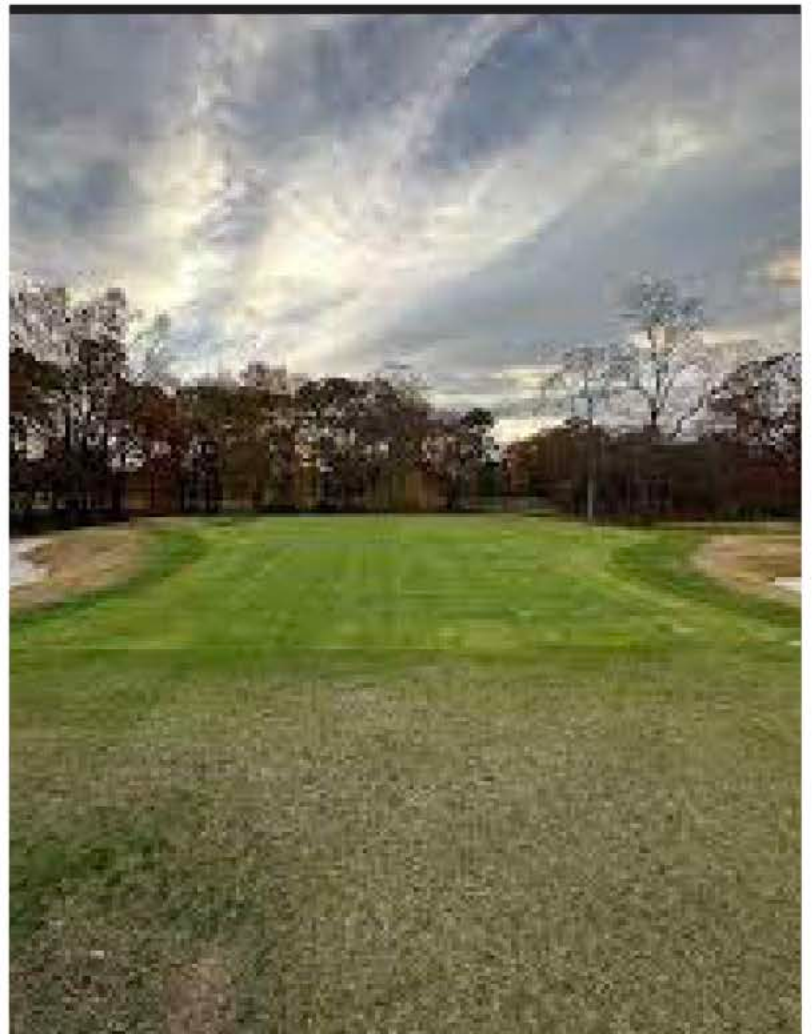
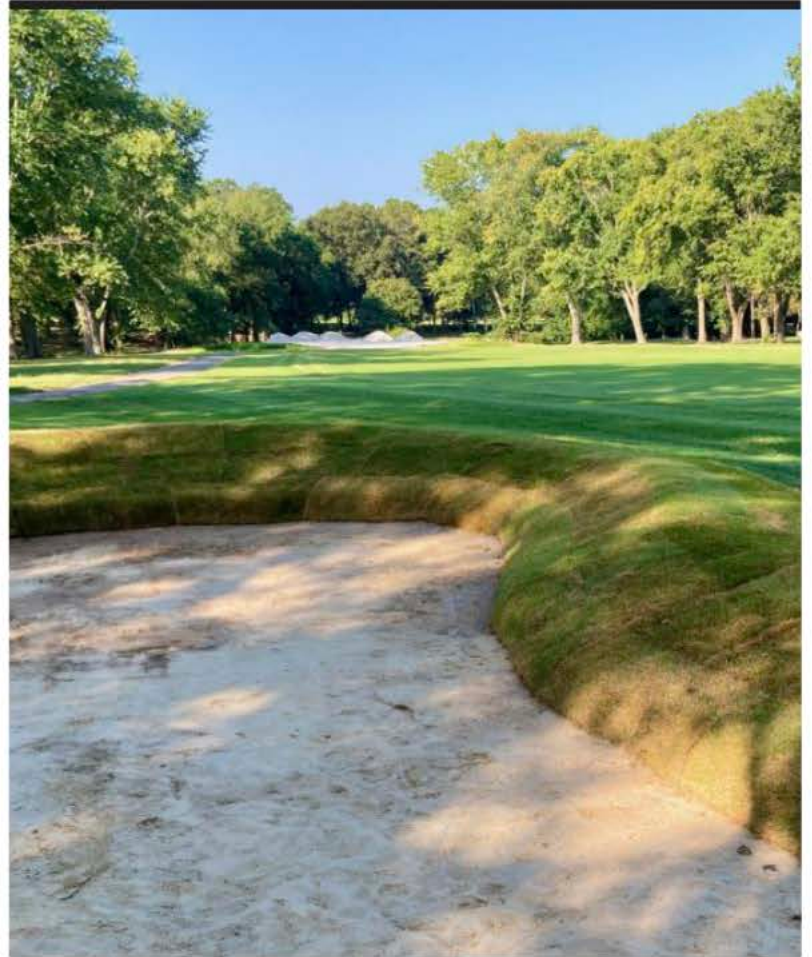
"Within the past year, we have redone all the greens," said Kupfer. "All the greens are now triple seven bentgrass that was done by either myself or the owner's son Matt."

"All of the bunkers are pretty much finished, they just need some sand. But we reduced the number of bunkers from 69 to 58 by filling them in. We're also edging out all of the trees and having pine straw put beneath the evergreens and woodchips beneath the oak trees," said Kupfer. "The excess trees we cut were put through a chipper and are being reprocessed for ground cover. Everything that we have taken from the course is being recycled and put back into the course. We are repurposing everything."

The driving range is also being upgraded into a fun new project, using repurposed materials from the course.

"When we were doing our renovation, everything we took from greens and bunkers has become something else. The mounds that surround the driving range and even in between some holes came from the land that was the bunkers and greens," said Kupfer.

He continued, "We want to do elevated grass tees on the range, with a whole line of mats, not just separate ones. Then we want to make bays that are enclosed on three sides. The bays will be heated in the winter, have fans in the summer, and have TVs in each one. It will be our version of Top Golf. We've talked with the restaurant as well and they're planning on having food and drink service out to the bays. We want it to be available year-round."



The developers are also planning on building a 19th hole that will operate when other holes of the course are closed for maintenance.

While the course has seen a major overhaul already, the Johnsons and Kupfer weren't finished yet. In their renovation plan, the original pool house on the property was completely gutted and remodeled to become the new Pro-Shop. The clubhouse is currently being transformed into a restaurant and will be operated by Big Oyster Brewing Company. The restaurant is scheduled to open on April 20th. The restaurant expects to have indoor seating, bar seating, outdoor patio seating, a golf simulator, and other small outdoor activities like cornhole. Big Oyster is also planning on building a brewery next to the restaurant and will serve golf-themed beverages exclusive to the course.



"I think I heard that one of the beers they are developing is called 'Beach Traffic,'" said Stewart Fisher, Head Pro at SDGC. "A perfect name for this area."

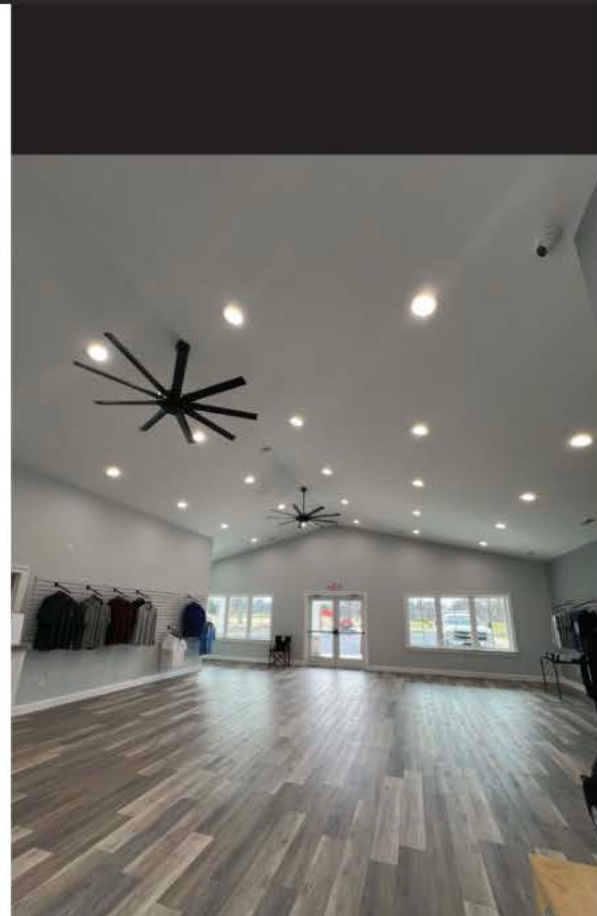
Fisher was hired by Kupfer this past January and has been helping the team develop an overall course and membership strategy for SDGC.

"The plan for the course is to be semi-private," said Fisher. "We have about 120 members signed up and are still accepting membership for single and family. But we will also be open to the public as well. We open to our members on April 15th and then open to the public on May 1st."

After being closed for almost four years, Fisher is excited about the future of the course and outlines what he expects from the first year at Southern Delaware Golf Club.

"In the first year, I hope that our members are happy with all the work that Bill and his team have done. And I think they will see it out there. And they've already shown a lot of appreciation. But yeah, really just excited to see who comes out to play," said Fisher.

He continues, "Our overall main goal is to just provide a great golf experience to the town of Milford, as well as any beach-goers, who are more than welcome. We want to provide a championship 18-hole golf course, driving range, and short-game facility to members, and guests. We will offer evening and weekly leagues, nine holes for the Senior's League, a Ladies' League, and a Men's league."



The team at Southern Delaware Golf Club is excited to see members and guests enjoy their course for the first time this spring.

"Folks that have played the course before and know the course, have continued to keep talking about how great the layout is and the character of the course. I've seen it firsthand the few times that I've been out there," said Fisher. "And for folks that have maybe played it before, it is challenging but fair. Tree-lined, with great dog legging. Bill did a great job with the greens. If you haven't played the course, I would highly recommend it. I think it's gonna be a lot of fun for everybody."