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## Dr. J takes swing at golf business

*Julius Erving imagines slam dunk in venture: transforming Heritage Golf Club into a 'global golf destination'*

By John Carroll, Special to the Daily Report

The Doctor is in the house at Heritage Golf Club in Tucker.

Julius "Dr. J" Erving, one of basketball's all-time greats, sits at a table in the club's restaurant. He has a great view overlooking the 18th green.

It's a hot July day, but Heritage is buzzing with activity. Players fresh off the golf course gab about their rounds. Club employees attend to golfers in the pro shop and service diners in the grille.

Wearing a tropical shirt, long pants and Converse sneakers, Erving, 58, stoically gazes out the window of the freshly renovated clubhouse and assesses the golf course, lakes and other amenities sprawled out over 200 acres in south Gwinnett County, about four miles northeast of Spaghetti Junction.

Dr. J owns the place. He bought the 27-hole golf facility in December 2006. Originally just an investment opportunity, Heritage is now Erving's core business.

"I have a very serious commitment here," he said. "I have an obligation here that necessitates my time, energy and involvement."

Opened in 1996, Heritage Golf Club is a semi-private golf course that is open for public play. Erving has ambitious plans for the facility. He wants to turn Heritage into a "global golf destination" that attracts celebrities and average golfers from all over the world. He imagines selling international memberships. He imagines the course packed with golfers and the 16,000-square-foot clubhouse booked with special events such as business conferences, weddings, banquets and graduation parties.

"We have an opportunity to do something here," said Erving. "This place is only limited by lack of imagination. I have plenty of imagination. I have imagination in reserve."

On the basketball court in the 1970s and 1980s, Erving was the master of imagination. He saw angles that other players didn't see. He created plays and improvised shots that left opponents dumbfounded and fans awestruck. He soared through the air, defying gravity, ball held high above his head, and delivered thunderous dunks.

"Once I get into the lane it's history," Dr. J once said. "I'm like a jazzman. When it's my turn to solo, I'm not about to play the same old riff."

Most observers consider Erving a pioneer of the modern game of basketball, one that is now played above the rim by elite athletes. It's a style of play that has prevailed over the past two decades.

When he retired from basketball in 1987, Erving had won three team championships, four MVP awards and three scoring titles while playing with the ABA's Virginia Squires and New York Nets and the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers. He is the fifth-highest scorer in professional basketball history, with 30,026 points (NBA and ABA combined).

These days, Erving's sport has switched from hoops to golf. He took up the game at 37 and said he plays to a "weak 12" handicap. "I'm better than the average player," he said. "My personal experience with golf has been very joyful."

But there's a big difference between playing golf and owning a golf course. "A lot of this is new to me," said Erving, who has experienced success in business since leaving basketball. For 21 years, he was an equity partner in the Philadelphia Coca-Cola Bottling Co. with actor Bill Cosby and entrepreneur Bruce Llewellyn. He sold out in October 2006. Since retiring from basketball, he's also owned a NASCAR team and sat on several corporate boards including The Sports Authority and Saks Inc.

Erving said he plans on consulting with friend and golf legend Gary Player on "how we can improve the product" at Heritage.

Designed by Athens architect Mike Young, Heritage Golf Club was named one of the best new golf courses in the U.S. in 1996 by

Golf Digest. The original 18 holes are constructed around a 20-acre lake that comes into play on five holes. It features tight, undulating fairways, 96 bunkers, zoysia rough, multi-tiered bentgrass greens and a 23-acre practice facility.

The course plays 6,903 yards from the back tees, where the slope rating is 145. The daily greens fee for non-members is \$90.

Located 13 miles from downtown Atlanta just off Interstate 85, one niche demographic that Heritage serves is professional athletes and other celebrities. Erving said pro athletes such as John Smoltz, Michael Jordan, Charles Oakley, Alonzo Mourning and Kordell Stewart have played the course.

Erving lives in St. George, Utah, but said he plans on spending more time in Atlanta, overseeing his golf and hospitality business, which currently has more than 100 members and about 25 employees.

The club recently launched a membership drive. There are three membership packages, categorized as Georgia, U.S.A. and International. The initiation fee is \$25,000, \$15,000 and \$10,000, respectively.

Erving said he will personally handle the international category, and plans on inviting Prince Albert of Monaco and Boris Becker of Germany, among others, to join the club.

"I have played golf all over the globe in the last 20 years and know what it takes to create a unique world-class destination in golf," said Erving. "Our commitment is to not let up until we have evolved into its full potential."