

# KemperSports takes over management of Canal Shores Golf Course in Evanston from an area association, looking to rehab the ‘valuable asset’

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PIONEER PRESS | MAR 08, 2022 AT 4:03 PM

Northbrook-based KemperSports has taken over management of the Canal Shores Golf Course in Evanston, with plans to upgrade the greens and make improvements to hospitality and other operations, officials said.

The 3,600-yard, par-60 course designed by golf course architect Tom Bendelow opened in 1919. Prior to now, it was managed by the nonprofit Evanston Wilmette Golf Course Association, according to a KemperSports news release announcing the management change.

“A couple of the volunteers on the board are people I know through golf,” Josh Lesnik, president of KemperSports, told Pioneer Press. “They asked my opinion on a few things, and we started talking about what kind of improvements we could make to the operation and realized that their four missions — golf, youth development, ecology and community — were very similar to our mission and vision as well.”

KemperSports has managed nationally ranked courses, as well as private clubs, municipal courses and golf tournament venues, according to organization officials. Evanston Wilmette Golf Course Association, which is

run by volunteers, decided to bring in KemperSports to help them manage the course.

“Canal Shores wants to be the best community golf course in the world,” said Karl Leinberger, president of the Board of Directors of the Evanston Wilmette Golf Course Association. “Partnering with KemperSports will help make that happen. KemperSports is renowned for its expertise from the high-end resorts to municipal golf courses and lots of things in-between. The fact that they’re family-owned and locally-based makes it a great match for Canal Shores.”

Lesnik said there are many positive aspects to Canal Shores.

“It’s one of the most charming courses you’ll ever come upon because of its location, accessibility, the opportunities to get youth into the game of golf,” he said.

Lesnik also praised the location of the course, saying golfers are “playing along the Metra, playing along the [CTA train line], playing along a canal, playing underneath the [Chicago] Baha’i Temple. There are people who jog and walk their dog. You see people going to work, coming home from work, depending on when you play. It’s really a community-accessible, affordable, purpose-driven golf course.”

Leinberger said a couple of things that make the course unique is that there are no fences and five streets run through the course.

“It’s a very local, neighborhood feel,” he explained. “And we have activities that cater to that.” That includes concerts and events where people come out to remove invasive species and plant.

Despite all these positives, the course is in need of work. Lesnik said the last couple of years, the course has had issues with the greens. He said KemperSports would like to improve the condition of the golf course.

“The small staff they have and the volunteers work really hard. They keep it looking really, really nice,” said Alderman Eleanor Ravelle, 7th Ward. “But it does need significant investment in the infrastructure, particularly the irrigation. It’s beyond its useful life so from a golfer’s point of view, the course is not in the greatest shape. It requires extra time from the volunteers and the staff to keep it looking as nice as they do.”

She praised the Evanston Wilmette Golf Course Association for hiring a management firm to take some of the burden off the volunteers.

Ravelle believes that the course is a valuable asset to Evanston.

“It’s this wonderful open green space,” she explained. “And the residents in the area make heavy use of it for walking and taking their dogs out, looking for birds. It’s a wonderful amenity for residents and it’s really important to have that much green space for climate change reasons.”

Lesnik said KemperSports plans to improve every facet of the operation of the course, including hospitality.

The course’s youth golf instruction program, which partners with The Golf Practice in Highland Park, is very good, according to Lesnik. He said every summer the program serves 150-200 young people, with about 50 of them on scholarship.

“We’d like to take that to the next level,” Lesnik said. “Not just golf instruction but more youth development.”

For this plan, they will work with First Tee—Greater Chicago. In addition to learning golf, the kids would learn “the life lessons through the game of golf that can help them do better in school, do better communicating with adults, graduate from high school, go to college,” Lesnik said.

KemperSports is also in discussion about possibly creating a caddy training program at Canal Shores. That could lead to wonderful summer jobs for young people and they could possibly earn one of the college scholarships that are open to caddies, officials said.

Lesnik the cost of the changes his company is making will be covered by golf course revenue.

“We’re going to make improvements to the bottom line,” he said. “We have been in business 40 years. We have best practices both on the revenue side and expense side. And we’re basically doing this at cost. It will pay for itself.”

Golf is “widely popular” now, Lesnik explained, noting it was one of the few safe activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“One of the things that was important to us is that we have a particular character and charm and we don’t want that to change. KemperSports doesn’t want that to change either,” said Leinberger.

***Myrna Petlicki is a freelancer.***