

# New owner has Sugar Valley GC looking good

## LOCAL GOLF BUCKY ALBERS



I don't know of any golf facility in the Miami

Valley that has made more impressive improvements this year than Sugar Valley Golf Club in Bellbrook.

Under the direction of retired realtor Jim Keyes, who re-purchased the club last November after being out of the business for six years, Sugar Valley is making a strong bid to become a viable family recreation option.

Keyes has made significant changes to the staff, the clubhouse and the golf course.

Never mind that golf courses everywhere seem to be struggling in a tough economy, Keyes exercised an option to buy the club when seven members of the founding Foreman family elected to sell it.

"Don't you buy low and sell high?" he said when the timing of his purchase was questioned.

The truth be told, Keyes had put too much sweat equity into the club to see it fall into strange hands. In 1977, eight years after his uncle, Carl Foreman, opened the course, Keyes became his partner. He bought the surrounding land from him and developed it for home sites.

"In the spring of 1978, he took residence in Florida and I was stuck running the golf course," Keyes recalled recently.

Foreman died in 1991, and his wife was a partner with Keyes until her death in 2003.

She left SV in a trust for her seven children, who

had 55 shares to Keyes' 44 and decided in 2004 to exercise their right to run the club.

"That was fine with me," Keyes said. "I wanted to retire. I sold my real estate company and my shares in the golf club."

Last year, after struggling to operate successfully for seven years, the Foreman siblings arranged to sell it. Upon learning of the sale plan, Keyes bought it. He brought in Gary Wright and the Jim Powell family as minority partners.

He immediately hired as golf professional Doug Cartwright, the former general manager and a 27-year employee who had been let go by the Foremans in a cost-saving move when they took over. He brought back veteran Greens Superintendent Bill Job, who left Sugar Valley two years ago. He also retained Paul Double, who has been grooming the course nicely while Job was gone. John Haile was hired as the chef.

To enhance the membership experience, Keyes hired Elsa Rodriguez, a 2009 Ohio State University graduate, as director of clubhouse operations. Rodriguez interned at Borrego Springs (Calif.) Resort & Spa and worked at Yankee Trace in Centerville.

A state-of-the-art sound system, a giant flat-screen TV and a gas fireplace were installed in the dining room. The bar room, the locker room and the pro shop were remodeled.

"We've tried to gear the whole thing to casual," Rodriguez said. "We want a relaxed, friendly, inviting atmosphere."

Before all of this happened, Matthew Shank, dean of the University of

Dayton School of Business Administration, conducted a survey of the membership. Shank is especially interested in sports marketing and has published a book on the subject.

Seventy percent of the Sugar Valley members participated in the survey, and Shank presented the results (before Keyes saw them) at an open meeting of members early in March.

"He did a bang-up job," Keyes said. "We got a lot of good feedback, and we've started to implement a lot of things the members wanted."

Among other things, the golfers thought the bunkers were sub-par and they felt the crumbling asphalt cart paths should be repaired.

Keyes brought out the original drawings of architects Mike Hurdzan and Jack Kidwell and gave them to his greenskeepers for use as guidelines in bunker restoration. He purchased 250 tons of Steubenville sand.

Repairs were made on the cart paths, and Keyes plans to have much more asphalt work done in stages before the year is over.

Having no tennis and swimming facilities on site, Keyes has arranged for members to use four local swim clubs and two tennis clubs. An agreement with Rollandia enables SV's junior golfers to train there.

The members, many of whom have had their dues reduced by 20 percent, are pleased.

Longtime member Tom Rizzo, who recently co-hosted a large event at SV, said, "They're doing a real nice job."

"I've had nothing but compliments," Keyes said. "We were well under 200 members; now we're over."